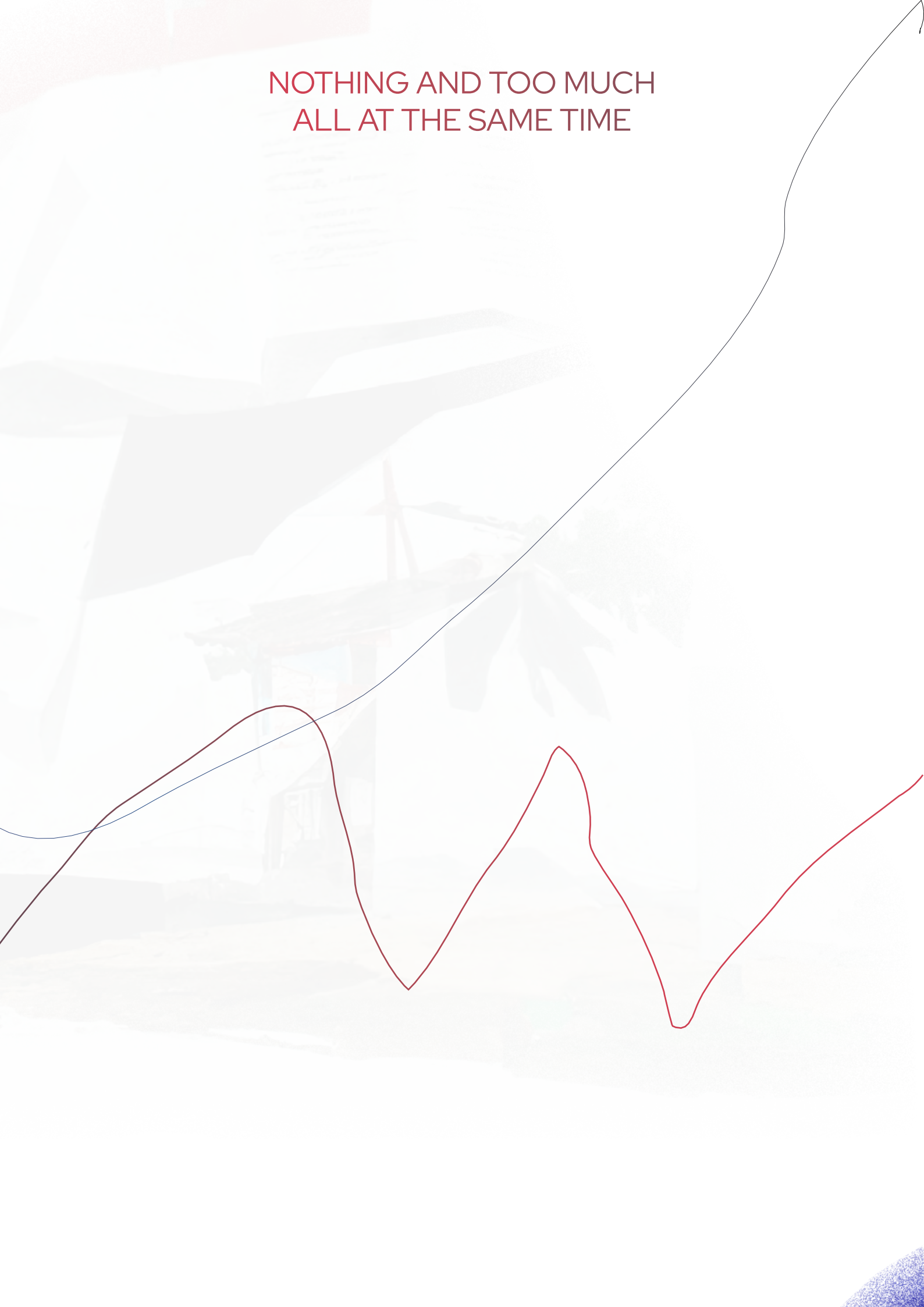# NOTHING AND TOO MUCH ALL AT THE SAME TIME

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PARSA SANJANA SAJID

NOTHING AND TOO MUCH
ALL AT THE SAME TIME

What is the impact of Social Impact?

The consultants would have us believe it is social good, solutions, innovation. But we should be wiser to the "sell" and the promise.

