
**When will ordinary
people rise up?
How a united
voice of the public
could transform
the world**

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Summary

Public uprisings and mass occupations have become a significant force for change on the world stage since 2011, as evidenced in the Middle East revolutions and Occupy protests across North America and Europe. This essay explores the nature of this new social actor, which can be seen as the latest expression of the 'people's voice' – a phenomenon also witnessed in the peace, justice and environmental movements of recent decades. Recognising that this collected voice of engaged citizens is acutely aware of the need for world reconstruction and renewal, the question is whether the growing power of the people's voice is sufficient to challenge the immense forces of profit, greed and control that stand in the way of transformative change. The Middle East protests and Occupy movements have many connections and similar causes, chiefly the vast social and economic inequalities that span rich and poor countries alike, but it would be over-optimistic at this stage to assume that they mark the emergence of a truly global movement of ordinary people. Only a joint demand for a fairer sharing of the world's wealth, resources and political power is likely to unify citizens of the richest and poorest nations on a common platform, one that recognises the need for global as well as national forms of redistribution as a pathway to ending poverty and extreme inequality. The urgent need for world rehabilitation may only begin with a united voice of the people that speaks on behalf of the poorest and most disenfranchised, and gives the highest priority to the elimination of extreme deprivation and needless poverty-related deaths. Based on such an appeal to our common humanity and compassion, the greatest hope for the future is a worldwide popular movement that demands a fairer sharing of global resources as its all-embracing cause.

When will ordinary people rise up?

In 2011, an astonishing new phenomenon took centre stage in world affairs: the rising voice of the mass public. From Tahrir Square to the Puerta del Sol, Wall Street and St Paul's Cathedral, the sudden 'democratic awakening' of global civil society was arguably the biggest political event since the late 2000's financial crisis. An overwhelming number of articles, websites, interviews, videos, social posts and even books have picked apart the importance of this unanticipated phenomenon, although no-one really knows how it will evolve as we move deeper into 2012 and beyond. We have entered an uncharted era, a 'laboratory of possibilities' in which the political imagination of everyday people is given license to propose radical alternatives to existing social arrangements and economic structures.¹ For perhaps the first time in history, it is the world's people – not their leaders or governments – who are declaring their needs and pointing the way to a more just, sustainable and hopeful future.

The deep significance of what happened throughout the Middle East from late 2010 may only be grasped with future hindsight, not least the events in Cairo from January 25th to February 11th 2011. Throughout those momentous eighteen days, the world's attention was captivated by the fearless protesters who amassed in Tahrir Square in their tens of thousands, defying the tear gas, tanks and water cannons that defended the old corrupt regime. Journalists described the atmosphere inside the square as electrifying, with 'reservoirs of creativity' being expressed by the people taking part, and a communal solidarity that posed a stark contrast to Mubarak's police and thug militias; people caring for each other with food, blankets and medical supplies, different political factions discussing and singing together, the Muslims praying at their appointed times while others stood guard.² By the time that Mubarak was thrown out of office and charged with killing protesters, there was no longer any doubting where power ultimately rests. Even an autocratic regime with monopoly military command, long supported by the world's reigning imperial superpower, could not withstand the non-violent, massed power of the people united. A blueprint for change had fired the imagination of millions of others across the world, a sense of 'this should happen everywhere'.³

People power uprisings and mass occupations have since spread across a large tract of the world; throughout Northern Africa and the Middle East, around the Mediterranean and into Southern Europe, across Western Europe and North America. Following the so-called Arab Spring and European Summer, the American Dawn took the movement to another level of inventiveness, using new media and social networking tools to proliferate occupations to almost every corner of the USA. Mobilisations were soon coordinated internationally by leaderless grassroots assemblies, and reflected their global solidarity in protest slogans like 'We are all Egyptians', 'We are all Greeks now', and the ubiquitous '99%'. It is already a cliché to repeat how the Occupy movement's 'Hot Fall' of 2011 was a game-changer, a wake-up call for deep-rooted change, and the spark for a shift in political discourse towards issues of social and economic inequality, greed, financial corruption and the undue influence of corporations on government.⁴

For all the commentary and media debate, it remains peculiarly difficult to define or apprehend this distinctly Western expression of the emerging people's voice. You cannot summarise the importance of Occupy solely in terms of its unique version of direct democracy and horizontal networking, but must also observe its living alternative to the business-driven, consumerist and atomised societies that we live in today.⁵ Every Occupy encampment has been a kind of social experiment in different ways of relating and being with each other, like small islands of solidarity and mutual support that organise co-op kitchens, communal living and free events, and provide a meeting place for all people – including the unemployed, the socially excluded, the evicted and the homeless – without attaching any stigma or sense of exclusivity. Only ill-informed media pundits and non-participants appeared agitated about the movement's lack of concrete policy demands.⁶ The people involved were too busy being a part of the movement, standing off evictions from police battalions and realising their newfound sense of freedom and non-violent, non-materialistic, solidaristic power – and even breaking the law on behalf of the public good when it stands in the way of true justice.

