Other People's Problems

 Something in our nature enables us to ignore problems until it looks like we can solve them.

We survived millennia before realizing things absolutely positively had to be there overnight and, until we see a simple solution, we're willing to tolerate many much larger problems. This has a powerful effect on innovation and sustainability.

Whether it's in our food supply, water, health, or climate change - our choice of which problems to work on depends on which ones we think we can solve. Don't get me wrong, we all like to work on meaningful problems, but only when we feel like we can wrap our heads, and hands, around solving them.

Unfortunately, something else in our nature makes other people's problems seem easier to solve than our own. The more distant the problem, the simpler the solution seems, and thus the more attractive the notion of solving it. This comes in part from a simple phenomenon known in social psychology as the Fundamental Attribution Error.

The Fundamental Attribution Error

The Fundamental Attribution Error describes how, when we look at other people's behavior, we tend to explain it by referring to personality traits like "intelligent" or "dumb," "hard-working" or "lazy," "honest" or "corrupt." By contrast, when we explain our own behavior in the same situations, we talk about situational variables: "the noise distracted me," "my task was harder," or "I was having a really bad day." In other words, our problems always seem more complicated than other people's problems.

How does this affect which problems we decide are worth solving? When we look at our own complicated problems, we see complicated solutions?and too often stop there. When we look at other people's problems, we see simple solutions. So it's much more tempting to try solving other people's problems instead.

Other people's problems

For example, we seem to care more about solving hunger halfway across the world than we do those halfway across the cities we live in.

A 2011 World Bank study estimates annual grain losses in Sub-Saharan Africa run upwards of 20 percent of total production. The loss, with an estimated value of $4 billion, roughly equals all the grain imported into that region each year.

A large part of the problem stems from inefficiencies in the supply chain from farm to fork. Indeed, some of the worst famines occurred without declines in overall food production. In the Irish potato famines, one-eighth of the population died while Ireland remained a net exporter of grain and beef; in the Bengali famine of 1943, 3 million people died while excess grain rotted in stockpiles.

This sounds like a worthy problem to solve. Many people, from the United Nations to foundations to student projects around the country, have dedicated considerable effort to solving this problem.

And yet, at the same time, a recent NRDC study found the U.S. food system wastes upwards of 40 percent. How big a problem is this? Consider that our total food production consumes "10 percent of the total U.S. energy budget; uses 50 percent of U.S. land; and swallows 80 percent of all freshwater consumed in the United States." Moreover, 15 percent of US families don't have a secure supply of food.

Is our problem more complicated than theirs, or does it just seem that way because we're inside it?

There's an app for that

Talking to colleagues who teach innovation and entrepreneurship at universities around the country, and working with the recent wave of social entrepreneurs, it's clear that our younger generation has tremendous talent as well as passion and energy, for taking on the sustainability challenge facing us today.

But much of that talent and energy seems to be spent sitting at home or in a coffee shop somewhere designing an app to solve it.

So how can we best direct and focus that talent, passion, and energy? For one thing, we need to fight the fundamental attribution error. Other people's problems are rarely simpler than our own, they are further away, in other cultures and other languages. If we can't understand and solve our own problems, we have little chance of solving anyone else's.

On the bright side, if students and entrepreneurs can learn how to understand and address the problem of food waste and hunger across their own communities, they will bring that experience and empathy to problems further away.

In Voltaire's novel Candide, after attempting to save the problems of the world (and causing as much trouble as relief), the hero Candide concludes:

"That is very well put," said Candide, "but we must cultivate our own garden."
This post is modified from the original post Other People's Problems appearing on The Hargadon Files on CapRadio on 3/15/13.