



Sustainable Futures

An Agenda for Action

Raphael Kaplinsky

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Praise](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Figures](#)

[Tables](#)

[Preface](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Notes](#)

[1 A Fork in the Road](#)

[2 The Rise and Fall of the Mass Production Economy](#)

[2.1 The Rise and Fall of Economic Growth, 1950–2018](#)

[2.2 What Accounts for the Fall in the Rate of Economic Growth?](#)

[*Was it a consequence of a shortage of labour?*](#)

[*What about the contribution of investment to the growth slowdown?*](#)

[*And what about the productivity of investment?*](#)

[2.3 Neo-liberalism and the Decline in Growth, Investment and Productivity](#)

[*Free trade and the retreat from Industrial Policy – increasing imbalances between countries*](#)

[*The crisis in macroeconomic policy – matching demand with supply*](#)

Sustaining demand through Quantitative Easing

Growing financialization fuelled short-termism and dulled innovation

2.4 Can the Mass Production Paradigm Be Reinvigorated?

The Great Recession of 2007-2018 - the sticking plaster wears off

Debt continues to spiral

Volatility and fragility in the financial sector threaten the likelihood of a new stock market crash

Disruption to global supply chains

2.5 So What Does the Future Hold?

Notes

3 The Bumpy Ride to Social Decay

3.1 The Rise and Rise of Inequality

Changing patterns in the distribution of wealth

Changing patterns in the distribution of income

3.2 The Startling Growth of 'Absolute Poverty'

3.3 Growing Inequality and Poverty Undermine Welfare and Social Solidarity

3.4 Neo-liberal Austerity Policies and the Power of the Plutocracy Caused Growing Inequality and Absolute Poverty

The contribution of neo-liberal austerity policies to rising inequality and poverty

The plutocracy promoted and legitimized austerity policies

3.5 The Fear of Migration Has Been Used to Fuel Populism

3.6 The Erosion of Liberal Democracy and the Rise of Populism Disrupt the Potential for Sustainable Growth

Notes

4 The Collapse of Environmental Sustainability

4.1 From the Dawn of Settled Agriculture to the Great Acceleration

4.2 The Transition to the Anthropocene – Take, Make, Use and Waste

‘Taking’ from the biosphere: the example of the energy vector

‘Making’ with what is ‘Taken’ – are we using the earth’s resources more efficiently?

Consumption: ‘Using’ what is ‘Made’

‘Waste’, in and after ‘Use’

4.3 It All Adds Up to a Crisis in Environmental Sustainability

Notes

5 Mass Production Runs Out of Steam

5.1 Learning from History – Successive Techno-Economic Paradigms since the Industrial Revolution

Growth surges and techno-economic paradigms

Learning from history

5.2 The Development, Deployment and Atrophy of the Mass Production Paradigm

The ‘Big Bang’ in Mass Production was followed by speculative frenzy, a financial crisis and the Great Depression

The deployment of Mass Production and the post-war Golden Age

Maturity deferred: the globalization of Mass Production

Complementary policy changes in low- and middle-income countries

5.3 Economic and Social Sustainability during the Mass Production Paradigm

The synergistic close fit between economic and social sustainability in the Golden Age

The erosion of synergy between economic and social sustainability after the Golden Age

5.4 The Crisis in Environmental Sustainability during the Mass Production Paradigm

5.5 Mass Production: The Balance Sheet

Notes

6 Information and Communication Technologies: The Motor of the New Techno-Economic Paradigm

6.1 The Emergence of the New Heartland Technology

6.2 Digital Logic – the Brains of the System

6.3 The Evolution of ICTs

Data storage and communication

Computer-integrated and flexible production systems

The Internet of Things

Big Data and Artificial Intelligence

6.4 Beyond Mass Production

ICTs provide the capacity to revive productivity growth

ICTs provide the capacity for decentralized production, and thus for bringing residence, production and consumption closer together

ICTs can provide the capacity to customize products to meet individual needs

ICTs can provide the capacity for shared, rather than individualized, consumption, and for repairable rather than throwaway products

ICTs can enhance the capacity for greener production systems, and for the development of renewable energy

ICTs provide for peer-to-peer communication that enhances civil society

6.5 Not Just Roses, Also Weeds in the Garden

Notes

7 Transformative Change in Practice

7.1 Mobile Telephones Transform the Financial Sector and Facilitate Economic and Social Inclusion

Mobile phones have promoted financial inclusion and renewable energy in Kenya

Social inclusion through access to renewable energy

Mobile telephony and techno-economic paradigms

7.2 Renewable Energy, Large Dams and Hydroelectric Power

The impact of large hydro in the Zambesi River basin

Large dams also support irrigation

Is there an alternative to large-dam hydroelectricity?