The new face of civil resistance

This is the new face of civil resistance, so spontaneous and inspired that social movement theorists will struggle to categorise its constantly altering manifestations. Just as the Middle East uprisings demonstrated the ability of ordinary people to overcome the power of repressive governments, the European protests and Occupy movement revealed that real power lies with the majority of people – the 99%. But this is by no means the sum total of the 'people's voice', which must also include the many other strands of global civil society that, consciously or unconsciously, has informed the mass demonstrations for peace and justice in recent years. This includes the workers and peasant movements that have united internationally in the struggle for land, labour, water and other human rights; the non-governmental organisations and grassroots groups that organise ceaseless campaigns on single or multiple environmental and social issues, as well as 'counter-summits' at gatherings of world leaders; and the diverse elements of the global justice movement that have entered the world's lexicon since the 1990s – the Zapatistas, the World Social Forums, the WTO protesters and so on.

The growing power of the people's voice is also strikingly evident in the anti-war and peace movements, most notably during the historic Iraq war demonstrations of 2003 which popularised the idea of public opinion as 'the new superpower' in world affairs.⁷ Even celebrity activism events, from Live Aid in 1985 to Live 8 and Live Earth in 2005/7, can be considered part of a growing global awareness of our shared humanitarian responsibilities. Almost every day now is named after a particular issue or cause, from World Health Day to Human Rights Day to the World Day of Social Justice, and it is a challenge to keep up with every Global Day of Action: for climate justice, for a global financial tax, for moving beyond fossil fuels, to move the planet toward cleaner energy, to Occupy the World. Add to this the millions of people of goodwill in

every country who vocalise the need for a more just, sustainable and compassionate world order, and we have a broad sense of the articulate people's voice in its many and varied expressions.

Together, this collected voice of engaged citizens is acutely aware of the need for world reconstruction and renewal. No-one could read all the vast number of campaign materials and reports that begin with a description of 'multiple and multifaceted crises', namely the food crisis, the environmental crisis and the financial and economic crises that have erupted into a global systemic crisis. For the hundreds of organisations who prepared papers for the Rio+20 Earth Summit, it was common to describe the world's major challenges as a 'planetary emergency', backed up with comprehensive evidence from leading scientists about the ongoing decline of biodiversity, the degradation of natural resources and the ecological boundaries that humanity is pushing up against. Meanwhile, the promises of corporate-led globalisation to benefit all, both in advanced industrial countries and the developing world, are no longer defensible to the wider public who are suffering the worst effects of economic recession and government cutbacks. Even in the richest and most powerful country in the world – the United States, there is the highest poverty rate among developed nations, the greatest inequality of incomes, and the lowest level of social mobility. In terms of social and environmental indicators on a global scale, people everywhere are loudly pointing out that almost every trend line is going in the wrong direction.

Among this cacophony of voices calling for dramatic change to established institutions and structures, there is a huge awareness now that world leaders and policymakers are paying only lip service to the unfolding human and environmental catastrophe. As Western countries slide further into financial turmoil and unemployment hits ever greater heights, politicians call only for increased austerity and a return to former days of consumer-led growth and competitive free markets. Public consciousness of the issues at stake is rising at an unprecedented pace, but the forces arrayed against creating a fairer and sustainable world appear practically insuperable. This is the main subject of countless critiques and debates today: the vested interests that push for a further concentration and centralisation of power and wealth into the hands of a minority, and the corporate-dominated political and legislative process that enables the furthering of these aims.

Overcoming the forces of power and control

Almost any major development issue can illustrate the extent to which these powerful forces of economic and political self-interest control the current world direction. The threat to small farmers, pastoralists, fishers and indigenous peoples from land and resource grabbing by foreign financial interests, for example.⁸ Or the immense subsidies paid to the fossil fuel industry, despite the critical need for transferring support to cleaner alternatives.⁹ Or the lack of meaningful reforms to the financial industry, despite the spectacular failures of international banks that led to a world system failure in late 2008 and colossal government bail-outs.¹⁰

Or the potentially catastrophic example of a pre-emptive strike on Iran, driven by powerful economic and strategic interests regardless of the real threat of sparking a nuclear war.¹¹ Such a list could go on indefinitely.

