

Book Review

There is No Planet B: A Handbook for the Make or Break Years; Updated Edition (2021)



By Mike Berners-Lee

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Reviewed by Sqn Ldr Eliot Finnimore

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Biography: Sqn Ldr Finnimore is an Aero Systems Engineer who has served 14 years in a variety of technical, first line, and procurement roles. He is a serving CAS Fellow having completed an MPhil in Engineering for Sustainable Development at Cambridge University in 2020. Applying his academic experience in the practical domain, he has recently led a project trialling Sustainable Aviation Fuel with 32 Squadron aircraft at RAF Northolt, subsequently carrying out a full logistics and carbon accounting analysis to inform future low-carbon aviation transition activity. He remains an advocate for sustainable change within the RAF and is an active participant within the Astra Network and RAF Sustainability Think Tank.

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Introduction

In this book Mike Berners-Lee, a published Academic and high-profile business sustainability consultant, has made several updates to a previously released edition in view of the latest Climate Change science; and to encompass the lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic at a global scale. Setting out the basics of how the human species now dominates the eco-system of the Anthropocene age, Berners-Lee provides a lively and thought-provoking commentary on how humans can best address the Climate Emergency. Further developing this to identify what the major future challenges are in view of the absence of an alternative home for our species. It is most suitable for readers who have an interest in sustainability but only a basic knowledge and wish to expand on their credibility within this arena. It is refreshingly jargon free, relatively colloquial in tone,

and written in the first person allowing all readers to engage as a start point for this important contemporary discussion.

Tackling several key concepts and leverage points, structurally the book is divided into chapters that can be read discreetly if you are only interested in specific issues, such as Business and technology, sustainable diets, Transport, Energy, and requisite values and thinking skills for more sustainable pathways. Alternatively, it can be read sequentially with intelligent links made across the above topics via a web of recurring key themes such as human behavioural traits, the energy food and land-use nexus, and fragility of governance systems that continue to utilise flawed growth metrics such as GDP.

Other core tenets are also found throughout the book's chapters, including a heavy emphasis on reinforcing systems effects through positive feedback, whilst also urging caution around technological efficiencies that perpetuate and lead to unforeseen rebounds in demand for energy. On the latter, providing unambiguous data and confirmation of the alarming trend towards (exponential) increases in energy demand from technology advances. Close to home, particularly for military organisations, the efficient and cost-effective access to mass transport and aviation serve as a pertinent example of this rebound effect.

A self-confessed generalist, Berners-Lee keeps the scope deliberately at a high-level throughout to remain accessible. Helpfully however, the majority of chapters are rationally structured such that they build towards explicit focus on what actions Government, Business, and Individuals should do to address the climate emergency. This is particularly useful, as it spotlights the differences between strategic and personal goals, and how influence can be most effectively achieved by unifying these strands. The conclusions obtained are mostly justified at the level of detail provided, although researchers of specific topic areas should necessarily consult other works for additional depth and balance. In essence, this is a book that will allow the reader to navigate and access some of these very complex topics initially, with signposts provided within the detailed appendices and references (including some of Berners-Lee's previous publications) to follow up on should a topic spark further interest.

Because of the broad scope, it is also germane to highlight that the book can only serve limited explanation in some areas and abbreviates some fundamental challenges as part of suggested proposals for improvement – which invariably some readers will find frustrating. For instance, in Chapter 1 deducing that supermarkets need to help customers purchase less but without addressing the restrictive economic model that prohibits such a transition (p. 45). Likewise, in Chapter 3 (p. 98) on Energy and Chapter 5 on Growth (p. 147) the need for a global deal and governance that restricts fossil fuel usage are eloquently justified, but stop short of suggesting specific actions to broker such an arrangement. In fairness to the Author on the latter, the UN has been working on such problems since the 1972 environmental conference in Stockholm through to COP 26 in Glasgow last year, and still hasn't managed to square the national vs. collective interest conundrum either.

As a tonic for some of these reduced areas of coverage, the use of data and analysis to develop specific points in a way that the non-specialist can understand and convey is genuinely innovative and does add to the book's overall utility throughout. For instance, the comparison of relative energy losses against land-use for different fuel sources and transport modes is genuinely eye-opening. Here, Berners-Lee intuitively explains why biofuel powered cars are a sub-optimal mode of transport relative to battery electric vehicles powered by solar - based on the 200-fold energy differential developed per-squared metre of land used to source the energy (p. 117). Yet another feather in the cap of your self-assured Tesla driving neighbour!

For organisations, there are also several easily digestible sections on enacting and sustaining change. Certainly, Air Forces worldwide can benefit from applying the principles espoused by Berners-Lee in this book, with reassuring coverage given to both influencing choices and creating the value systems required in modern sustainable organisations. Consequently, this book has real utility for commanders and aviators at all levels looking to take responsibility for supporting the net-zero ambitions (Including the RAF's own NZ 2040 goal). On a related tangent, there are also several particularly thought-provoking sections on how disruptive influences can accelerate required changes through effective protest. So, whilst an Air Command branch of Extinction Rebellion is perhaps a polarising influence too far, the book is certainly an effective clarion call to uniformed personnel to make sure they are questioning and challenging their leadership appropriately on environmental matters.

The book concludes with perhaps the most important theme around sustainability and climate change, posing and summarising in simple terms answers to the question 'What can I do?' Herein, outlining the requirement to develop a system where the cumulative sum of changes is greater than the sum of individual changes in isolation i.e. where individual choices effect systemic change. One individual choice you might consider is reading this book as a starting point on a journey to a more sustainable lifestyle and workplace. Yes, other authors have compiled more detailed analysis on specific topics in dedicated works for some of the areas Berners-Lee addresses (e.g. on Systems thinking at the planet scale '*Gaia: A new look at life on Earth*' by James Lovelock). However, as an encompassing and holistic initial reference point, *There is No Planet B* is a highly recommended handrail through the immense complexity of environment-focused technology, politics and behavioural science.

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