PARSA SANJANA SAJID

Here is a slim roster of consulting practices

- **Analytics on how plastics are not so bad.**[1]
- **An active contribution to the opioid crisis.**[2]
- **Shriveling of the middle class.**[3]
- **Greenwashing.**[4]
- **Metal and mining advisory services.**[5]
- **In short, the consultants are for hire.**[6]

1   Wolman, J. (n.d.). McKinsey's take on plastics: not so bad. [online] POLITICO.
     Available at: https://www.politico.com/newsletters/the-long-game/2022/07/21/tables-are-turning-00047110

2   Hamby, C. and Forsythe, M. (2022). Behind the Scenes, McKinsey Guided Companies at the Center of the Opioid Crisis. The New York Times.
     [online] 29 Jun. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/29/business/mckinsey-opioid-crisis-opana.html

3   Markovits, D. (2020). How McKinsey Destroyed the Middle Class. [online] The Atlantic.
     Available at: https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/02/how-mckinsey-destroyed-middle-class/605878/.

4   grain.org. (n.d.). Corporate greenwashing: 'net zero' and 'nature-based solutions' are a deadly fraud. [online]
     Available at: https://grain.org/en/article/6634-corporate-greenwashing-net-zero-and-nature-based-solutions-are-a-deadly-fraud.

5   www.mckinsey.com. (n.d.). The mine-to-market value chain: A hidden gem. [online]
     Available at: https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/metals-and-mining/our-insights/the-mine-to-market-value-chain-a-hidden-gem.

6   Kolhatkar, S. (2018). McKinsey's Work for Saudi Arabia Highlights its History of Unsavory Entanglements. [online] The New Yorker.
     Available at: https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/mckinseys-work-for-saudi-arabia-highlights-its-history-of-unsavory-entanglements.

They create *impact* as when McKinsey & Company announced the opening of their Myanmar office:[7] "In 2017, we opened the Myanmar office as the firm's eighth office in Southeast Asia, part of our broader commitment to creating lasting and meaningful impact for the country and the region." In its country report from 2018, the company goes on to explain[8] that "economically, Myanmar had demonstrated considerable competence in recent years. The country has consistently maintained sufficient growth over the previous 20 years to move up one income band – a feat achieved by only 18 of the 91 economies examined. Such growth has delivered significant benefits to citizens – for instance, GDP per capita rose from $270 to $1,484 over the period – and established Myanmar as a lower-middle-income country."

Simultaneously, in August of 2017, hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas fled the murderous rampages of the Myanmar regime into Bangladesh where the latter "also follows a policy of making the country unwelcome"[9] for the refugees. They were not recognized as legitimate citizens of Myanmar nor Bangladesh.

7   www.mckinsey.com. (n.d.). Myanmar | McKinsey & Company. [online] Available at: https://www.mckinsey.com/mm/overview

8   www.mckinsey.com. (n.d.). Sustaining economic momentum in Myanmar | McKinsey. [online]
     Available at: https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/asia-pacific/sustaining-economic-momentum-in-myanmar

9   Wikipedia Contributors (2019). Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. [online] Wikipedia.
     Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rohingya_refugees_in_Bangladesh.

Consulting practices cover such a wide range that they can be hard to understand or define. What or whom is a consultant? What is their function? What is being offered? An art consultant might offer a collector insight on hot new trends or artists. A film project can hire a historian as a consultant to get basic historical markers on the set right. Or an artist could be hired to teach an actor how to hold a paintbrush. Business or commercial consulting practices like McKinsey of course offer value, efficiency, impact, cost-benefit or trend analysis, advice on strategy, operations, marketing, and more. Consultants and consulting services are everywhere, doing everything. McKinsey tells us it is "the trusted advisor and counselor to many of the world's most influential businesses and institutions." A statement such as that can never not be suspicious and often their consequences or impact have a built-in violence.

If it can be anything and everything, it is nothing. If consulting constructs such parameters that everything and anything fits within its shapeshifting boundaries, 'not all consulting' can be an exculpatory device. That is, there may be some practices which produce negative impacts, but not all. Advising a mining company is not on the same plane as a location scout consultant on a film production. Such a broad sweep would be improbable and unnecessary. Nevertheless, 'consulting' as a professional practice evokes a set of assumptions, underlying and guiding principles, rationalizations, epistemologies. There are two parties; there is a transaction. A client buys a service. That service is expertise. And the goal is often impact.

The industry of consulting and its surrounding ethos—which spans management consulting businesses, individual and private contractors, even shadowy operators— functions to bring about social change. We can find consultants everywhere from education, healthcare, housing, energy sectors/ industries, from businesses and nonprofits to regime change (unsurprisingly they overlap). A consultant could very well be flown in to write a constitution in an invaded country.