Large hydro, renewables and techno-economic paradigms

7.3 Precision Farming and Robots in Agriculture

The extension of mass production in mechanized farming

ICTs, robotics and machine-learning can transform mechanized farming

Precision farming and techno-economic paradigms

7.4 Three Case-Studies – The Balance Sheet

Notes

8 What's To Be Done?

8.1 The What – Visioning a More Sustainable Future

A more sustainable environment

A more sustainable economy

A more sustainable society

8.2 The How – What Actions Will Deliver a More Sustainable World?

Regulating and changing behaviour in the financial sector

Reducing the concentration of individual and corporate power

A Smart Green New Deal

Incentivizing changes in behaviour

Infrastructure to support the Circular Economy

Innovation to support the Green New Deal

Strengthening global and local governance

Promoting global development

8.3 The Elephant in the Room – Who Will Drive the Transition to a Sustainable World?

Notes

[9 Who Will Do It? Making Change Happen](#)

[9.1 Entrepreneurship: Turning Fantasy into Fact](#)

[9.2 The Private Sector Provides the Motive Power, the State is at the Steering Wheel \(and Sometimes Pays for the Petrol\)](#)

[*Beyond the private sector*](#)

[9.3 Building Coalitions for Change](#)

[9.4 Change Is Cumulative](#)

[9.5 How to Jump Over Walls](#)

[*Synergistic interventions*](#)

[*Governments must act decisively and with vision*](#)

[*Confronting reactionary power bases*](#)

[9.6 Sequencing and Priorities: The Two-Shot Stimulus to a Paradigm Change and the Rebuilding of a Sustainable World](#)

[*The trigger for change*](#)

[Notes](#)

[Index](#)

[End User License Agreement](#)

List of Tables

Chapter 2

[**Table 2.1** Average annual economic growth rates: World, US and Europe \(%\)](#)

Chapter 3

[**Table 3.1** Extent and character of migrant inflows in ten high-income economies](#)

Chapter 4

Table 4.1 Range of approximate CO₂ emissions per unit of electricity produced, ...

Table 4.2 Projected impacts of global warming at increase of 1.5 °C and 2 °C

Chapter 5

Table 5.1 Post-tax wages in global economies, March 2009 (\$).

List of Illustrations

Chapter 2

Figure 2.1 The expansion of Gross Domestic Product, 1961–2018: World, US and Europe ...

Figure 2.2 Share of investment in equipment and other physical assets (Gross Capital Format...

Figure 2.3 Annual growth of labour productivity, 1951–2019

Figure 2.4 Balance of payments: largest debtor and surplus economies, 1998–2019 (...)

Figure 2.5 Corporate tax rate: France, Germany, US, UK, Japan and Sweden, 1981–2019 ...

Chapter 3

Figure 3.1 Top 1% personal wealth share in emerging and rich countries, 1913–2015

Figure 3.2 Changes in global inequality, 1980–2016

Figure 3.3 Share of labour in total national income, high-income economies, 1960–201...

Figure 3.4a Life-expectancy and inequality, 22 OECD economies

Figure 3.4b Life-expectancy and inequality, 50 US states

Figure 3.5 Health and social problems and degree of inequality, inter-country differences

Figure 3.6 Index of status inequality and degree of inequality

Figure 3.7 Index of social participation and degree of inequality

Figure 3.8 Index of civic participation and degree of inequality

Figure 3.9 Belief in conspiracy theories, US and UK

Figure 3.10 Inflows of migrants, selected high-income economies, 2006-2016 (millions)

Figure 3.11 Immigrant share of population and far-right voting %

Chapter 4

Figure 4.1 The Holocene in historical perspective: not just warm temperatures but stable te...

Figure 4.2 The Great Acceleration

Figure 4.3 Take, Make, Use and Waste

Figure 4.4 Energy equivalent global output of different energy forms, 1800-2019 (ter...