Standing behind these trends are the oligarchical and corporate forces that global civil society movements are up against – relatively small groups of wealthy elites and vested interests that consolidate power and dominate government policy, often with no sense of civic duty and with little or no regard for constitutionally-protected rights or the common good. The concentration of political, economic and media power not only upholds the present system based on unsustainable consumption and growth, but it ensures the continuation of negative social and environmental outcomes. Although private interests with economic power comprise a social minority, they are over-represented in dominant institutions and maintain the full support of most government leaders elected to office. Through the dynamics of the ‘revolving door’, the same political leaders of today become advisors to the boards of major companies tomorrow. Even the United Nations, founded as a forum for people’s representation and the protection of their universal rights and interests, is now hijacked by the growing influence of large corporations and business lobby groups.¹² As a result, private interests are increasingly prioritised over public interests in both national and international forums, and viable solutions for the world’s multiple crises are effectively blocked or at best weakened. Instead of searching for comprehensive responses for threats related to climate change, food production, water supply, human rights violations, deforestation or poverty and health issues, false solutions are promoted that protect wealth and profits and fail to tackle the core of global problems. As each critical year passes by, we pay witness to the further concentration and control of private interests over land, resources, and all aspects of peoples’ lives.

The question is whether the emerging voice of the mass public is sufficient to challenge these immense forces of profit, power and control. After decades of failed conferences and summits on the world’s intractable problems, we are well aware that existing institutions are not up to the task of initiating wholesale systemic transformation. The actions of businesses are limited by their adherence to the profit imperative and the pressure to grow shareholder value, while governments are constrained by short-term political imperatives and their commitment to economic growth above all other concerns. The limitations of large civil society organisations (CSOs) to affect transformative structural change are also well discussed, as most mainstream CSOs work within the same business-as-usual political context and focus on single issues and short-term wins, or remain constrained by a narrow policy-oriented approach. Reformist or ‘within-the-system’ changes are not succeeding, and often do not even generate the small wins or incremental changes that they seek.¹³

There are also serious limitations to ‘outside-the-system’ changes, especially when governments are overthrown and newly-elected leaders fall captive to the same forces of institutional power that prevent

meaningful change, as happened in the ‘people power’ overthrow of the Marcos administration in the Philippines, the break-up of the former Soviet Union, the entry of the Greens into the parliaments of Europe, and following the end of apartheid in South Africa.¹⁴ Only months after the 2011 Egyptian revolution, the military-appointed interim government was already pursuing neoliberal policies and centralising state control rather than promoting social justice.¹⁵ At the same time, local alternatives to the prevailing economic order – sustainable communities, transition towns and innovative business models that prioritise social and environmental values over profit and growth – are not yet of a large enough scale to mount a serious challenge to the existing political economy.¹⁶ These rapidly-growing local initiatives provide great hope and inspirational models for a sustainable future society, but the dominant trend is still towards the centralisation of state and market power, and the shifting of real power away from ordinary people and communities towards largely undemocratic global institutions and multinational corporations.

A global movement of ordinary people

If it is clear that governments, private institutions and civil society organisations acting alone are not capable of steering the world onto a just and sustainable course, can we imagine a new movement of ordinary people that can fill the vacuum in global leadership? Is the people’s voice, in its current latent form, capable of being organised into an implacable countervailing force that no government or vested interest can withstand? If this is even a plausible scenario, will it happen spontaneously, or do civil society leaders – or perhaps some modern-day Gandhi or Luther King figure who captures the hearts and minds of the entire world’s people – need to catalyse this vast transnational public opinion? What would such a movement look like? How will it be coordinated? What would be its values, its nature, its global issues of shared concern? And are we seeing the first signs of its awakening in the new protest movements of 2011? Exploring this issue is not merely of theoretical interest, but could provide the most important source of hope if the world is to make a safe passage into the 21st Century.

To try and answer these questions, it is firstly important to examine whether the recent uprisings indicate the advent of global democracy or something else that currently lacks a name. Of course, it would be over-optimistic at this stage to assume that the Arab Spring and Occupy mark the emergence of a global movement of ordinary people who are united in their values, goals and long-term vision [see box]. The Middle East protests could well be as significant to the Arab world as 1989 was to Eastern Europe, but “protests alone do not make a movement”, as explained by the non-violent social movements expert, Professor Stephen Zunes. Whether the issue at stake is the power of Wall Street or a corrupt dictator, being ‘right’ and having the majority of public opinion on your side is not enough to consolidate human rights and create long-term, pro-democratic changes to society.¹⁷ Many parallels and connections can be drawn between both of these remarkable international uprisings, especially their desire to bring about true democracy and their shared

aspirations for equality and justice, but the two movements are not directly connected in their short-term objectives or by any long-range strategic planning. The aims of the Arab Spring were clear from the outset: to oust repressive dictatorships. But the initial aims of Occupy were less straightforward, and clearer in what the movement was against rather than what it was for.¹⁸

