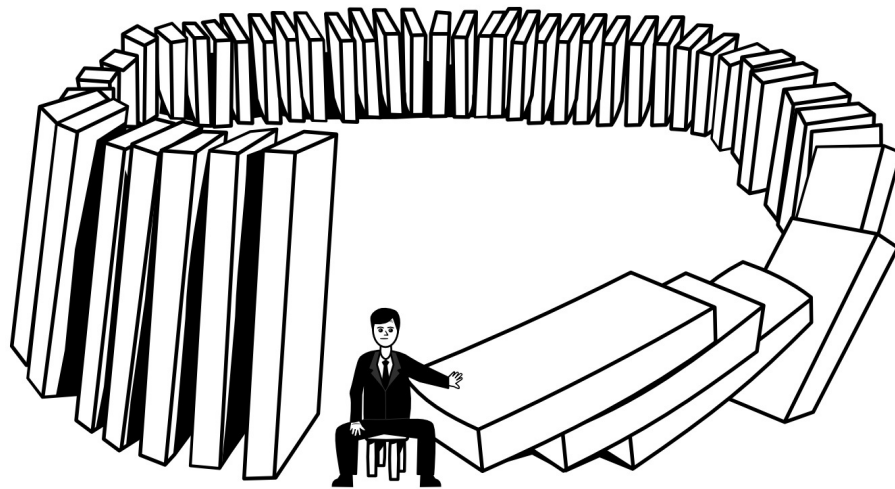

CRISES AND SDGs: UNDERSTANDING AND APPROACHING THEM SYSTEMICALLY



by Dr. Violetta Neumann-Wolff

Can we turn the existing crises into an extraordinary opportunity for the economy, society, and the environment? The answer is "Yes!" Provided that we use the findings of science and apply a comprehensive systemic solution strategy.

The existing crises (e.g., climate, biodiversity, resources, and war) are highly complex. If the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations are to be achieved by 2030, a new approach is needed: Systemically oriented management sciences indicate that complex problems should not be split into separate parts.

Instead, the interactions of visible, invisible, and even subconscious influencing variables must be understood and approached holistically. This requires suitable methodologies, for instance, a systems thinking-based management map. Such a map or model promotes an overview of the system's goals and makes it possible to identify effective leverage points and potential conflicting targets.

In addition, with the help of a map, a system can be redesigned in a solution-oriented manner so that synergy effects emerge. To ensure that the derived solution strategies are beneficial and acceptable to all parties and stakeholders, the model must be preceded by essential guardrails.

What guardrails can be used to achieve this in the context of the various escalating crises?

1. "Cradle-to-Cradle" as the basis for a holistic circular economy

Eco-effective sustainability requires a guiding framework for action, especially for decision-makers in business and politics. Like a checklist, the Cradle-to-Cradle standard ensures that a circular economy is approached holistically. This standard focuses not only on separate biological and technical resource cycles but also on renewable energy, water quality and quantity, social standards, and chemical analysis accurate to 100 ppm to promote human and natural health. In addition, Cradle-to-Cradle addresses business model changes if needed, for example, by turning technical products into services so that scarce resources become organizations' assets. In addition, the approach is compatible with political requirements such as the European Green Deal. Many of the existing sustainability crises could be solved or significantly reduced if Cradle-to-Cradle became the new way to do business worldwide. Thus far, however, the Cradle-to-Cradle paradigm coined by Stahel as well as Braungart and McDonough is nowhere close to being known to everyone. This is because Cradle-to-Cradle principles are (as yet) rarely mentioned or taught in schools and universities.

2. Inner development of the human being

A flanking guardrail is to focus not only on the SDGs but also on Inner Development Goals (IDGs) to support the SDGs' achievement. The five proposed inner human development areas first relate to

- the quality of being and the relationship with oneself
- cognitive and systemic skills essential for managing complexity

- the ability to relate to other people and the environment
- social skills for effective cooperation and social responsibility
- values for effective action, such as courage, creativity, optimism, and perseverance.

Undoubtedly, the IDGs are essential to the SDGs in promoting change. But do the IDGs address the strongest leverage point at its core?

According to systems scientist Donella Meadows, the greatest leverage comes from questioning worldviews and changing them, if necessary. So far, this has yet to happen. The prevailing mechanistic worldview and realism paradigm assume a "fixed" external reality independent of human observation and emotion. But this does not correspond to the latest findings of science, and it results in delicate mistakes in strategy development. For this reason, a third guardrail addresses a needed paradigm shift based on an updated worldview.

3. Take into account constructivist mechanisms for effective strategies

Findings from various scientific fields such as psychology, quantum physics, and quantum biology confirm that people's conscious and unconscious beliefs, thoughts, emotions, and focus of attention interact constructively with the subjective reality they experience and perceive.