Figure 4.5 The growth in global total resource supply, 1970-2010 (million tonnes)

Figure 4.6 Index of energy efficiency in the EU, 1990-2014 (1990 = 100)

Figure 4.7 Variation of CO₂ emissions from transport in the EU, 1990 and 2010 (m...

Figure 4.8 US advertising expenditure, 1900–2007 (\$m).

Figure 4.9 Rising frequency of natural disasters, 1980–2017

Chapter 5

Figure 5.1 Six phases of techno-economic paradigms

Figure 5.2 US corporate profitability as share of domestic income, 1951–1966 and 196...

Figure 5.3 US corporate profitability as share of domestic income, 1990–2007 (post-t...

Chapter 6

Figure 6.1 Six phases of techno-economic paradigms

Chapter 7

Figure 7.1 Broadband connections per 100 inhabitants, 2005–2018

Figure 7.2 The global share of different energy sources, 1971–2014

Figure 7.3 Frequency and cost escalation of electricity infrastructure projects (based on a...

Figure 7.4 The Zambezi river basin

Figure 7.5 Global average annual net capacity additions by energy source

Figure 7.6 Wheat and barley crop yields in UK agriculture, 1948–2017 (tonnes/hectare...

Figure 7.7 Sources of productivity growth in UK agriculture, 1973–2019 (1973 = 100).

Figure 7.8 ‘Tom’ gathering data on soil and weeds

Chapter 8

Figure 8.1 Levels of circularity: the 10 Rs

Figure 8.2 Total UK tax receipts, 2018-2019 (£bn).

Praise

‘Faced with what some describe as extinction-level threats, Kaplinsky dares to say this is no time to despair. With his considerable expertise as a developmental economist, he shows that trying to tick off each problem as it comes along is doomed to failure. Part history, part manifesto, *Sustainable Futures* calls for an integrated approach which brings together the resources of government and the power of the people. Those who want to avoid the mistakes of the past and re-make our future should read this book.’

George Alagiah, BBC Journalist and Author

‘Dedicated to “all the grandchildren”, *Sustainable Futures* is written in the hope of contributing to a pathway out of the current dreadful state of our world and into a sustainable future for them. Kaplinsky provides a theoretical and conceptual framework to better understand the current crises and to extract lessons for the future from epochal moments in history and sets out an ambitious agenda for change. He has indeed provided a compelling and hopeful message “for the grandchildren”.’

Keith Bezanson, former President of Canada’s International Development Research Centre

‘A most inspirational and enlightening book by a leading development scholar and thinker, analysing courses and actions to build an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable future. A book with historical and analytical depth as well as a global and forward vision which is much needed at a moment when the world is at crossroads.’

Xiaolan Fu, Professor of Technology and International Development, University of Oxford

‘A compelling read, brilliantly written and bubbling with thought-provoking ideas, experience and outlines for the future.’

Sir Richard Jolly, former Assistant Secretary-General of the
UN

‘Read this book! It’s tightly argued, packed with an astonishing depth and range of evidence on our current crises, and yet is ultimately equally full of hope and practical inspiration, ambitiously laying out a sweeping agenda for change. Kaplinsky combines the big vision of how society must come to grips with innovation together with the mechanics of driving change.’

Harriet Lamb, CEO of Ashden and former CEO of Fairtrade
International

‘As the pandemic continues to grip the world, we are facing increasing demands for a more resilient and sustainable socio-economic system. Taking a Schumpeterian perspective, this book offers an effective clue to a way out of the current crisis. While it still sees a window of opportunity in the potentials of information communication technologies, it also sets out a blueprint for collective action by us. It is a must read for all of us, who should participate in this joint effort.’

Keun Lee, Winner of the Schumpeter Prize, 2014, and
Professor of Economics, Seoul National University

‘This work is a tour de force by a mature and insightful social scientist, worth reading by anybody concerned with how to tackle simultaneously challenges such as global warming and growing inequality. It explains how the world got into its current unsustainable state and it comes with brave and radical ideas for how to move it back towards sustainability.’

Bengt-Åke Lundvall, Emeritus Professor of Economics,
Aalborg University

‘There are many critics of the current capitalist system. And equally many others who profess how to organize it better. What is often missing is a link between the two. That is, an understanding of how we got into the mess we have, and using this understanding to analyse what is required to do better. Kaplinsky’s book does just that, bringing together historical, political and economic research in a way that allows us to both learn from history, and to have a more prosperous and sustainable future.’

