

In the concluding chapter, the authors project three scenarios for the future of SMEs as Singapore ventures into Industry 4.0. Productivity and technology trends feature prominently in all these scenarios, and the authors conclude that the success of SMEs in the country will depend on their ability to adapt and grow continuously. This book, comprised of a little over 100 pages, is an easy-to-read volume. It reaffirms what is already known but also contains several new insights and imaginative views. It is a recommended reading for students, researchers and practitioners working on productivity issues, and for public officers responsible for promoting the productivity of their respective economic agencies.

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***The Sustainable State: The Future of Government, Economy and Society*, by Chandran Nair.** Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018. Pp. 249.

In its synopsis, this book is pitched as a "radical approach to governance for sustainable development", and that is exactly what it is. Chandran Nair totally goes against the grain to point out what has led to the planet's current state of poverty, environmental degradation and disconnect with nature, then proceeds to put forward an outrageously different approach to local and global governance to correct the imbalances. And, he is far from wrong.

Nair opens the book with a clear breakdown of how the term "sustainable development" has been watered down to "feel good slogans" that only emphasize being "environmentally friendly or even just being environmentally conscious" to the point where large organizations focus only on pollution, for example, instead of acting to ensure that resources are used in a way that allows them to replenish themselves, and remain indefinitely available. He also makes a clear distinction between the ability of developed nations to make sweeping environmental declarations and develop "green" technologies to further exploit resources to meet their comfort levels—while across the dark line, developing nations struggle to lift citizens out of poverty while trying to keep to benchmarks set by Western-dominated international organizations.

He pinpoints the crux of the problem to the overreliance on the free market economy, a distaste for a "strong state", overconsumption, and the inappropriate dream of a Western definition of "development" that is both unachievable and unsustainable for the developing world. Nair correctly points out that there are two sustainability challenges in the world today; while richer countries need only to focus on resource efficiency, poorer countries need to also "improve the lives of its poor majority" even as they mark out a path to a prosperous yet sustainable lifestyle. He goes on to emphasize that even the definition of

“prosperous” is dubious; and questions how the never-ending, exhausting pursuit for more can supersede the satisfaction of the quality comforts of a simple life in touch with nature, healthy unprocessed foods and time with family.

There is a tangible effort to decolonize sustainability throughout the book. Nair opines that the reason why there are so few alternatives to solutions for environmental calamities and climate change is Western orthodoxy in science and environmental schools of thought. The United Nations, for example, in deriving the Sustainable Development Goals, is a largely Western-led entity that makes decisions based on Western knowledge frameworks and the overarching goal of high resource consumption to attain Western standards of living.

The free market economy, according to Nair, functions on the premise that increasingly scarce resources will raise prices, which will then lead to an equilibrium between supply and demand, subsequently leading to less resource-intensive economies as businesses work to find more resource-efficient methods of production. He debunks this by establishing why this process is not sustainable. Amongst the factors are unaccounted external costs incurred in the production of goods and services that come about because every economic action places an invisible cost on someone else. He gives the example of how goods (especially purchased through e-commerce deals) have become increasingly cheaper, leading to even more consumption. However, these cheaper prices come at the cost of lower wages, poor working conditions and too easy access to credit.

A free and unregulated market is also inherently unsustainable because of the mismatch between “private interest to consume as much as possible and the collective interest to sustainably manage common shared resources”. The tragedy of the commons can clearly be seen in the near collapse of global fisheries and widespread deforestation. He also points out that yet another reason for free market failure is the vast imbalance of power between those who overconsume and those who can barely afford to consume. All economic negotiations thus inevitably lean towards those who can afford to consume and make decisions, while the “powerless” remain at the voiceless, receiving end of the decision-making process.

Nair’s solution then is to build a sustainable state by evolving the twenty-first century economy based on “providing a shared prosperity for their large populations through the management of constrained resources, containing the runaway impacts of consumption-driven economic growth and the associated externalities, yet avoiding the need to be authoritarian”.