However, many commentators are rightly enthusiastic about the unique South-North character of Occupy, and its credible claim of affinity with Tahrir Square as evidenced in cross collaborations and the common tactics of non-violent, youth-led and leaderless mass gatherings.¹⁹ The Occupy movement consists of a wave of spontaneous demonstrations that span rich and poor countries alike, and most of the protests have taken place in countries characterised by vast social and economic inequalities. Similarly, the Arab Spring was not only driven by political grievances, as sometimes portrayed in the media, but also by urgent economic causes and a growing gap between rich and poor.²⁰ All of the mass protests in disparate countries, from Tunisia and Egypt to Israel, Spain, Chile and the United States, are marked by a popular revulsion against a global economic system that has caused huge inequalities in income, and excluded millions of people despite its promises of more equal opportunities and shared prosperity.²¹ From this perspective, the uprisings of the past year reflect a worldwide reaction to a common predicament: enormous and growing socio-economic divisions, combined in many countries with corruption, maladministration and a high concentration of wealth.²²

Box: Imagining a global citizens movement

Prior to the sudden awakening of the people's voice in 2011, the vision of a new movement of global citizens was mainly the preserve of committed scholar activists. The World Future Council, for instance, founded itself upon such a vision following the failure of the Johannesburg 'Earth Summit' in 2002. They observed that many people feel we are on a path to disaster, and yet we lack a global voice to speak up for our much broader common values as 'world citizens' who care about the future of humanity and the planet. Their first initiative was called 'Earth Emergency: A Call to Action', and sought the creation of a council of eminent individuals from various countries, backgrounds and beliefs that could serve as a forum to focus global attention on the priorities for action.²³

A more recent initiative called The Widening Circle²⁴ was formed in 2010 as an action campaign to advance a global citizens movement for a 'Great Transition'.²⁵ Recognising the limitations of dominant institutions to change the pathway of global development, the initiative calls for new ways of thinking and acting that rise to the level of a popular global movement. This requires a more inclusive form of consciousness and association, the campaign states, one that goes beyond national identities and embraces a sense of ourselves as global citizens, or humanity-as-whole. The Widening Circle campaign seeks to catalyse such a diverse popular movement of concerned citizens the world over, as spelled out in its consensus document titled 'Imagine All the People'.²⁶

The birth pangs of this new political actor have long been evident in the burgeoning movements for social justice and the environment, which have often coalesced into a genuinely international phenomenon with its own identity and values-driven agenda.²⁷ On many occasions, diverse participants with a single-issue focus (from Greenpeace, Amnesty, Jubilee and Via Campesina to the many grassroots peace, justice and environmental groups) have united under a multi-issue and inclusive banner, most notably with the large gatherings of the World Social Forum, the many civil society 'counter-summits', and NGO coalitions such as Make Poverty History. These coalition movements are perhaps the most serious expressions yet for a new development trajectory centered on universal democratic values and human rights principles, but they remain hampered by organisational divisions, divergent priorities and the absence of an overarching vision or strategy for systemic change. They can be viewed as a forerunner and source of hope for the possibility of a truly global citizen's movement, one that rallies itself around a holistic vision of social transformation in order to build a just and sustainable future for all.²⁸

Those thought-leaders who have tried to imagine a worldwide movement of engaged citizens have stressed the importance of shared values to this vision of change. As many of these thinkers point out, an upsurge of public awareness and engagement is dependent upon a profound shift in values among a significant segment of the world population. James Gustave Speth has called this the rise of a 'new consciousness', which for some is a spiritual awakening – a sense of life's interconnectedness and deeper meaning – while for others it is a more intellectual process that comes to appreciate our present unsustainable modes of being, and embraces a new ethic of ecological and social awareness that necessitates fundamental changes to our collective human behaviour.²⁹ Paul Raskin of the Great Transition Initiative has explored in detail the shift in values that is needed, from the values of the past that are expressed in consumerism, individualism and the domination of nature, towards a new suite of values and worldviews that are grounded in quality of life, human solidarity and ecological sensibility.³⁰ Civil society organisations have also seriously studied the importance of working with cultural values, and the need to activate and strengthen those values that will help us to overcome our collective inertia and deal with today's profound global challenges.³¹

David Korten further emphasises the importance of a values shift in terms of redefining our conception of wealth, instead measuring it in the health of our families, communities and natural environment rather than in strictly utilitarian terms. He argues that this will inevitably shift policies from hoarding to sharing, from concentrated ownership to equitable distribution, and from the rights of ownership to the responsibilities of stewardship.³² As explained by The Widening Circle campaign, many historic documents have long enshrined the universal principles that should underpin a future global society, in particular the UN Declaration of Human Rights, Agenda 21 and the Earth Charter.³³ These and scores of other internationally-agreed statements provide a framework for

understanding the values and goals that should form the basis of a new way of living, and must therefore be urgently translated from a set of ideals into reality.