For example, the phenomenon of "self-fulfilling prophecy" has been experimentally proven. And Hans-Peter Dürr, the Alternative Nobel Prize winner, sums up a central insight of quantum physics: "Matter is coagulated spirit." If people's thoughts and feelings impact subjectively experienced reality, what do the crises "out there" say about people's prevailing inner states and beliefs?

The answer is obvious: inner work and a redirection of focus are necessary to create new and more desirable realities.

Since, from a quantum physics perspective, the focus of attention produces more of what it is directed at, SDGs 1, 2, and 10 are formulated counterproductively against this background. From a constructivist perspective, the goals of "no poverty," "zero hunger," and "reduced inequalities" lead to more poverty, hunger, and inequality by making them the focus of attention. The mass media have a similarly negative effect: by directing the viewers' gaze to images of wars and crises, they stoke fears and fuel further manifestation and worsening of these observed crises. If the focus were instead directed towards images and solutions that inspire hope, this would have a solution-promoting effect from a constructivist perspective.

Redefining and linking the SDGs

What if, based on these three guardrails, several SDGs were redefined and oriented toward solutions? What if, in addition to that, the basic principles of constructivism were taught in schools and universities, as well as methods for mastering complex problems and changing one's mental and emotional state? Only then could we rightly speak of SDG 4 as "quality education." In the system map of the interconnected SDGs, the three mentioned guardrails are taken into account in a solution-oriented manner:

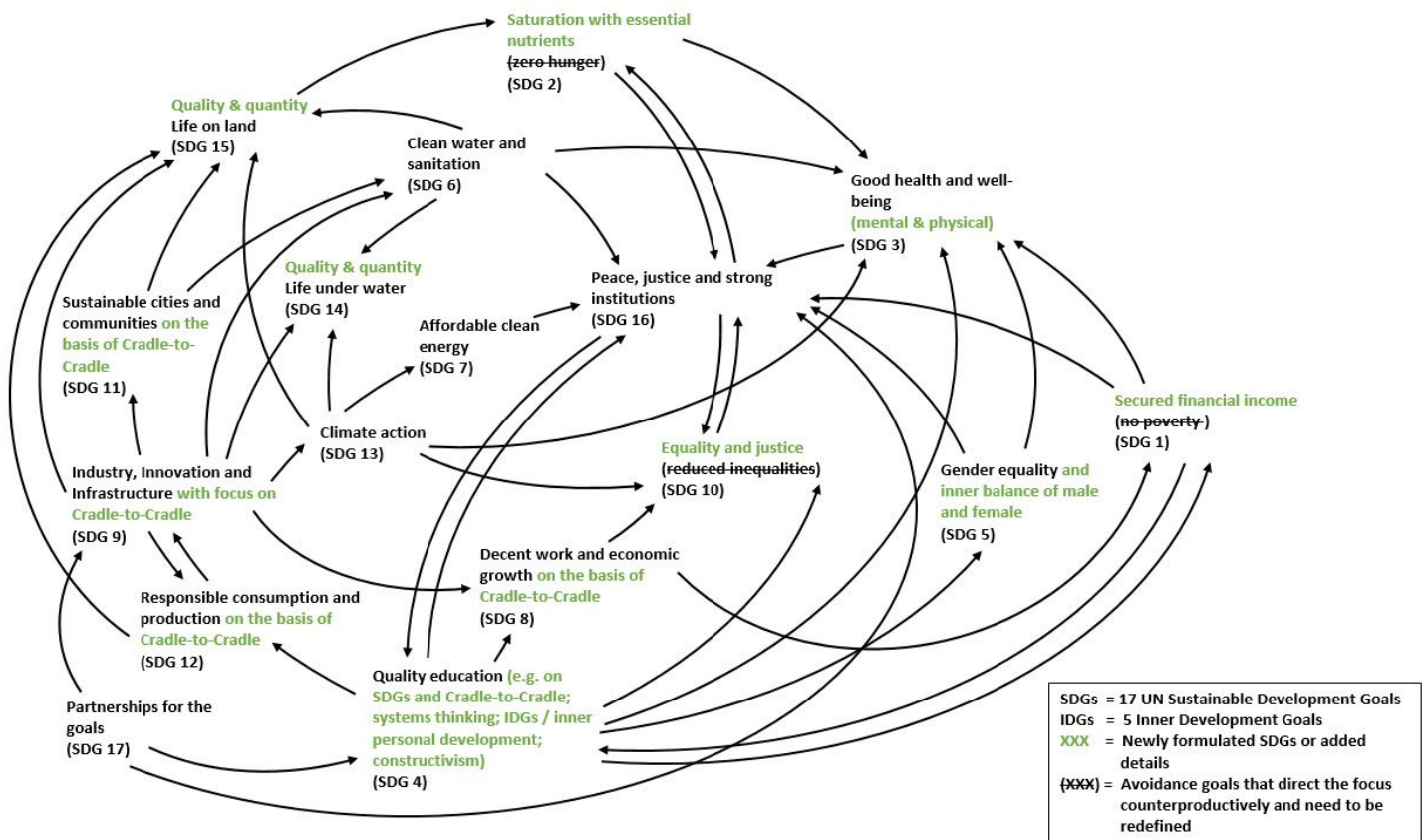


Figure 1: Interlinked SDGs, which take into account the Cradle-to-Cradle paradigm, the inner development of humanity, and positively defined goals.

