



Life After the Crash: Lessons from Kenya

Posted by [Gail the Actuary](#) on April 12, 2009 - 10:58am

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I want to share an e-mail I received from a reader I know as Derek. His Oil Drum name is "Ndege" (Kiswahili for... Bird, Airplane, Helicopter, Airport, Butterfly, flying--one word covers quite a lot of related concepts). We had been corresponding about another matter, and I had sent him a link to this [presentation](#) I have given several times recently.

Gail,

Thanks for the presentation. I read your post on The Oil Drum and think your analysis is spot-on.

I am not entirely sure about the implications for our lives in the immediate future, however. (I am typing without spell-checker and am German, so bear with me in case of mistakes and typos, please...)

Based on some experience, I have a 'feeling' that the doom we see coming will actually not result in real doom on the ground – after a period of severe adjusting, that is. At least, it mustn't really 'feel' like doom. Things could go 'bad' - and we still (many, many, many of us) could have not such a bad life after-all - including an economy with things (some) and food (less exotic).

There is this thought/observation/concept (of mine), and it might interest you. That's why I feel it's okay to take some of your time.

When I read the scenarios on The Oil Drum, I believe them. They make sense. Yet I feel there is something missing. Or, rather, some factor factoring in too much: the way we measure events and changes that we see coming, and how we consider them to be 'bad' or 'good'.

We merely measure them (as one always does, I guess) against the known constants of our own lives, our own known parameters for survival and happiness. But I have a feeling that by generalizing this, yes, by assuming that this is a necessary standard in the first place, we might be wrong. And, therefore, many (not all) of our fears may actually be much less justified. Not because that sort of envisioned change isn't coming - but because the change really won't 'feel' as bad as we now believe that it must.

I may have that feeling, because I also know a different set-up, one where, for a very large part, the standard of what to expect is not based on an oil-fueled society with all its trimmings.

You see, during the past 28 years, I have spent a lot of time in Kenya, where our family has a home.

What I experience there is a society that does pretty well with VERY little energy, all things

considering. Mind you, not 'pretty well' by any standard of the Western world. But survival - and happiness! - are pretty much possible. Oddly, a first-time visitor would think, but, yes, even (I would say, especially) the Masai, who really live lives quite, well, horrible (in the eyes of Westerners) are very happy people (and wouldn't want to change a thing, basically. A solar cell to get some TV and the mobile charger, that's all).

It's the mindset that makes most Kenyans experience a happiness most Westerners would never consider to be possible given realities - as they see and experience them.

In Kenya, we do use electricity (hydro / diesel), if we can. We have constant power cuts. But that's not the only limit. In fact, the vast majority of us, even the so-called middle-class, build our lives around limits. Limits are the basis for every decision we make, business or otherwise. It is, you could say, a way of life that is happy when it is not done in - not unhappy if things go wrong (I am not sure that this makes sense).

People there - including me - celebrate every day that was a good day. And a good day is one where we got by. I would say, for 95% of Kenyans, life there is very much focused on the hour - and hardly ever on the future.

We are used to being very mindful of how to not waste water. Or anything, really! Things get mended and re-used and re-used. Still, even our - middle class - standard of living FEELS like it is much higher than even here in cozy Europe, where I spend about two-thirds of the year.

We - and our guests - do really feel much better 'down there' - despite lacking certain consumer- and other creature comfort. When we get a nice block of (imported) chocolate, it is something special (as, I guess, it should be). It tastes great. It's fun to share something like this with guests (and, please, we have a big house - 500 sq. meters - so we are not 'poor' nor are our guests. We just don't define happiness by the amount of shopping for consumer goods - and use of energy. There is a big limit of both: things to buy (shops are far away, Western-lifestyle-items are very expensive); and energy.

When you go to the towns and villages, except for the ever-present mobile phones, everything else is pretty much powered by people doing their work by hand (one way or another). The approach employs a great number of people (although, mainly 'outside the legal employment system'). Everyone I know (or see) is constantly busy doing something. Not very efficient by 'our' standards, everything takes a long time to get accomplished, but, well, people do stuff, which creates opportunities to survive.

The outcome is different in the respect that little energy is put into things that may be fun, but are not important in the end. We go for income that generates food. Not tons of toys or consumer-stuff. Buildings are built by hand - even our house was. Not with machines. I guess there was only a special saw used once when certain stones had to be cut perfectly (but we would have well survived without them stones cut like we wanted them to be cut). Everything else was done by hand, using ZERO energy.

Our house was built according to local tradition (for such Mzungu - white - houses). We don't need AC. Not even with 32 Celsius.

