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**Green Shoots – A ReRegions Case Study**  
**or**  
**Building a Bridge to a New Economic Reality**  
**Paper presented to the ReRegions Conference**

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Marlyn Glen has already provided a useful account explaining why Economic Regeneration is more likely to fail than succeed in competition with the dominant forces within our characteristic European economies, and why Green Shoots might offer an answer to this problem. My presentation today seeks to expose a more fundamental challenge to our ambitions. Our economies themselves are failing. The study of modern economics is overwhelmingly pessimistic about the capacity of existing economic systems to sustain us for much longer without radical change. Green Shoots might also offer an answer to this, a symbol of hope in a landscape surrounded by threat. I want to talk to you today about change that might sustain us without any radical revolution, and show how Green Shoots might suggest some small signposts towards that change.

In the history of human thought, we find a repeated tension between our sense of the limitations within our world, and the idea that no limits exist, between the concept of boundaries on the one hand, and infinity on the other.

For example, the following definition of the study of Economics explicitly recognises the universal tradition of competition for limited resources:

“Economics is a science which studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses.” (L.C.Robbins, 1935, *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science*)

Or “the allocation of scarce resources between competing ends” (John Kay, 2003, *The Truth about Markets*)

This is borne out by our social and political history. One of the most familiar patterns of social development is the settlement in the fertile valley, and the settlement on the barren hill-side, which we have come to characterise throughout Europe as the North-South divide, the haves and have nots. We have many clichés for describing the universal truth that any region will have a more fertile area and a less fertile area, whether this be natural fertility or a related economic fertility, and contests will result for possession of the best land. The strongest in the community will establish themselves in the more fertile region, become more prosperous, and stronger, whilst the weaker will be forced to settle in the less favourable circumstances.

But we can set against this model another radically opposing body of thought, that based itself on the opposite hypothesis, that the world’s resources were infinite, and had infinite capacity for human use:

“For some historians, it was the Renaissance and the scientific revolutions of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries that doomed the earth to be treated by the West as a machine that would never break, however hard it was used and abused.” (Simon Schama, 1995, *Landscape and Memory*)

This description of the philosophy of industrialisation directly links the economic activity to the natural world. It reveals how little care has been taken in the headlong race for industrial

power, and technological revolution. This was undertaken as if there would be no consequences for the natural environment, no price to pay in terms of health and welfare.

This tension between the idea of scarce resources, and its opposite concept of unlimited capacity, has come to mean more to the modern world than almost any other aspect of our practical philosophy, because it is at the heart of our belief that the human race, as we know it, might be coming to the end of its supportable life on the planet. The forecasts for global warming have allowed us to see the possibility of a world entirely hostile to human survival. It seems to be approaching us more quickly than is comfortable.

This transformation in our thought has given us an almost insoluble problem. We have started to realise that human existence on Earth is fragile. And this has given rise to the development in modern thought of a different, but related tension. It places the environmentalists on the one side, starting with the historic declaration of The Brundtland Report in 1987 that created the concept of Sustainable Development:

"development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." (Gro Harlem Brundtland, 1987, *Our Common Future*)

On the other side stand the US-inspired free market economists, pursuing a liberal, unregulated free-for-all in the belief that the market knows best.

"Wealth has always been important in the personal pecking order, but it has become increasingly the only dimension by which personal worth is measured. It is the only game to play if you want to prove your mettle. It is the big leagues. If you do not play there, by definition you are second rate." (L.Thurow, 1999, *Building Wealth: The New Rules for Individuals, Companies and Nations in a Knowledge-based Economy*)

These chilling words were written, not by a Wall Street dealer, or a Manhattan banker, let alone a rock star or Hollywood producer, but by an eminent academic, an economist, Lester Thurow, former Dean of the Sloan School of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, or MIT, as it is known throughout the world.

The tension has shifted from an axis of capacity to an axis of morality, from a world divided between the savers, and the users, to a world separated into those wishing to be responsible, and those pursuing greed. The tension has, if anything, intensified, because both sides can see the potential for economic collapse. Not only can they see it, they are also motivated by it, they are only divided by their different response.