"Quality education" (SDG 4) can provide a fundamental and sustainable realignment of the overall system. When schools, universities, and continuing education programs for business leaders and politicians teach and promote systems thinking and personal development, it can have a positive domino effect. Systemic and critical thinkers are more likely to find and understand the interconnected root causes of complex problems and develop effective solutions. They will also increasingly ask for Cradle-to-Cradle products and services and stimulate economic development to that end (SDG 12). With the newly acquired systems thinking skills and the ability to solve complex problems, young people, in particular, lay the foundation for a secure income (SDG 1) and decent work (SDG 8). Since the new "quality education" also teaches the basics for inner work and changes of the emotional and mental state, it contributes to holistic health and well-being of society (SDG 3). At the same time, inner work strengthens not only mental and emotional health and "inner peace" but consequently also peace "on the outside" (SDG 16).

Companies and institutions also benefit if managers and employees work in and on the organization, including themselves, thereby aligning their electromagnetic field to more economic and social success (SDG 16).

Another key area lies in the model around SDG 9. Industries, infrastructures, innovations, and R&D activities are specifically geared to closed-loop and Cradle-to-Cradle principles. These activities are supported by cross-industry partnerships to achieve the goals (SDG 17). This will have positive knock-on effects for the system as a whole, such as the development of sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), development and implementation of climate change mitigation (SDG 13), and related to that, affordable and clean energy (SDG 7).

In summary, a more profound, systemic-constructivist understanding of our complex global challenges is essential, as are cross-disciplinary partnerships to implement effective solutions. This way, we can create and shape a genuinely peaceful and exciting future.

SDG BOOSTER: THREE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE GOALS

If the UN SDGs are set concerning each other and are organized in a solution-oriented manner, synergy effects are created. All the resources needed to implement the model's approach are already available: systemic methods, innovative technologies, (inter)disciplinary know-how, and a sufficiently large number of critically thinking people with similar values and ideals. These resources could be applied, especially in business, as follows:

1. Apply appropriate methods for complexity management and strategy development: The model-based method, "Systems Thinking in Management," stems from the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland and was developed further by various consultants. The method enables the development of concrete solution-oriented strategies with the involvement of affected stakeholders' interests. This way, stakeholders needs are adequately seen and understood. From the system's model, goals/KPIs, target-oriented levers, projects, and clear personal responsibilities for achieving the goals can be derived. However, this rational methodology should be supplemented by at least one intuitive method, such as "system constellation," to identify potential unconscious influencing factors or (emotional) blockages.

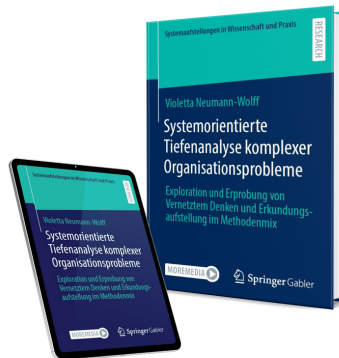
By including these additional insights and variables in the strategic system map, it allows for truly effective strategies and change.

2. Demand and promote a systemic "update" of the educational system: To advance the Cradle-to-Cradle paradigms' implementation on a large scale and to foster changes toward a systemic-constructivist worldview in the educational system, school principals, university and college professors, lecturers, and those responsible for their country's curricula are invited to engage with the aforementioned scientific developments. The aim is to promote the integration of this knowledge and the scaling of proven strategies and methods in the education system.

3. Mentoring for top managers and politicians as catalysts for successful change: Top managers can significantly influence the success of their companies, as can politicians of entire countries by changing their mental and emotional state and redirecting their focus in a solution-oriented manner. This is not yet sufficiently known in business and politics, or suitable methods are lacking. To achieve sustainability goals faster and more effectively, interested leaders should participate in systemic mentoring and coaching.

About the author:

DR. VIOLETTA NEUMANN-WOLFF is a consultant, systems thinking teacher, and coach focused on complexity management. She holds a Ph.D. in a systems-oriented, in-depth analysis of complex organizational problems. In her research projects, she has uncovered critical gaps in systemic knowledge and skills of CEOs and executives to manage complex problems effectively. Expensive symptom treatments and unresolved, worsening problems are, in her opinion, the result. Her book/eBook 'Systemorientierte Tiefenanalyse komplexer Organisationsprobleme' was published by Springer Gabler in September 2022 (in German). It contains key recommendations for management practice to deal with complex problems more effectively and successfully: bit.ly/3wos46d



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