The global wealth-poverty divide

These common causes of global protest cannot be taken too literally, however, as there is a significant difference between the wealth-poverty divide in the Global North compared to countries in the Global South. In the high-income countries where Occupy has largely taken root, opposition to economic trends is driven by people, typically young, who are educated and rightly angered by the growing concentration of wealth in their respective countries, as well as the prospect of paying for a financial crisis in their future that they had no part in creating. But few of these protesters are desperate, as compared to the South where millions of people live on the outskirts of overcrowded cities in slum conditions, often with little education and without a chance of accessing formal employment opportunities.³⁴ Many of the state provisions or social safety nets that are taken for granted in the North barely exist in the poorer regions of the world, especially in those countries – like Egypt – that adopted the International Monetary Fund’s neoliberal programmes and experienced the deregulation of food prices, sweeping privatisation and massive austerity measures. Deprivation and inequality is relative, and even in the grip of an economic downturn the average purchasing power of the bottom 10 percent of Americans remains higher than around two-thirds of the rest of the world’s population.³⁵

Unfortunately, these differences are not captured in the slogan ‘We are the 99%’ which, although brilliantly evocative as a meme or rallying cry, applies mainly to income inequality in the United States, but not to global levels of inequality. The domestic income gap in both rich and poor countries is alarming and generally rising, not least in the United States, but the world as a whole is much more unequal than any individual country.³⁶ If living standards are compared between the North and South, it is often repeated that the wealthiest 20 percent of the world’s population – a proportion that would include almost every Occupy protester – account for 80 percent of the consumption of global resources.³⁷ Of the poorer 80 percent of humanity, an overwhelming number of people are struggling with basic issues of health, sustenance and even survival.³⁸ From this perspective, it is difficult to see the Occupy protesters as sharing the same platform of concerns as the majority world, or even the same level of inequity and injustice, which may help to explain why the movement is notably small or absent outside of North America and Europe.

If we want to imagine a coalescing of diverse movements into a phenomenon that is more truly global in nature, this has several implications. A global movement must be built on a platform of globally shared concerns, but the Occupy protests are mainly focused on a range of local or national issues within mostly developed countries. In North America where the movement’s name was coined, an explanation for the

economic suffering across the region is primarily based on a U.S.-centric narrative – the thirty years of deregulation and pro-corporate policies that led to a casino Wall Street economy, a corrupted politics, and eventually a financial crash in 2008 that left tens of millions of people homeless, unemployed, economically insecure and laden with debt.³⁹ But there is a much bigger picture to this story. Many writers, such as J.W. Smith, have detailed at length how the world’s resources have been monopolised by wealthy elites and the rich industrialised nations through centuries of wars, ‘plunder by trade’ and modern methods of unequal trade.⁴⁰ The history of development is in many ways defined by the exploitation of human and natural resources in less developed areas of the world, and the use of export trade, privatisation and the leverage of debt to facilitate the continued flow of wealth to the most developed nations.⁴¹ An extensive literature explains how the era of neoliberal globalisation has maintained and entrenched this unequal world system since the 1980s via ‘structural adjustment’ in the South, market deregulation, and a competitive ‘race to the bottom’ in environmental rules and worker standards for transnational corporations.⁴²

Drawing the battle lines internationally

Although several manifestos co-written for the worldwide protests in 2011/2012 make a compelling case for universal rights and global equality,⁴³ this wider perspective is largely missing from the Occupy movement’s demonstrations and activities on the ground. In itself, it is a huge step forward to have a broad-based association of people in the streets protesting for better standards of living and a fairer economy, relative to the kind of society in which they live. It is natural for people in the United States, for example, to perceive that they are the richest and most powerful country in world history, yet they lack even the healthcare entitlements that other developed countries take for granted, while a large majority of the population has seen little material progress despite the substantial wealth produced in recent decades – wealth that is spectacularly captured by the ‘1 percent’ (or even the 0.01 percent).⁴⁴ But this aspiration is not enough to challenge a global system of extraction that creates and perpetuates immense poverty in the Global South, furthered by an American foreign policy based on violent and imperialist modes of control over world resources. As expressed by one of the founding participants of Occupy in London, people in the developing world “don’t see why they should support a movement of Westerners who want to regain levels of affluence that depend at least in part on the extraction of their countries’ labour and resources.”⁴⁵