There is a widespread underlying assumption that the economic model which has served the West for the past two centuries is collapsing.

But is there is a new economic model available to us? Can we find the seeds in modern economic reality that will grow into a safe economic future, a future which can avert potential catastrophe, at the same time as providing a long-term sustainable basis for the future?

And how does this relate to our meeting here? What meaning does it have for the work we are attempting in the ReRegions project, concerned, as it is, with much simpler things than economic theory?

I think this economic analysis defines the challenge. If we set out to achieve socio-economic regeneration of areas suffering from the decline of the coal-mining industry, then we have to establish a new relationship with resource use. In future, our methods of using resources must seek for unlimited sustainability for the following simple reason. Whether or not we are running out of resources, the consequence of competing for them is that ANY FORM OF SUCCESS IN ECONOMIC REGENERATION HERE MEANS A FAILURE THERE.

If we pause to consider our own lives, we realise this is obvious to all of us. Every successful sale here is a sale lost there. When you choose to buy your goods from one shop, you

choose not to buy from another; and you probably buy one brand of goods at the expense of another. One group of people benefits from your choice, another suffers.

In spite of the radical transformation in thought and awareness brought on since Brundtland conceived her definition of Sustainable Development, we remain stuck within the same economic model, the economic model that has created all the problems in the first place.

But there is another way. Let us use resources that cost nothing and can be renewed to provide goods to the communities that produce them.

Let us imagine the ideal. If the land which used to provide jobs in mining and quarrying were to be reinstated and returned to its natural origin, is there any reason why the local community should not be use it as a resource to try and sustain that community in a cooperative and resourceful way? A community could crop the wood for fuel, create craft items and perhaps exploitation like charcoal. Woodlands could be stocked so that seasonal crops like berries, nuts and fungi could be harvested and sold. Water features could be stocked with fish and even animals like wild boar could be used to help to provide income. We tend to think of jobs as full time and all-providing but multi-skilling could provide a rewarding alternative for people rejected by the normal job market. This does not have to exclude the use of these resources as a leisure area especially for visitor attractions and for holiday developments. Courses in woodland crafts and other associated activities could be provided for schoolchildren on a social education system with survival courses or cycling or physical education.

This is not some rural arcadia, but a practical vision which takes the closed loop concept to its logical conclusion. Let us use the green economy to create a self contained self supporting economy made up of social businesses. This is the founding principal of Green Shoots.

Green Shoots is the creation of the ReRegions project. It is a direct consequence of the socio-economic component led by the Oviedo Chamber of Commerce. The visit organised by the Oviedo Chamber to the former mining regions of Asturias provided an inspiring example of enterprise and commitment to economic regeneration at the most creative level. The work undertaken over a period of twenty-five years by Valnalon has been acknowledged throughout Europe to represent the pinnacle of Best Practice. The combination of education, training, incubation and business support has been responsible for a renaissance in business life in the region. The partnership was given a privileged insider's insight into the work of the team at Valnalon during its visit to Oviedo, and this inspired a new experimental initiative.

In Recycling Institute's office in Scotland, the wish to explore new means of economic stimulation to exploit opportunities in the Green Economy gave birth to the idea of Green Shoots, an adventurous new concept for the incubation of social enterprise in the Green Economy. This seems to be one potential solution to the problems of socio-economic regeneration. The Green Economy offers an escape from resource use into alternative sourcing. Social business offers the commercial model for self-support and self-sufficiency. Both shift economic dependence into a new system of sustainability.

Green Shoots constitutes an experiment. But it is an experiment that commands attention. It offers a new economic idealism. It frees us from the despair induced by the spectacle of a world falling into the trap created by its own prosperity. It offers the hope that we do not have to be destroyed before we learn the lessons we need to survive. Green Shoots is a means of socio-economic regeneration that can stretch far beyond the mining communities which form the basis for our partnership. It deserves to be taken further, and we will be working with our partners in ReRegions to make this happen.