Mariana Mazzucato, Founding Director of the UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose, and author of *Mission Economy: A Moonshot Guide to Changing Capitalism*

‘Kaplinsky has laid out with clarity, historical perspective and illuminating supporting data just how the current economic picture indicates a turning point in advanced capitalism. Kaplinsky’s driving and compelling historical narrative undergirds an ambitious case for political change that is both grounded and hopeful, touching on income equality, environmental resilience and economic development. *Sustainable Futures* is a serious and highly readable account of our recent economic history and our potential path forward. Informative, insightful and inspiring.’

William Milberg, Dean and Professor of Economics, The
New School for Social Research, New York

‘A timely and must-read book as the world ponders how to build better. It shows that the age of mass production, with endless harnessing of energy and matter, has resulted in multiple crises of declining growth, the rise of plutocracies and populism, and the ravaging of the environment. Kaplinsky argues that the power of the financial sector and

the plutocracy needs to be overcome, in order to realize the potential of the ICT-based techno-economic paradigm to build a more sustainable and environment-friendly system of production.'

Dev Nathan, Visiting Professor at the Institute for Human Development, New Delhi, and Director of GenDev Centre for Research and Innovation, India

'Kaplinsky illustrates the depth of the crises of the twenty-first century. *Sustainable Futures* distinguishes itself in its interdisciplinary, pluralist, and historical approach coupled with an emphasis on the broader techno-economic paradigm: technological drive, economic development, environmental sustainability, social change and political structure. This timely book is extremely relevant to policymakers and researchers of both the industrialized and developing world.'

Arkebe Oqubay, Senior Minister and Special Adviser to the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, and Distinguished Fellow of the Overseas Development Institute

'If you want to understand today's world and how to fix it, this is the book to read. Kaplinsky shows a formidable capacity to encompass the whole spectrum of today's global problems and provides realistic – though ambitious – solutions. Indispensable reading!'

Carlota Perez, author of *Technological Revolutions and Financial Capital: The Dynamics of Bubbles and Golden Ages*

'Engagingly written and spanning economic, social and environmental agendas in an exemplary way, *Sustainable Futures* places Information and Communication Technology at the heart of a compelling argument, but never as a technology fix. On the contrary, the book argues convincingly for a wide range of social and political

solutions that should provide a much-needed and powerful directionality to the opportunities offered by these technologies.'

Johan W. Schot, Professor of Global History and Sustainability, Utrecht University

'This work provides a careful, historically based, tough-minded but ultimately optimistic agenda for action that could rise to the challenges of the rapidly deteriorating climate and environment, threats to social cohesion, predatory elites, and destructive nationalism. We really can go beyond the fragile and destructive models and paths that we have followed, towards a much better economy, society and way of living. But we must decide and decide now; as the book's final sentence states, drawing on Sartre, "to choose not to act, is to choose".'

Lord Nicholas Stern, co-chair of the Global Commission on the Economy and Climate, Professor of Economics at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and former Chief Economist of the World Bank

'*Sustainable Futures* is a triumph. Drawing on all the social sciences, it demonstrates how bulldozer trends of our time can be understood as fuelled by the declining phase of the Mass Production "techno-economic paradigm". The book ends with a vision of what an ICT-enabled, more sustainable world could look like. Anybody interested in the future of human – and non-human – society should debate it.'

Robert H. Wade, Professor of Global Political Economy, London School of Economics and Political Science

'The journey from the world's current multiple crises to a sustainable future looks almost impossibly difficult. But in Raphael Kaplinsky we have a guide who inspires confidence. He is that rare thing: an economist who combines a real understanding of society and politics with

a seasoned idealism, and in this book he gives us what is perhaps our best chance.'

Richard Wilkinson, co-author of *The Spirit Level* and co-founder of The Equality Trust

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First published in 2021 by Polity Press

Polity Press

65 Bridge Street

Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press

101 Station Landing

Suite 300

Medford, MA 02155, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-4782-1

ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-4783-8 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kaplinsky, Raphael, author.

Title: Sustainable futures : an agenda for action / Raphael Kaplinsky.