In recognising that the Occupy movement is not truly global in nature or sufficiently inclusive of the majority poor in developing countries, it could lead to a very different set of priorities for the wider public who seek a fairer world. For a start, the agenda for change would have to enlarge in scope beyond reducing inequality in the U.S. or other rich countries alone, and must include global levels of inequality. Economic reforms cannot be limited to redistributing the wealth of the ‘1 percent’ back to ordinary Americans or Europeans, but must consider international

redistribution as a correction to unjust global economic arrangements and enormously uneven levels of development across the world. In this case, the targets of the '99 percent' agenda would not only focus on domestic issues of democracy and finance, but include the powerful global institutions and processes that maintain these unjust economic arrangements between rich and poor countries. There is nothing new about drawing the battle lines internationally in this way, which has a long history dating from the New International Economic Order in the 1970s to the so-called anti-globalisation protests from the late 1990s.⁴⁶ An inclusive and global agenda for change would recognise that transnational business, financial markets and the holders of capital are the chief beneficiaries of corporate-driven globalisation, but more than half of humanity who exist without sufficient means for dignified survival are the chief casualties of an economic system that concentrates wealth and resources among the most affluent parts of the world.

All this returns to the original questions: if the current protest movements across diverse continents are neither fully united nor representative of the entire world's people, what would a truly global movement of ordinary citizens look like? If such a movement is based on shared values and a single platform of globally shared concerns, what would be its demands? How could it construct a framework of action that moves beyond a spirit of protest to the articulation of a commonly-held vision? And – perhaps most importantly – how could it unite the people of goodwill in both the richest and poorest areas of the world? The purpose of asking these questions is not to predict future world trends, but to try and understand how a fused and directed global public opinion can quickly become a force that ushers in world repair and renewal. Such a phenomenon will not come into existence by itself unless many millions, even hundreds of millions of ordinary people understand the need to participate in its manifestation. The problems of the world are so immense and interrelated, and the need for global solutions and structural transformation is so urgent, that the most pressing question concerns how a worldwide popular mass movement can actually begin its formation.

The priorities of world protest

From the cursory analysis above, we can surmise the following point of view. Only a collective demand for a fairer sharing of the world's wealth, resources and political power is likely to unify citizens of the richest and poorest nations on a common platform, one that recognises the need for global as well as national forms of redistribution as a pathway to ending poverty and extreme inequality. Central to this focus is the wealth and income differences between the poorest and richest nations, which remain the greatest economic divisions that persist today. The United Nations reported in 2010 that the number of very poor countries has doubled since the 1970s, while the number of people living in extreme poverty has also grown two-fold.⁴⁷ These global wealth disparities may no longer be based on a distinctly geographical North-South divide, as the globalisation era has created an 'international consumer class' that

includes many elites in developing countries, with a huge superfluous population that also exists in many developed nations.⁴⁸ But even after several decades of economic growth there remains a majority of people in the Global South who are relatively marginalised, largely excluded from the formal economy, and often overlooked by government welfare and employment programmes without any extant plans for how to incorporate them into the mainstream economic system. All the people categorised as the ‘extreme poor’ live in developing countries, and still almost half of the developing world population live on less than \$2-a-day, even according to the World Bank’s latest (probably under-estimated) statistics.⁴⁹ To reiterate, no matter how severe the fiscal austerity measures in North America, Western Europe and other developed nations, most residents in these countries still comprise the wealthiest 20 percent of the world population who account for the vast majority of total global private consumption. In comparison, the poorest fifth of the world – far more than a billion people – make do with barely any resources at all.⁵⁰

For global citizens who identify themselves as part of an emerging world community, this is the starting point for recognising our common humanity: the enduring condition of excessive luxury and extreme poverty within and among countries, and the enormous disparities in living standards between the richest and poorest regions of the world. A call for the sharing of world resources, if upheld as the leading concern of a global citizens movement (or whatever else we term the coming together of people from all nations with a united cause), would inevitably lead to dramatic changes in political priorities. First and foremost, world public opinion would have to focus on the plight of the millions of people now starving to death in the Global South. The situation today remains as critical as ever, and not only in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel where currently 17 million people face food insecurity and starvation.⁵¹ In Yemen in the Middle East, for example, the number of food-insecure people has doubled since 2009, leaving almost half the population facing hunger.⁵² Worldwide, at least 925 million people go hungry every day, following an astonishing 1.023 billion people in 2009 – a historic high reached not as a result of poor harvests or a lack of available food, but the global economic crisis combined with stubbornly high food prices. Although the FAO’s global hunger statistics may even be considerably underestimated, this means that at least one in seven people in the world suffers from chronic hunger and malnutrition, with a child dying every six seconds because of undernourishment-related problems alone.⁵³

