

The call for efficiency leads to... inefficiency!

By Professor Jan Willem de Graaf

Professor of Brain and Technology, Saxion University of Applied Sciences, Deventer, Netherlands

My love and I had a wonderful weekend in the famous hotel on the Dutch Bilderberg. Away from the daily hassles, we enjoy the swimming pool, our hotel room and each other. For a moment nothing else matters. We talk about anything and everything, inspired by the setting where the Bilderberg conferences have been held since 1954, with participants including American presidents, a Rockefeller and of course the Dutch royal family. While talking we come to research grants, where unfortunately interesting-sounding but in the given context underdefined “buzzwords” play a leading role.

One of those words is efficiency. Everyone thinks it is important, but on closer inspection it is not clearly defined at all. For example, what results in more efficient energy conversion, business operations or procedures, or more efficient education, or a more efficient life? It is about achieving a higher return with the same or even less effort. No one can argue with that, right?

In fact, it can never be determined one-dimensionally whether something is true, false, good or bad, or whether one is more beautiful, better, worse, smarter, or more efficient than the other. Apart from a specific perspective it is impossible to determine how efficient a process is (every “truth” has many perspectives). Every disadvantage has advantages, and every advantage turns out to have disadvantages in the long run. For example, the urge for more efficient energy conversion often leads to an increase in the need for energy. Supply and demand determine the dominant economic growth model. Moreover, working or studying more efficiently can in the long run very well lead to less learning or working pleasure and therefore to less efficiency.

So what is efficiency? What is most in line with the predominant imperative (infinite economic growth from finite resources) in the short run? How efficient is an exhausted employee, organization, or even planet in the long run? The net result is undeniable worldwide: efficiency in terms of earning capacity is one of the first things we need to get rid of! Efficiency must be redefined in terms of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in what it takes to “save” nature and the planet. Still from our hotel room, we fear that even initiatives in this SDG direction are still mainly dominated by economic rather than sustainable motives.

The call for efficiency concerns not only institutions, companies, education and governments, but also our personal lives. In our lives it is about the balance between active and passive, between effort and rest and between work time and free time. This concerns our daily schedule from hour to hour, or even from minute to minute. We control the arrangement of our lives with calendars, smartwatches and apps via beeps and alerts, very efficient!

Psychologically it is very difficult to give in to inactivity or relaxation after continuously trying to achieve efficiency. For example, if you have driven your car through the busy traffic as economically as possible, it is difficult to relax immediately after arrival. A common response then is to engage in interactions that maintain the stabilized stimulus level, for example by immediately starting a busy conversation or chatting on social media.

As with many buzzwords, efficiency also easily turns into its opposite: inefficiency. For example, how difficult is it to get past the “efficient” click-through menus in case of a complaint (or request for help) to get a real person on the phone who can help you? The click-through menu is efficient for the producer (no hassle) instead of for the consumer. Again, efficiency depends on the perspective chosen! There is inefficiency in efficiency. In ‘sustainability’ lies the depletion of resources. In ‘safety’ lies the ever-increasing restriction of freedom of movement. The goal of an efficient daily schedule is to relax, but we have to consciously plan that as mindfulness or yoga, or as my wife and I did, as one weekend at the Bilderberg!