In the world of consulting, the practice is staked on a surfeit of words without discernible meaning – expertise, impact, innovation, change, sustainability, efficiencies, growth, transformation, vision, and so many more. What does it mean, for example, to create

impact or transformation? When another leading global consulting firm, Bain & Company, announces its missions as driving "transformative social impact by applying talent in partnership with the most innovative and effective organizations, addressing some of the world's most pressing issues" what is it explicating? Infosys is proud[10] to "help enterprises pursue a path of smart transformation." And we are none the wiser.

But repetition creates familiarity. These words— as evasive, insipid, perfunctory as they are—are also indicative. They rest on a system of philosophies, knowledge, knowingness of a cadre whose interests are tied to preserving the interests of the powerful. They are also forceful in a way, and deployed with authoritative meaning. Take 'impact' or 'social impact,' which in consulting argot, convey an evaluative meaning. Impact can be assessed, quantified, appraised, measured – it is a form of valuation. There is expectation of a return on investment. Impact as applied and practiced is based on always/already assumption of ascertaining or extracting value even when things cannot be or should not be valued or measured. Or when impact is a substitute for foregoing or obstructing revolutionary change.

10   www.infosys.com. (n.d.). Management Consulting Services | Infosys. [online]
      Available at: https://www.infosys.com/services/consulting.html

[4]

As an example, let us turn to the education sector where we can understand social impact in practice.

Gradely (gradely.ng): "Gradely is another edtech startup founded in 2019. Similar to uLesson in that it targets secondary school learners, but its uniqueness is in the use of data analytics and algorithms to provide adaptive learning. With gradely.ng adaptive learning, teachers and parents can ensure their ward does not have a learning gap in any subject. So far, Gradely has been deployed in 60 schools, raised $35,000 ((12.7 million NGN) in seed funding, and was also part of the Facebook Accelerator 2019 Cohort."[11]

Zedny (zedny.com): "Zedny is Egypt's Arabic e-learning platform with over 200 online courses, 400 animated video summaries and more than 5000 hours of study. The company offers services in the Middle East and targets individuals looking to develop their general business skills. Founded in 2018, the startup received $1,200,000 pre-seed funding in June 2020. It offers its services at a fraction of the cost of its offline alternatives and hopes to strengthen Arab human capital."[12]

11   Benjamindada.com, premium tech blog in SSA. (2022). These edtech startups are revolutionising learning in Africa. [online] Available at: https://www.benjamindada.com/edtech-startups-in-africa/

12   Digest Africa. (n.d.). Most Funded EdTech Companies in Africa. [online] Available at: https://digestafrica.com/most-funded-edtech-companies-in-africa.

These ventures are ostensibly about creating social impact where profit is not the primary motivation, but education when it remains inaccessible to many. There are performance metrics, learning outcomes, process reports, student-teacher-institutional assessments, quantifiable measurements for improvement goals to understand impact and transformation. There is an assumption that the outcome is collective social good.

Missing:

- Whether privatization of education and erosion of public funding and commitment can achieve collective social good in the long-term.
- Whether education can be readily assessed or quantified via only performance metrics.
- Whether a start-up/seed funding/venture capital model limits our idea of education.
- Whether data analytics/machine learning/algorithmic models excuse unfettered data mining and surveillance.
- Whether these models structure a highly generic curriculum and education.
- Whether education understood as producing human capital is reductive and deleterious.
- Whether student-teacher-parent social participation, engagement with education, learning, curriculum and their political-discursive formations within society is undercut.
- Whether social spaces (learning with each other, together, creating potential for revolutionary change) are depleted with this model of education delivery.

Another example, social impact investing. From the OECD Social Impact Investment 2019 report:[13]

- "Social Impact Investment markets are growing all around the world in both OECD countries as well as developing countries."
- "There is an "Impact Imperative" for a shared understanding of how specifically the impact of collective investment in sustainable development is measured."
- "Without a clear definition and consensus around how to measure the 'impact" of investment made by the private sector, we will never be able to adequately assess how effective such funding is in sustainable development."
- "Mainstream investors have increasingly been moving from a strictly sale focus on financial returns to one also seeking to mitigate environmental, social, and governance risks."
- "There were approximately USD 22.89 trillion assets under sustainable investment strategies in 2016."
- Blended, SII, and green finance together form a set of effective approaches and tools to leverage private finance. All three financing approaches can help address the financing gap for the SDGs and COP24 Paris Agreement."

13   www.oecd.org. (n.d.). Social Impact Investment 2019: The Impact Imperative for Sustainable Development | en | OECD. [online] Available at: https://www.oecd.org/dac/social-impact-investment-2019-9789264311299-en.htm

Once again, social impact investing as a practice aims to promote "social" or "environmental" returns through financing instead of profit maximization.

