

Initiative for a World Future Council

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"We quarrel, we agree, we are friendly, we are not friendly, but we have no right to dictate, through irresponsible action or narrow-mindedness, the future of our children and their children's children."

King Hussein of Jordan

"Buried deep within each and every one of us, there is an instinctive, heart-felt awareness that provides - if we will allow it to - the most reliable guide as to whether or not our actions are really in the long-term interests of our planet and all the life it supports."

H.R.H. The Prince of Wales

"I think that it is necessary to address another restructuring, concerning the system of values on which contemporary civilization rests"

President Vaclav Havel

"It could be worthwhile to establish a body whose principal task is to monitor human affairs from the perspective of ethics ... a group of individuals drawn from a variety of backgrounds ... with a common reputation for integrity and dedication to fundamental ethical and human values ... these deliberations would represent the conscience of the world"

The Dalai Lama

The existential challenges now facing us are historically unprecedented in their globality, variety and long-term consequences. There is ample evidence that we (still) have the means to meet them. But do we have the will? Or will the great historical moment encounter too small a human race, lacking the "right stuff"? Much time has been wasted since the threats to our common future became public knowledge. Recent UN, OECD and EU studies agree that our natural environment - the basis for all life - continues to deteriorate at an alarming pace, both in rich and poor countries. We are still criminally failing our children and future generations. While previous ideologues were prepared to sacrifice present generations for an imagined future paradise, we seem prepared to sacrifice our grandchildren for economic dogmas and our own comfort.

If present policies and trends continue, even the (urgent) world-wide application of Best Available Technologies will still not be enough to preserve a liveable planet for more than a fraction of its present population.

The global rich are cheating the poor out of their inheritance, consuming common global resources at an unprecedented pace. While the global institutions of the rich enforce a borderless world for them and their money, the poor are turned back as "economic migrants" while their traditional, non-market safety nets crumble and their children die of easily preventable diseases. According to UNICEF, "Seven million children's lives could be saved each year if the money being spent on debt repayment went on health and education."

The cancellation of this "debt" (actually compound interest, as the debt itself has long been repaid!) would cause no suffering in the rich creditor countries. It would only require that we

decide to value the lives of poor children above current financial accounting practices and banking regulations.

Why don't we? Why are we so out of touch with the real world, with our common humanity? We are in danger of replacing representational democracy - with leaders willing to take temporarily unpopular decisions - with direct mass "democracy", obsessed with opinion polls and maintaining constant popularity. The result is a "dumbing down" of public debate, in search of the lowest instead of the highest common denominator. If governments become mere conduits for the fickle politics of marketing, then the "politics of meaning" (Michael Lerner) becomes homeless.

Lack of Vision

Too many of our current leaders live by the words of Mark Twain: "When they had lost sight of their goals, they redoubled their efforts!". There is no coherent vision. Economists worry about Japan consuming too little, environmentalists about China consuming too much. The age of retirement in Europe must be lowered, we are told, to reduce youth unemployment. But it must be raised to stop pension systems going bankrupt. The wealthiest generations in history can no longer "afford" children - or parents! In the USA economists worry about the increase in private debt ... but worry even more that it will stop growing and bring the bubble economy to a halt.

Never was political failure so comfortable! But the longer we wait, the harder, more wrenching and sudden the transformation of our societies will have to be, if we are to avoid "barbarization from within" - as desperate people fight for even scarcer resources.

We are facing a systems crisis, not just a management crisis. The only voice speaking with authority today is that of the market. Many of our most brilliant minds are employed in advertising, the greatest social engineering project in history. Starting with pre-school children, it aims to foster a consumer culture of permanent dissatisfaction, immaturity and irresponsibility. (In his "Theory of Moral Sentiments", Adam Smith described "economic man" as "vain, self-centred, narrow and grasping" ...)

The US model is held to be globally applicable. But, as US Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers pointed out at the 1997 Davos Forum, this could be a costly error: "As a means of creating a stable society and addressing the concerns of our citizens, the American model's superiority is far from clear. A child born in New York today is less likely to live to five than a child born in Shanghai. A young American black man is more likely to go to jail than to college. We have seen a collapse of respect and trust for every American institution and community value ..."

Materialism and Meaning

The orgy of consumerism over the past forty years has not made Westerners any happier - for it cannot feed their hungry souls. We feel "free, like empty sailboats lost at sea", unmoored from our pasts, our neighbours and ourselves (Richard Sennett).

As the world is globalised, other countries - North and South, East and West - report similar trends: de-solidarisation, depoliticisation, cynicism, distrust, apathy, anomie ... Only a small minority of young Germans place any trust in their government or political parties. But,

while five years ago most of them still trusted organisations like Greenpeace and Amnesty, now the majority does not regard any institution as trustworthy.

In 1995 Ex-President Gorbachev created the State of the World Forum to debate the most urgent challenges facing us. The report from its youth section, with participants from 28 countries from all over the world, concluded: "We currently face a global crisis of the spirit in the search for meaning. As our confidence and self-esteem decline, the value of friendship, family, society, trust and respect begins to lose the battle against selfishness and the pursuit of material gain. It is difficult to know what to believe in these days ..."

