

From noble to necessary

How Global Footprint Network approaches sustainability communication

“Fraternité”, not “charité”

Finger pointing and moralizing rarely transforms. Neither does oozing a sense of superiority. The advocates of the French Revolution recognized this and promoted “*fraternité*.” This may be best translated as solidarity. They argued for “*fraternité*” and not “*charité*,” because charity is noble. *Charité* positions the benefactor as the “superior” party and is pursued mostly as a hobby of the noble and goodhearted. *Fraternité*, in contrast, is a mutual insurance, it is essential: I need you and you need me, and together we are better off.

People act with focus and determination when they know that their action is existentially critical for them. When actors, whether individuals, companies, or cities, realize that embracing sustainability is existential for them – and therefore desirable – they engage. Once they grasp that their active participation in sustainability solutions is central to their own existence and to their wellbeing, they become unstoppable. This is called having “skin in the game.” Conversely, as long as sustainability action is perceived as merely noble rather than the necessary path for one’s own positive future, transformation remains an empty promise.

The noble narrative may even be counterproductive. “Necessary” is not the opposite of “noble”, nor the opposite of moral; it is simply another dimension. The abolition of slavery was necessary, not noble. It was necessary because slavery erodes the essential trust and dignity which any society needs to keep functioning. Consequently, this inhuman system had no future, politically, economically, and psychologically. In the United States, that necessity was not recognized early enough by those wielding power, which led to a brutal civil war, leaving wounds up to this day. In South Africa, the need to free the country from apartheid was acknowledged by enough influential actors across the board, albeit very late. South Africa narrowly avoided a civil war. Putting an end to this corrupt, dehumanizing system was not a noble act, but a brutal necessity for all. It was a matter of life and death for the country as a whole. South Africa’s Ministry of Finance did not belittle this necessity.

Global Footprint Network is primarily concerned with the global shift from a “noble” to a “necessary” narrative. We see the former as a stumbling block and the

insufficient understanding of the latter as a dangerous potential dead-end. We aim at shifting the narrative so ever more actors from individuals all the way to national decision-makers and global influencers realize they have true skin in the game. That is how we are approaching the Earth Overshoot Day campaign.

How do we recognize the “necessary” narrative?

Those bothered by social injustice and ecological destruction often raise essential questions and stimulate discourse for what needs to be changed. Can their goals win critical mass for sufficient political will? More likely yes, if many see the goal as essential, necessary for themselves, if not even existential.

Once goals turn into an actual government priority, we know that they have been taken seriously. But what is a government priority? A political declaration does not count. There are innumerable noble declarations, many of which are empty.

“Put your money where your mouth is”: the litmus test of a “necessity” is whether official budgets and economic development plans incorporate it. Does the government’s economic policy (often called its “competitiveness strategy”) recognize the need for a sustainability transformation with sufficient weight? Are meaningful financial budgets allocated?

For example, the World Economic Forum’s flagship report, the [Global Competitiveness Report](#), compares the long-term economic productivity of countries. At least it acknowledges the “global necessity” of sustainability (at least since it started to include the Ecological Footprint as a context indicator). But it ignores the country-level necessity, making it seem to be a “global tragedy of the commons” (where costs are individual, yet benefits are socialized) thereby amplifying the “noble” sustainability narrative. Here’s the evidence: Not one of the over 100 indicators they magically turn into a competitiveness score is relevant to sustainability. This demonstrates that this organization (as just one example of many) does not see sustainability as truly necessary for every actor.

The sustainability transformation happens, once the necessity of sustainability for each one becomes so obvious that even economic strategies drive it. Therefore, positioning the sustainability transformation from noble to necessary is an indispensable milestone.

Still, we want to look noble...

Of course, most of us want to look noble. I want to be seen as a force for good – even by myself. I want to feel good about myself, and this shows up in my own narrative.

Wanting to **look good** is different, though, from wanting to **be good**. Looking good is PR management. Being good or noble takes effort since noble also implies that the effort is without immediate personal reward. This is also why in the Jewish tradition, “doing good anonymously” is the highest form of doing good.

By putting the focus of Global Footprint Network’s communication approach on necessary (i.e., essential & existential) rather than noble, we do not negate the urge to look good and the importance to cater to that. Rather, we propose that the motivational core for action needs to be aligned with what the audience sees as essential for itself. “Existential & essential” needs to be addressed as the primary decision force; catering to the decision narrative is secondary, because it mostly legitimizes the choices we make. Therefore, a transformative narrative must speak to the decision-makers’ deep desires.

Yes, decision-makers will often use a narrative that paints their choice as noble, even though their decision was really driven by a deeper force, such as a goal or motivation that is essential for the decision-maker’s success.¹

In other words, our approach recognizes the distinction between a person’s true motivation, and the narrative with which it is presented. We presume that helping decision-makers recognize the alignment between their essential desires and sustainability is far more powerful and transformational than merely arguing a choice’s moral superiority. This is the reason why wrangling with decision-makers’ identity is more powerful than engaging with their (typically noble) narrative.

In essence: this shift “from noble to necessary” is not advocating non-noble or even amoral approaches. Rather it proposes to turn our approach into something as accepted as brushing teeth. Regularly brushing our teeth is not a noble act. We all know it is necessary. It is essential, not just to prevent cavities today, but even more so as an investment in future dental health. If we can help our audiences perceive climate and sustainability action to be something as obvious and routine as brushing our teeth –to recognize them as necessary and not merely noble – then the chances for a successful transformation are soaring.

¹ Some say: “humans are not very rational but are very good at rationalizing.” The rationalizing is the official narrative. But if we call people not rational, then it may just be that we have not fully discovered yet their actual motivations...