But missing:

- Whether financing, private investment, erosion of public infrastructure is transfer of public good towards private interests.
- Whether the impact of capitalism be it in climate or infrastructure or wealth disparities can be resolved through arms of capital.
- Whether impact investing is structurally inadequate to address world-historical, political questions of our time.
- Take market-based impact-oriented climate change mitigation measures such as carbon credit or offset programs or green bonds which do not challenge fundamental tenets of capitalism including commodification and extraction of natural resources.

The rise of consulting as a professional industry correlates with the dominance of a depoliticized understanding of social processes especially where social change is concerned or needed. Within this worldview experts, expertise, technocratic solutions abound. There is an emphasis on solutions which follow from identification of so-called gaps, challenges, or problems. But each of them – solutions, gaps, challenges, problems – are depoliticized (although admittedly depoliticization is a political process itself). A consultant and their expertise are considered neutral, above politics. Experts/consultants offer solutions against a context where every problem – be it healthcare access, housing or land rights, educational attainment, poverty, disenfranchisement – is a technical one, when it should be political.

In this technocratic framing, solutions must be demonstrable even if they do not or cannot be ambitious. Or are not meant to question foundational issues. A program on providing water, sanitation and hygiene (commonly known as WASH programs[14]) may use lack of funding – the gap – in this area to attract greater financing from the public and private sectors by making WASH projects more attractive to investors – impactful – and not a drain on budgets, the underlying question of why essential utilities should not be subsidized is scarcely under consideration. Or how privatization of what should be public utilities is harmful. We can also question whether impact or a solution via financing, although much needed, can supplant the underlying political question of access to clean water as an entitlement and not a commodity. A quantified impact of increased funding and resources, even when necessary, is not a substitute for the moral urgency of provisions for clean water as a public good.

Social impact purports the creation of a social good, when businesses, nonprofits, governments are compelled to produce results beyond the narrow confines of just profit or development. The term first appeared in 1969:[15]

"The term 'social impact' was first used in a Yale University seminar in 1969 on the ethical responsibilities of institutional investors. For the seminar leaders, which included James Tobin, the aim was to consider the social and environmental aspects of investment activities, beyond merely the financial return on investment. The following year, the U.S. National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1970 articulated a set of practices and procedures called the Social Impact Assessment (SIA). [...] From the dawn of the 21st century, social impact has been mapped and reported by an increasing number and range of firms, well beyond the NEPA land-use reporting requirement in the U.S. Private companies adopted the language in an effort to take into consideration and combat issues previously considered belonging to the public sector domain, such as environmental degradation, poor labor conditions, and gender inequality. [...] But it was in the onset of the Global Financial Crisis that the term found salience. According to Google Search Term Analytics, the annual interest in the term has steadily risen since 2008, with the greatest-ever interest coming [...] in 2019."

But social impact remains ill-defined. Not only that, but it has produced an industry of 'impact washing' and the term's application often implies a marketing veneer. There is, for example, no "ethical" coal mining, nor "sustainable" or "responsible" mining.[16] When the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) invites impact investors and ventures in "food & agriculture, renewable resources and alternative energy, infrastructure, education and services … to generate social and environmental impact"[17] in Tanzania as part of its Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), it is operating firmly within a market-based ethos and promoting market-based solutions.

14   Devex Editor. (2020). Q&A: How to plug the WASH financing gaps. [online] Devex. Available at: https://www.devex.com/news/sponsored/q-a-how-to-plug-the-wash-financing-gaps-96338.

15   Klingler-Vidra, R. (2019). Social Impact: Origins and Evolution of the Term | Global Policy Journal. [online] Available at: https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/19/12/2019/social-impact-origins-and-evolution-term.

16   Neill, P. (2020). Major mining companies accused of greenwashing. [online] Available at: https://environmentjournal.online/articles/major-mining-companies-accused-of-greenwashing/.

17   SDG Impact | United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (n.d.). SDG Impact | United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). [online] Available at: https://sdgimpact.undp.org/#:~:text=Achieving%20the%20SDGs%20will%20create.