Fifty years ago the computer pioneer Norbert Wiener warned that, after the IT revolution, many people would no longer have skills to offer which anyone would want to pay for. Today, as our personal worth and job satisfaction is increasingly measured in money, this spectre of uselessness increasingly shadows the lives even of the educated middle-class. To many, the technological revolution has meant disempowerment, dispensability, and deskilling.

It is a serious mistake to believe that present trends are irreversible, that the losers will just shut up and adapt. The most powerful reaction is unlikely to be a socialist resurgence. Much more likely is a conservative-reactionary revolt against the values of marked radicalism.

History gives many examples of greedy, materialistic societies collapsing, only to be followed by centuries of intolerance and obscurantism, deskilling, economic collapse and terrorism.

The 'Logic' of the Market

International trade has existed for many centuries. We are and have always been consumers. But we are much more than that. We cherish other truths and have broader priorities than those of the market. A society which attempts to reduce its citizens to one-dimensional economic beings is on the road to self-destruction.

A truly "free" market would soon lead to chaos and civil war. Functioning markets are always regulated. But in whose interest? How can we ensure that market forces do not invade areas of life where they do not belong? How can we protect our non-material citizen values against the intrusion of perverted cost-benefit-analysis? Many things necessary for a decent society can never meet a narrow test of profitability, nor should they be required to do so!

When decisions are made today, we are no longer represented by our elected governments as citizens but only in our (much narrower) capacity as consumers. Thus, the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, last year stated that "governments should not hinder the logic of the market".

But it is this "logic" which has destroyed more than half the earth's forests with more than half the earth's species in the last fifty years. It is this logic which made the British authorities encourage the force-feeding of cattle with the ground-up remains of other animals to "increase yields" - leading to the BSE-CJD horrors.

This logic has created a dangerous imbalance. The speed of technological change and economic globalization are bringing unprecedented uncertainties which, more than ever, demand careful political decisions based on democratic citizen values. Yet governments have chosen this moment to abandon the "primacy of politics" and the pursuit of economic democracy. Instead of trying to steer the innovations shaping our lives they are abdicating

this power to the planned economies of giant corporations - planned in the interest of maximising short-term shareholder returns.

To restore the power balance in our societies we need to create institutions representing citizen values on all levels. In the future, members of such institutions could be elected nationally - there is a campaign in Switzerland for a "Future Council" as a third legislative chamber - and even globally.

Until that happens, the legitimacy of the Global Council we propose would come from its embodying generally approved values and goals - and from the benefits which would follow from it. (What was the "legitimacy" of those who organised to campaign for the abolition of slavery?).

Many studies show a remarkable global convergence of common values and priorities. Research by the Institute of Global Ethics involving individuals of different social backgrounds and beliefs in over 20 countries on all continents found common values to be (in their order of preference): truth/honesty, love/compassion, freedom, fairness, community, tolerance, responsibility.

The Valencia 2000 "Declaration of Human Duties and Responsibilities", drafted for UNESCO by a broad international commission, likewise reveals a remarkable consensus on the underlying common values (For a copy: Fax: 34-96-579-5600).

Values in Action

The problem we face is not a "values vacuum" but that agreed values are often not acted on. When they are, we move ahead. Studies of Global Environmental Accords have shown that these are overwhelmingly based on a shared moral perspective rather than on a cost-benefit analysis.

When common values are not protected or respected, e.g. when politicians insist on separating "decision ethics" from "conscience ethics" (Helmut Kohl), then the moral capital of our societies is depleted. "It is difficult to speak of or to practice, love, friendship, generosity, understanding or solidarity within a system whose rules, goals and information streams are geared for lesser human qualities". (Abraham Maslow)

Contrary to the claims of the genetic and economic determinists, human survival has been assured by co-operation and mutual obligation, not by mindless competition, unlimited acquisitiveness and constant struggle. But their flawed, reductionist view of human nature, based largely on a selective misreading of the works of Darwin, Adam Smith and Ricardo, guides our social, political, economic and educational policies.

Not surprisingly, more and more citizens, dis-oriented by such a dismal vision of humanity, withdraw from public life into virtual reality. Fewer voters vote and a smaller part of each voter votes. Are we voting as responsible citizens or as morally confused, narrow-minded, selfish consumers? Which values are we voting? Never was the answer more important than today, when our votes (and non-votes) have global (and very long-term) implications!

A World Future Council

We lack a voice which appeals and responds to our common values as planetary citizens, to our moral inner voice struggling to be heard against the round-the-clock cacophony of

commercial speech. The Council we propose would remind us of our responsibilities as guardians of all future generations of life on earth. It could provide an ethical audit on important decisions and their compatibility with our duty to assist those in danger and safeguard the world for our grandchildren. It would expose the connection between the pursuit of economic goods and the growth of social ills.