Credit is not really something that propels that part of the Kenyan economy that the vast majority depends on for its survival. It is people, social structures, give and take, barter on a certain level (I assist you with providing you with a certain contact/job; you return the favor - or else...). And it is - mostly - cash... wads of cash. All the time. It is a society that is extremely

people-orientated, extremely network-reliant. And, when it comes to financial transactions, they are cash-based, even for big projects. Builders for the houses are paid in cash in most cases. When people buy cars, they pay in cash, mainly. And cars are expensive - they cost at least US\$ 20.000 - even for a Toyota Corolla (that's why I don't have one; I use a taxi or public transport if I have to get someplace - as do most Kenyans).

I am not saying there aren't any problems there. In fact, there are many and they are huge. But they are related to a very basic human - and modern - (mis-)behavior. One: political leadership squandering resources, getting into debt for silly things (things 99% of Kenyans have no use for), constant in-fighting to sit at the source of power. The other: people making too many babies, which is a tradition, because there is not much else to do in the villages (I am serious) and because, up until recently, many of them died within the first year or so. (Some Kenyan cultures don't give names to their babies within the first year still to this day.) Except, since the onset of modernity (farming/medicine) many of these babies do make it, which, please don't get me wrong, is fine with me - I love children, but which puts obvious strains on resources. But, on the other hand, I have also been witness to a great many situations where people lost their children, cried for a week, and moved on, had new babies, weren't depressed - nor impressed (strangely; I am still not getting over this - but that's the way it is; again: different view on things in Kenya).

It is safe to say that Kenyans would use even less energy and yield much higher economic results where it matters for most of them if there were NO politicians, no political structures, at all (and no credit facilities). Most Kenyans get along not because of modern financial and social structures, but despite them. In Kenya, most of what we assume to be a modern society actually is a hindrance (because it is so corrupt and because it doesn't fuse well the traditional culture, which is group- and NOT AT ALL individual based). I am pretty sure you won't find a Kenyan believing otherwise.

I am writing this because I believe (well, know, actually) that what we consider to be a 'flourishing' economy mustn't be the standard to go by when judging whether we, as people, can live without fear of constant social meltdown - and without perceiving our lives to be happy ones.

I think the coming changes will hit different societies differently. Maybe European and American people will have to let go of much more (stuff) than we in Kenya. We really have very little to lose as it is. There is very little credit - internally - to unwind, and people aren't too attached to it in the first place, knowing how difficult it is to hold on to stuff - or people, really.

I wouldn't be surprised if what you called the 'bad option' for the future (new currency etc.) may actually, after only a surprising limited amount of time of re-adjusting, be the better option. Because, it seems to me, things have to shrink a LOT. And they will.

Because, at the end of the day, it is our lifestyle that is doing us in. Our desires, not our needs. Nor the amount of oil available or not (which was just a propellant that was used to build a certain kind of society, which is by no means the only kind possible).

Maybe, one day, someone will come up with something that is available indefinitely to provide an indefinite lifestyle for an indefinite number of people (I doubt it). But as long as that is not the case (or as soon as oil gets uneconomical), I guess different ways to survive and to make a living are going to take place - and are, as such - not at all bad, once we arrive at that point.

To go from here to there, the way it will happen, and the decrease in population so far sustained by a lot of cheap energy, that will be horrible. The loss of lives, that is the price that will have to be paid. Credit? Consumer goods? Nice to have, perhaps. But not that important, really, to have a

nice day.

I am pretty sure that this unwinding of the market - and of populations - will take place rather quickly. And afterwards, maybe not on a personal level, but for societies, life can and will continue. And it won't necessarily be a bad life. It may be one that feels, at first, like waking up from a dream, where everyone went shopping for tons and tons of things with a credit card - and finding one-self in a reality where there is less stuff, less choice in supermarkets, less of everything, but where one still does all kinds of things (including surviving), also 'modern' things, using a lot less resources - and still having a laugh, friends, fun, joy.

I guess what I am trying to say is this: even if all you wrote comes true (and, I am damn sure it will; option 'B' that is), life mustn't necessarily be bad for those who can survive - which, I guess, will be all those countries with a food-surplus, or, roughly, enough food to hang on. Kenya can be one of those places (after a decrease of population, which, knowing Africa, would take place rather quickly). Especially since we produce food with a lot less oil-input than the so-called First World.

In other words... what we assume to be so bad (change of economy and lifestyle) will most likely prove to be quite okay once we get there - and live it.

Forgive my ramblings. Thought I should share. And thank you, thank you, thank you... for all the mind-expanding input you and your fellow contributors made available to me on The Oil Drum!

Cheers,

Derek



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