[7]

Social impact, thus, produces nothing and too much all at the same time. It is action and inaction at the same time. There is a sensation of movement, towards change when nothing changes, while introducing sensational, cataclysmic changes. Let us think of a healthcare startup which introduces digital diagnostic tools in its telemedicine platform. This does not reimagine healthcare as much as it reproduces inherent inequalities where physical interaction with a physician is reserved for the few and privileged. Access to healthcare becomes a shorthand for privatization of healthcare. Building healthcare infrastructure via commercial products also leads to erosion of healthcare as a right and public good. Often these startups are biometric data gathering operations, when combined with machine learning, predictive models, artificial intelligence, attempt to create new human subjects with dangerous implications for how we understand disease and wellbeing, patients, health, privacy and sociality, biology and externalities, ultimately people and their subjective conditions.

[8]

The promise of social impact is wide and shallow. As "social impact" think and speak have spread worldwide – not by accident, but by design – we find a ready script and vision with which businesses, governments, nonprofits, thinktanks have armed themselves. Often consultants "help" in fulfilling that promise. Promises of change and results, quantifiable evaluations and actionable terms, efficiency and process improvements, acceleration and deceleration all tied to the rhythms of capitalism. Consultants are experts at finding a seat at the table to turn a concept into a cliché – disruption, innovation, thinking outside the box. A stake on the street would be more promising.

17

(Artist Bio) Parsa Sanjana Sajid is a writer and researcher (as a freelance researcher she has been a consultant at times). She primarily writes on politics, art, culture, social movements and social spaces and has published with the Migrant Journal, The Funambulist, March, and Book Works among others. Her recent projects include Longing and Belonging, a collection of narratives from Indian emigres and their descendants in Dhaka, Bangladesh affected by 1947 partition of British India and a compendium on food as community, both supported by the Goethe-Institut. She is currently working on several interlinked projects on social life in online spaces, sex worker movement and organizing, and a co-edited volume on nation and identity formations to be published by Routledge.

(About - Artist Project Group) The curatorial collective Artist Project Group (Bernhard Garnicnig, Lukas Heistinger, and Andrea Steves) interrogates phenomena of capitalism through curatorial and artistic methods, in an attempt to build platforms for resilient aesthetic and artistic practices. In our project for curated_by with Galerie Elisabeth & Klaus Thoman and within the framing of Kelet, we continue to investigate the capitalist overproduction of meaning, including the recuperation of crisis phenomena into the market, and ask "What Can Artists Do Now?"

Following the workshop "Artists Have The Answers?" and the online festival "What Would Artists Do?", the exhibition integrates recently developed works—developed from the vantage point of the Artist-as-Consultant and/or offered as services—into the context of a contemporary art gallery. The exhibition troubles notions of audience, participant, material, and impact. In presenting what these artists are doing now, the works connect to a multitude of current crises— both acute and wide-ranging—that are inherent in capitalism and continuously producing its resultant conditions and intensifications. The works hook together and offer an overall landscape of the present phenomenon and epiphenomenon of capitalism.

The Cybernetics-based model of business consultancy services is one of the most pervasive yet invisible global exports from the incipient Western Cold War information industry. Today, consultative industry continues its expansion into increasingly differentiated services, with its methods and services pervasively influencing decision making processes that govern public life.

In the 90s, artists started to critically affirm their transforming role as service providers to institutions, yet their collective movement towards self-regulating their practice was often sidelined by discourses of critique and politics, putting an end to emancipatory initiatives to improve working conditions of artists. Artist Project Group is interested in replacing the concept of innovation with practices of maintenance, that is, maintaining practices through crisis by developing projects in which artists extend their performative knowledge practices as services to institutions, organizations and businesses.

Artists are purported to hold an important role in a changing society, yet their expertise is often undervalued, and their practices are rarely integrated with the processes where change happens. The constant expansion of capitalism continues even through war and crisis, an expansion that doesn't exist outside of or separate from crisis and war, but rather intensifies through these periods.

PARSA SANJANA SAJID

WHAT CAN ARTISTS DO NOW?

John M Armleder, Eglė Budvytytė, Juan Blanco (memeclassworldwide), Mateusz Dworczyk (memeclassworldwide), Thomas Feuerstein, Bernhard Garnicnig (Artist Project Group), Lukas Heistinger (Artist Project Group), Julia Haugeneder, Lucie Kolb, Ramona Kortyka (memeclassworldwide), Jens Van Lathem (Bureau of Analogies/TWIIID), Mary Maggic, Walter Pichler, Scott William Raby (Bureau of Analogies/f.eks), Tobias Van Royen (Bureau of Analogies/TWIIID), Peter Sandbichler, Jennifer Merlyn Scherler (memeclassworldwide), Miriam Simun, Parsa Sanjana Sajid, Paul Spendier, Seth Weiner, Franz West, Lois Weinberger.

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Galerie Elisabeth & Klaus Thoman, Vienna