Such a "World Future Council" would consist of respected and open-minded individuals from various countries, backgrounds and beliefs. It would serve as a forum to focus global attention on new phenomena and priorities for action. As the voice of our common future it would debate the choices facing us from a perspective of expanded responsibility.

What quality of life do we wish to ensure for future generations? How do we repair the cracks in our moral edifice which are now threatening the moral advances of the last 50 years, e.g. the right to asylum? What (if anything) is acceptable anywhere which is not possible everywhere?

The Council's power would be moral - but should not be under-estimated. Agreements are now increasingly made between private corporations and non-governmental organisations which rely on moral rather than legal enforcement. Civil Society derives its power from its ability to speak to shared values and traditions. Many would welcome guidance to help us turn back from the "cusp of extreme evil" (Bill Joy) which threatens if we do not master the developments now shaping our lives and future. Intuitively we feel deeply uncomfortable with the ruling cynicism towards everything which puts any demands on us. (Perhaps we fear the contempt of our grandchildren for having risked and done so little?). As the voice of Global Stewardship, reminding us of our personal responsibilities, the Council could become a powerful change agent.

This requires asking new and different questions, as recognised by those working at the cutting edge of practical change. Thus, the Hanover Principles guiding industrial re-designers William McDonough and Michael Braungart begin with the question "How can we love all the children, of all species, for all times?" and include "Respect (for) relationships between spirit and matter".

EU polls show that for most opponents of GM foods, the main concern is not health or safety but ethics. Failure to understand this difference brought Shell the Brent Spar debacle. For the protests they faced were fuelled not so much by a cost-benefit analysis of the risks involved as by moral outrage against a corporation treating our oceans as its private waste dump.

The "science" of cost-benefit analysis has been morally discredited as analysts now routinely ask not how much compensation prospective victims of a planned project would accept, but how much they are willing to pay to avoid being damaged - the moral equivalent of a blackmailer asking a supermarket how much it would pay to stop him poisoning its products.

The Challenge of Implementation

There are historical precedents for the Council we are proposing. The Native North American Council of Elders considered the impact of tribal decisions on the next seven generations. In the Tamil Kingdoms of India, the "Council of Seers Into the Future" had power of veto.

In recent years, similar proposals have been made for a "Council of the World's Intellectual Elite" (Mikhail Gorbachev, 1987), a "Council of Elders and Innovators" (State of the World Forum, 1998), a "Council of World Cultures" (Development and Peace Foundation, 1999), a "Council of Wise Women and Men" (World Ethics Summit 1999), and a "Council For Responsible Globalization" (Forum 2000). Should they become reality we will be happy to co-operate with them.

We do not underestimate the task we face. But nor do we start from zero. Much invaluable work has been done over the past decades in defining our rights and duties as planetary citizens. The work of the global UN Commissions of the 1980s and 1990s has been invaluable, as have the initiatives of many civil society institutions.

"While many of the recommendations and programs of action arising from these conferences have yet to be implemented, they nevertheless mark the first time in human history when the world came together in a deliberative process and reached consensus at a global level on a series of issues confronting the entire human community. They are thus a foundation from which all of us can begin to view the world and our future in a more integrated manner." (Forum 2000).

Through them we know much more. But we are still not practising anywhere near enough of what we know! The "political realism" of small steps over the past 25 years has been so far from the minimum required that it is time for a re-think. To change course before it is too late we now need "problem-realistic" large steps which can inspire and mobilize globally.

Today, the effects of global decisions are felt in the remotest village. There is no escape. The Council would provide a permanent, respected forum to ensure that these decisions are transparent and considered from the perspective of our highest values – including the right of all peoples and communities to make informed choices about their level of global integration and have their choices respected.

What is the alternative? "Business as usual" surely is not, as the growing conflicts between the proponents and opponents of economic globalisation threaten to paralyse international decision-making. We are increasingly ruled by closed minds blind and deaf to different future scenarios than their own. They are unable to understand the deep anger in many parts of the world against the superficiality of the "freedom of choice" they propagate as the solution to all problems.

The World Future Council could de-trivialize and deepen the global dialogue. It would hold regular open meetings. Expert hearings and closed deliberations would be held at least annually. A permanent secretariat would serve the council, receive proposals and provide information. It is envisaged that the Council would have no more than 100 members of whom at most half would meet at any one time. Of the members about 3/4 would be recognized authorities and 1/4 young potential leaders. An elected executive committee would ensure continuity, respond to emergencies, set the agenda for the meetings and issue invitations. The Council is envisaged as an ongoing institution, providing guidance in a rapidly changing world. However, in order to prove its value, it could be given a set task with a limited time frame, such as the drafting of a global social contract.

The Governor of Salzburg has kindly agreed to host the first meeting of this Initiative in the Spring of 2001. If the decision is taken to proceed, the first Council meeting will be held in 2002. German TV (SWR) supports this Initiative and plans to transmit all Council meetings

world-wide. Substantial funding is still required for travel and accommodation, translation etc.

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This paper was mainly written by Jakob von Uexkull to stimulate debate about the Initiative. The opinions expressed are the author's and may not reflect the views of sponsors or prospective Council members.

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