Description: Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA : Polity Press, 2021. | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "How to steer the economy and society to a more sustainable future"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020053493 (print) | LCCN 2020053494 (ebook) | ISBN 9781509547821 (hardback) | ISBN 9781509547838 (paperback) | ISBN 9781509547845 (epub) | ISBN 9781509548439 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Sustainable development.

Classification: LCC HC79.E5 K3644 2021 (print) | LCC HC79.E5 (ebook) | DDC 338.9/27--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020053493>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020053494>

by Fakenham Prepress Solutions, Fakenham, Norfolk NR21 8NL

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Dedication

To my grandchildren (Arlo, Kika, Eva and Cam), to my children and their partners (Natasha, Ben, Justin and Nichole) who made them for us, to my godson (Kian) and, of course, to all the grandchildren of the world

In memory of my parents, Morris and Becky, with love and gratitude for building the platform on which our family stands, and to Cecil, who left us too early

Figures

[2.1](#) The expansion of Gross Domestic Product, 1961–2018: World, US and Europe (% per annum)

[2.2](#) Share of investment in equipment and other physical assets (Gross Capital Formation) in GDP

[2.3](#) Annual growth of labour productivity, 1951–2019

[2.4](#) Balance of payments: largest debtor and surplus economies, 1998–2019 (\$m)

[2.5](#) Corporate tax rate: France, Germany, US, UK, Japan and Sweden, 1981–2019 (%)

[3.1](#) Top 1% personal wealth share in emerging and rich countries, 1913–2015

[3.2](#) Changes in global inequality, 1980–2016

[3.3](#) Share of labour in total national income, high-income economies, 1960–2012

[3.4a](#) Life-expectancy and inequality, 22 OECD economies

[3.4b](#) Life-expectancy and inequality, 50 US States

[3.5](#) Health and social problems and degree of inequality, inter-country differences

[3.6](#) Index of status inequality and degree of inequality

[3.7](#) Index of social participation and degree of inequality

[3.8](#) Index of civic participation and degree of inequality

[3.9](#) Belief in conspiracy theories, US and UK

[3.10](#) Inflows of migrants, selected high-income economies, 2006–2016 (millions)

[3.11](#) Immigrant share of population and far-right voting

[4.1](#) The Holocene in historical perspective: not just warm temperatures but stable temperatures

[4.2](#) The Great Acceleration

[4.3](#) Take, Make, Use and Waste

[4.4](#) Energy equivalent global output of different energy forms, 1800–2019 (terawatt hours)

[4.5](#) The growth in global total resource supply, 1970–2010 (million tonnes)

[4.6](#) Index of energy efficiency in the EU, 1990–2014 (1990 = 100)

[4.7](#) Variation of CO₂ emissions from transport in the EU, 1990 and 2010 (million tonnes energy equivalent)

[4.8](#) US advertising expenditure, 1990–2017 (\$m)

[4.9](#) Rising frequency of natural disasters, 1980–2007

[5.1](#) Six phases of techno-economic paradigms

[5.2](#) US corporate profitability as share of domestic income, 1951–1966 and 1966–1990 (post-tax profits as a share of domestic income, %)

[5.3](#) US corporate profitability as share of domestic income, 1990–2007 (post-tax profits as a share of domestic income, %)

[6.1](#) Six phases of techno-economic paradigms

[7.1](#) Broadband connections per 100 inhabitants, 2005–2018

[7.2](#) The global share of different energy sources, 1971–2014

[7.3](#) Frequency and cost escalation of electricity infrastructure projects (based on analysis of 411 projects)

[7.4](#) The Zambezi river basin

[7.5](#) Global average annual net capacity additions by energy source

[7.6](#) Wheat and barley crop yields in UK agriculture, 1948–2017 (tonnes/hectare)

[7.7](#) Sources of productivity growth in UK agriculture, 1973–2017 (1973 = 100)

[7.8](#) ‘Tom’ gathering data on soil and weeds

[8.1](#) Levels of circularity: the 10 Rs

[8.2](#) Total UK tax receipts, 2018–2019 (£bn)

Tables

[2.1](#) Average annual economic growth rates: World, US and Europe (%)

[3.1](#) Extent and character of migrant inflows in ten high-income economies

[4.1](#) Range of approximate CO₂ emissions per unit of electricity produced, different sources of energy (grammes CO₂/kWh)

[4.2](#) Projected impacts of global warming at increase of 1.5 °C and 2 °C

[5.1](#) Post-tax wages in global economies, March 2009 (\$)

Preface

I decided to write this book after returning from a wonderful family summer vacation in September 2018.