He takes the reader through his thought processes and justifications in a highly readable text. In Chapters 1 and 2, he discusses the follies of “sustainable development” as it is understood and practised now, then moves on to dispute the adulation for the free market economy in Chapter 3. These early chapters are a refreshing take on the rarely discussed problems behind the world’s lust for consumption and over-exploitation. He turns widely accepted notions on their heads and highlights the need to move away from capitalist hegemony to think about a better way of living beyond survival levels for the world’s developing masses.

In Chapters 4 to 7, he discusses the state and its role in ensuring sustainability. While elaborating on his framework for a sustainable state, he examines what he feels is necessary for a strong (but not authoritarian) state that will make the necessary decisions to ensure both sustainability and inclusivity for its people—and for the greater good. As the author outlines how the state should intervene in the economy, business and its citizens’ pathways to prosperity, he counters potential arguments against his hypothesis.

Chapter 8 is where Nair reinvents the term “prosperity” and posits a new concept that ensures everyone’s basic rights to life (including nutritious and clean food, clean water, sturdy shelter, access to energy, satisfactory healthcare and so on). He also discusses freedoms and how they may have to be curtailed to prevent overconsumption and resource over-exploitation. The following three chapters apply his ideas and framework to existing scenarios in Asia: the haze, urbanization and China. He concludes in

Chapter 12 with the ideal transition path to achieve his dream state, outlining key sustainability pillars that need to be developed in the implementation of a true sustainability agenda.

This is, by far, one of the more interesting takes on how a state can achieve sustainability and a huge departure from the usual catch-phrase laden tropes that really only encourage superficial greenwashing. Nair's analysis is blunt and spot on, and probably something that many will not be able to accept or condone. However, it is a *dream* state—for it seems near impossible for the reins to be pried free from those who control the world's major markets today. Not only will it take many generations to undo the decades of conditioning that have moulded popular understanding of what it means to be “developed” and “prosperous”, it is a Herculean ask to expect the powerful to allow the poor to readjust their goals when it could lead to a loss of their own perpetual prosperity.

Nair's book needed to be written. Its powerful content needed to be out there. But whether or not anyone will act on it to truly transform the world for real sustainability is the question.

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***Beyond Debt: Islamic Experiments in Global Finance*, by Daromir Rudnykyj.** Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019. Pp. 288.

In the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2007–08, Islamic finance emerged as a saviour for the global financial industry. Even a seminal paper by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) comparing the performance of Islamic banks with that of their conventional counterparts found that Islamic banks, on average, showed stronger resilience during the crisis period (Hasan and Dridi 2010). One of the reasons cited for this resilience was the prohibition of excessive debt.

The book *Beyond Debt* delves into this notion by showcasing how creating a debtless economy can help overcome the perils of financial crisis and economic instability. The author encapsulates this notion by highlighting the success of Islamic finance in Malaysia, a country known not only for the implementation of a successful dual banking system model, but also for being at the forefront of the global Islamic capital market.

The book makes a distinctive contribution to the Islamic finance literature by providing both the theoretical foundation of Islamic economics as well as the practical and real-life applications of Islamic finance concepts. Using the example of Kuala Lumpur, which has transformed itself as the Islamic finance capital of the world, Daromir Rudnykyj clearly identifies the differences between “Shariah-compliant” and “Shariah-based” Islamic finance, an aspect that continues to confuse readers of the subject.

The author has taken a unique approach to set up the structure of the book. In the introduction section itself, he re-charts the course of relevant economic anthropology by carefully highlighting the societal dimension of Islamic finance and tying it to the influential work on social relationships. The groundwork is well supported by the discourse on how Islamic finance can achieve economic objectives by combining ethical and developmental practices.

In subsequent chapters, Rudnykyj draws the readers' attention to the right mix of infrastructure, subject experts, government policies, and regulatory reforms that can act as an impetus for deeper development of Islamic finance. His decision to use the case study of Malaysia to examine the details of