If other poverty-related causes of avoidable deaths are taken into consideration, the statistics are even more disturbing. Every day, at least 41,000 people die needlessly of poverty-related causes according to the World Health Organisation’s most recent data.⁵⁴ An estimated 7.6 million children (under 5) died of preventable causes in 2010 alone, equivalent to one child mortality every four seconds (the vast majority in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia).⁵⁵ Rarely does this tragedy appear on primetime news headlines, while most of these deaths occur quietly and invisibly in the poorest villages on earth, far removed from the world’s conscience. It is a truism to repeat that the challenge is not one of resource availability,

infrastructure or technical knowledge, but one of resource distribution. There has always been enough food, fuel, oil and minerals in the world to meet the basic needs of the entire population. The world's food reserves alone – although fairly low after decades of market-oriented agricultural policies – are still sufficient to meet the requirements of all regions suffering from food shortages, if those reserves were adequately distributed to those in desperate need.⁵⁶ Cost and affordability is not the real issue either when bringing everyone above the global absolute poverty line (\$1.25 a day) would require just 0.2 percent of global income,⁵⁷ and when the trillions of dollars raised to bail out banks in 2008 would be enough to end global extreme poverty for 50 years.⁵⁸ The root of the problem is a lack of widespread popular concern among ordinary people in affluent society, as much as it is a lack of political will. Until a united voice of the global public demands an appropriate response from governments, one that is commensurate with the dire privations of today, we can assume that the fact of starvation and penury amidst plenty will relentlessly continue.

An emergency relief programme

Ending hunger and poverty-related deaths is obviously not enough to shift the world onto a just and sustainable course, but we cannot underestimate the knock-on effects of such a show of global solidarity. If we accept that the world is 'one human family' with the same needs and rights, as enshrined in the many UN declarations, our first major priority must be to provide the very basics to those in a life-threatening state of deprivation. If we are clear that governments and global institutions will never prioritise the necessary level of reforms and redistributions to achieve these ends, despite decades of rhetoric and broken promises, then we accept that the people of the world must make it their own priority and lead by example. A little imagination can suggest the kind of actions that could ensue: simple acts of sharing and saving food on the household and community level, local initiatives that are soon scaled up into national and cross-border efforts led by ordinary citizens and charitable organisations. Ultimately, huge demonstrations and a deafening public outcry would be needed, even greater than the international protests that we have already seen, but unified and coordinated towards this central aim. If such a grassroots pressure erupted, governments would have no choice but to listen and heed the call, and even the private sector might feel compelled to get involved with monetary donations and the redistribution of food, medicines and other basic material needs. In meeting the urgent demands of a colossal and worldwide public opinion that favours an irrevocable end to hunger, an emergency relief programme would have to be organised at the international level as the only means to eliminate needless poverty-related deaths in the shortest possible space of time. The United Nations and its relevant agencies would be best placed to help coordinate its most important task to date: a comprehensive plan to mobilise governments and all necessary resources to alleviate the suffering of those at risk of death from extreme deprivation.⁵⁹

This may sound like utopian thinking in the present context of economic breakdown and declining aid budgets, but it assumes that the precondition of curative world change is a massive outpouring of goodwill from ordinary citizens towards the most deprived and marginalised people of the world. It assumes nothing more than redirecting public attention towards immediate human need, which is far from an attempt to satisfy some vague or idealistic theory of world revolution. Yet a fundamental reordering of global priorities in favour of securing the most basic necessities of food, water, healthcare and housing for the majority poor is likely to have profound repercussions in the longer term. A newfound sense of trust, hope and possibility would surely rally masses of people, both rich and poor, behind a far-reaching and shared aspiration for world transformation. There is no question that the poorest half of the world, those crying out for help and succour and a better way of life, would embrace a fairer allocation of global resources. The real question is whether a critical mass of people in more affluent countries – the 20 percent of the world population who over-consume and waste the majority of global resources – will uphold and champion the principle of sharing in response to world need. Perhaps only then can we foresee the implementation of a sustainable development pathway for the world, regardless of the opposition of powerful elites and the myopia of global decision-makers.

The challenge has long been outlined in thousands of documents published since the first Rio ‘Earth Summit’ in 1992: to achieve adequate standards of living for all within the constraints of a severely polluted and overstrained environment. We know that we are already using around 50 percent more natural resources than the Earth can sustainably produce.⁶⁰ We know that the high-consumption lifestyle adopted by the affluent parts of the world (both in developed countries and among richer people in developing countries) is driving the planet towards environmental destruction, and leading to a ‘natural resource grab’ that devastates poor communities and is subsidised by the most vulnerable nations. We also know that ecological limits and threats from climate change make it impossible for the less developed countries to imitate the same model of fossil-fuel-based industrialisation as the Global North, or for the majority world to share the same standard of living as the wealthiest 20 percent.⁶¹ What we don’t know is whether affluent society will accept the only way out of this impasse, which is to demand that governments distribute resources more equitably and sustainably both within and between countries. In other words, we await the rich world population to join forces with the poor and together forge an enormous public opinion in favour of sharing the world’s resources.