Looming over the warm afterglow of the holiday was the spectre of a damaged and increasingly unsustainable world. Donald Trump was two years into his malign disruptive Administration, threatening safety and livelihoods not just in the US, but across the world. It was increasingly clear that the UK was descending into a narrow tunnel in which delusions of past imperial grandeur, coupled with rising xenophobia, fuelled an insular and destructive nationalism. In my country of origin, South Africa, 'state capture' had led to the looting of state coffers by a predatory and opportunistic new elite. In Brazil, President Bolsonaro was following in the footsteps of his mentor, Donald Trump, and in the slums of the Philippines, police were encouraged to shoot on sight. If that wasn't enough, climate change and global warming were accelerating at an alarming rate.

Out of my post-holiday depression was born a desire to contribute in some small way to finding a solution to these societal ills. This book is an attempt to identify a path which might help us to get out of the mess in which we find ourselves. Learning from history, it is not inevitable that our worlds collapse into increasing unsustainability. To the contrary, there are credible reasons for optimism, and this is the furrow which I plough in this book.

Out of crisis comes opportunity. It is possible to rebuild a more sustainable world by taking advantage of the potential offered by a new socio-economic paradigm. The

lives of all of our grandchildren – to whom this book is
dedicated – demand that we do so.

Acknowledgements

During the course of my professional life, I have been privileged to work with three truly inspirational colleagues. Their contributions play a central role in the ideas advanced in this book.

The late Chris Freeman mentored my early career development and alerted me to the centrality of innovation in the unfolding of history.¹ Chris was resolute in his belief that technologies are socially created, and are hence malleable. Thus, he argued, we have a choice about the nature and trajectory of the society we live in. This choice, however, is frequently obscured by disciplinary silos and a belief in technological determinism. In the early 1980s, Chris pioneered the theory of ‘long waves’, which is the analytical structure I have drawn on and extended in order to analyse our contemporary crises in sustainability.

I worked with the late Robin Murray for more than two decades. Robin was an inspirational teacher and a visionary colleague.² Amongst the imprints he left on me was the understanding that distributed power, robust communities and civic participation are the foundations of a more socially and environmentally sustainable world. Robin helped me to realize that more inclusive societies not only are normatively desirable, but can also be more ‘efficient’ and are, hence, feasible. He was a pioneer in the development of ideas about the Circular Economy and the urgent need to take action to avoid a looming environmental crisis.

More recently, I have had the pleasure and privilege of working closely with Carlota Perez.³ Carlota collaborated with Chris Freeman in extending long wave theory from its

preoccupation with economic trajectories to an analysis of the co-evolution of technology, economy and society. Subsequently, she elaborated this framework to take account of the role which finance plays in the unfolding rise and atrophy of techno-economic paradigms. Drawing on insights gained from an understanding of the evolution of past techno-economic paradigms, Carlota provides us with a vision of what a more sustainable world might look like as the new Information and Communications techno-economic paradigm is deployed. But, she argues, this can only be achieved through purposeful action, particularly by visionary and effective governments. Carlota has stood by my side throughout the drafting and redrafting of this book. We have put on weight during our long lunches, and she has read (and sometimes reread) my draft chapters.

Although I have leant heavily on the contributions of these three colleagues, I take responsibility for the views expressed in this book.

My editor at Polity, Jonathan Skerrett, has been exceptional. He helped me to sharpen my focus and to make my material less inaccessible to a non-specialized audience. Shan Vahidy provided an invaluable and highly professional read of an earlier draft, Stevie Holland was my constant foil as an intelligent general reader, and Keith Bezanson provided insightful comments on the complete draft. Annie James (in Delhi) and Courtney Barnes and Chris Grant (both in Cape Town) assisted me with excellence in the processing of some of my data. Leigh Mueller assisted with a close copy-editing of the text. And, of course, the wonderful Wikipedia – how did we manage without it?

A number of colleagues and friends provided data and comments on individual chapters. The list is long. What surfaces as the work of an individual author is always a