

# Imagine global solidarity



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The world confronts a set of profound problems with origins and consequences that traverse international boundaries, such as climate change, pandemic spread, widespread poverty and human trafficking. Tackling these problems will demand much more coordination of public and private action, including increased sharing of resources from where they are currently concentrated. As this report makes clear, this will require a much greater degree of global solidarity.

But building a vibrant global nation in which individuals perceive a true sense of connection with others from different countries, cultures and contexts is easier said than done. Not all of us naturally worry about those outside our purview. It's hard enough to solve local challenges, let alone what might seem insurmountable on a global scale.

Those who have tried to build solidarity even with the best intentions have not always succeeded. The prevailing strategy among international organisations, of continuously reminding people of the extent of the problems we share on planet Earth, has sometimes contributed to sentiments of despair without sufficiently communicating *why* we ought to believe we are all in this together.

But there are examples of solidarity-building that offer clues about what might work while also identifying cautionary tales about what doesn't. What are the components of narratives that might contribute to 'fellow feeling' on a planetary scale?

First, we need to think of ourselves as a community. Given there are approximately eight billion people on the planet, some might view this metaphor as a silly one. But it is no sillier than the audacious-yet-successful strategy of nation-building that has prevailed in much of the world, including in mega-states such as China and India and throughout Western Europe and in the United States. Only with a strong sense of community can actors see that our fates are truly linked rather than in zero sum competition.

Large-scale imagined communities have been built on symbols and narratives. As the renowned scholar of nation-building, Benedict Anderson, highlighted, the sharing of maps, the process of census enumeration and value of national museums and, more generally, the spread of information through the print media all contributed to the collective imagination of national communities throughout very large territories. Nationhood

compelled citizens to pay taxes, go to war, and take actions for the larger good.

By contrast, at the global level, the messages we receive in the varied media landscapes focus disproportionately on what divides rather than what unites – borders, wars, economic rivalries and so on. These are real features of our global experience. Nonetheless, if we are to act not just with local but also with global perspectives, we need to be reminded of the stories of common origins and shared destinies that knit us together, and to develop more compelling symbols of unity.

Just as it did with nation-building at the state level, imagination can play a key role here as well. Cultural creators can offer music, movies, books and art that make tangible the ways in which our past and future are interlinked, the shared opportunities and constraints we face, and examples of characters who act selflessly with and for those in other corners of the world.

Second, we require narratives of the likelihood – or perhaps even the inevitability – of *success*. Think of the tools used by teams, companies, militaries, neighbourhood organisations and so on that work together to achieve their goals. Inspirational speeches rarely dwell on failures and shortcomings. People seek to be associated with groups that connote a positive self-image.

A good place to start is the re-telling of success stories of global action. Young people have often led the way in solidaristic expressions, and one of the most powerful was the global anti-apartheid movement that contributed to the toppling of a profoundly unjust regime. More recently, the willingness of billions of people around the world to alter their behaviours and lives during the Covid pandemic was fuelled, at least in part, by a desire to arrest a shared problem. Expressions of gratitude for front-line workers during the early months of the Covid lockdown were reminders of the benefits of mutual action. Support for development aid in many countries reveals concerns for other humans across the world. One could find reasons to be cynical about all three of these expressions, but there are also lessons to be learned.

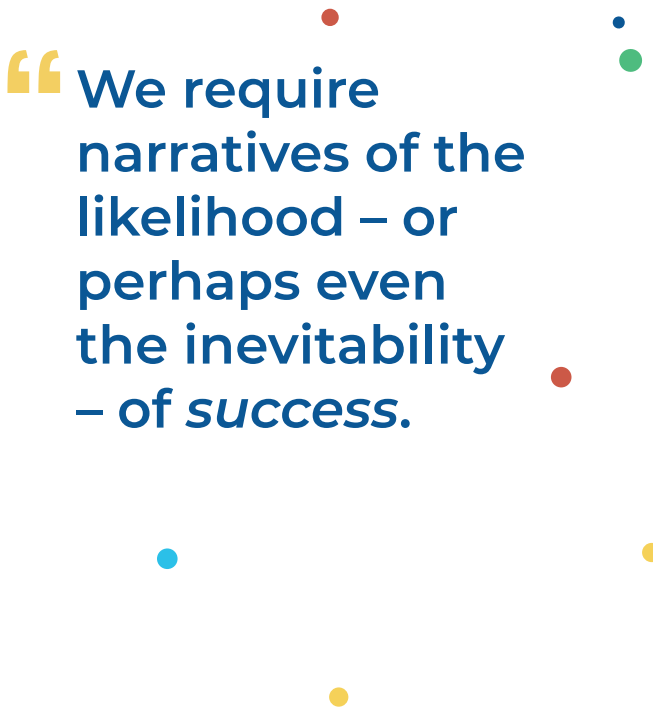
Third, perhaps ironically, we need to creatively harness the power of ‘us–them’ thinking. Most modern nations have reinforced the rules that distinguish insiders from outsiders, because humans have a tendency to think in group terms,

and nation-building strategies have relied on such tools to the detriment of our collective wellbeing. So we need to approach this tool with great caution and avoid hateful solidarities that exclude people of particular races, beliefs or orientations.

But Nobel-prize-winning economist Elinor Ostrom highlighted the role of exclusion as a strategy for successfully governing common pool resources. If that’s the case, who is the ‘them’ that might reinforce a sense of ‘us’ when it comes to a global nation? Without an interstellar attack, there is no obvious counterpart to the human species.

So, again, we will need to be creative. Some narratives might highlight a rejection of aspects of a global history that pre-dated solidarity. Others might, within reason, reject those anti-social behaviours that act against human prosperity, clarifying what it means to be not just a good American or a good Brazilian but a good *Human*. Cultural leaders can help valorise examples of the latter.

Imagining global solidarity will be an iterative process, uncontrollable from any centre. Creative thought leaders will need to draw on the shared psychologies of humans to find an optimistic common purpose that will knit us together sufficiently that the case for global action will appear self-evident.



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