Pointing the finger at ourselves

This is easy to say, but we have to reflect upon what this means for us personally in our day-to-day lives – those of us who are well-fed, live in relative comfort, and at least have access to basic social protection and essential services no matter how bad our economic circumstances. First of all, it means that we have to make the effort to understand how

global economic arrangements are fundamentally skewed in favour of the most materially-advanced nations, and how we enjoy an artificial standard of living that is based on the exploitation of cheap labour and natural resources at relatively low cost. We have to fill our awareness with the sheer extent of life-threatening deprivation in the world, and keep in mind that our collective response to human need – as expressed by the actions of our elected governments – is tragically inadequate on a global scale. Although an abundance of information is freely available on the internet and other media, there remains a considerable lack of mindfulness among affluent society about the daily misery and destitution experienced by countless men, women and children in distant countries.

For the billions of people considered the ‘relative’ poor, which would include 95 percent of the developing world population who live on less than \$10 a day,⁶² sharing the world’s resources is more than a matter of putting food on the table. It will mean a chance to live in dignity with a sense of freedom and self-worth, safe in the knowledge that there will always be access to adequate food, healthcare, shelter, basic amenities and education. This is what we ourselves have to want for the world beyond anything else: for all people to be freed from a life of drudgery and squalor, and able to experience the same level of variety, leisure and culture that we ourselves enjoy. We can only imagine the transformations that will take place if the less-privileged majority of people, the roughly two-thirds of humanity who are excluded from the benefits of a corporate-led global economy, are given a chance to contribute their talent and creativity to the restoration of the world. It will never happen unless we, in our unreal worlds of excessive consumption, luxury and waste, fully appreciate that we can no longer continue with such an imbalance in global resource allocation. We have to understand that we can never live peacefully or ‘well’ so long as the greater proportion of the world population lives in penury and degradation, while a wealthier proportion of the world lives mostly regardless of their plight and largely at the cost of their deprivation. In the final analysis, we have to recognise that we are the ones who enable this divided world to endure, and our continued acquiescence can only indicate our respective complicity and complacency.

An even more difficult question to face is whether we will take upon ourselves the implications of sharing global resources to our present consumerist way of life. In approaching the limits of the planet’s resources with regard to population, water, soil, raw materials and energy, it is clearly not enough to try and raise the living standards of the poor while doing nothing to address the consumption levels of the comparatively rich. This is the politically expedient way to try and tackle poverty that must be reversed if social justice is to be compatible with environmental sustainability.⁶³ We have to accept that the claims of the poor take precedence over the claims of the rich, while the claims of the rich must be subordinated to the sustainability of the Earth’s life support systems. The basic requirements for food, clothing and housing in the Global South are clearly a higher priority than the demands for additional consumption in the Global North. The road to a fairer world inevitably

requires that the industrialised nations accept reductions in material and non-renewable energy use, at least in overall and relative terms, so that it is possible for less developed countries to grow their economies sufficient to meet the basic needs of their populations. For this to happen, a new era of simplicity must be inaugurated based on a revised understanding of what constitutes the 'good life', with reduced resource consumption and more frugal living commonly prized as the social ideal. National priorities have to shift from economic growth and Gross Domestic Product to an emphasis on 'societal well-being' and 'sustainable sufficiency'. And the rich nations must lead the way if more realistic standards of living are to become aspirational for the Global South.⁶⁴

The principle of sharing

There is no shortage of analysis pointing out these basic premises for a new economy, but for the necessary social transformation to come about by democratic means we will have to want these changes for ourselves. Plenty of evidence already demonstrates that a simpler way of life can contribute to happier, more fulfilling lives, and that spreading prosperity more evenly around the world can benefit everyone.⁶⁵ Few people are likely to oppose the restructuring of modern societies if it leads to less formal working hours, more recreation time, a less frenetic pace of life and greater well-being for all. Nonetheless, the desirability of a new way of living has to be recognised by a majority of people in the developed world, and translated into an informed world public opinion that understands the urgency of adopting new lifestyles along with new models of production, consumption, organisation, ownership and governance.⁶⁶ A far-reaching programme of education towards these ends will undoubtedly be required at all levels of society, although the motivation for social change and global resource reallocation must initially come from the shared awareness and heartfelt concern of ordinary people. We have to perceive the common sense and necessity of restructuring our political and economic systems in order to create a sustainable and peaceful future, while understanding that the redistribution of world resources according to need is the only way to end poverty in the immediate term.

If the wider public makes a resounding call for sharing global resources, their political representatives would have no choice but to make a commitment to economic sharing as a guiding principle of government policy, both nationally and internationally. An ethos of sharing and generosity may even become the distinguishing hallmark of leading politicians, who would be forced to reorder government priorities in direct relation to the pressures of massive public campaigns and the ballot box.⁶⁷ The basic principle behind every policy would be to share, as fairly as possible, all the benefits from economic activity among society as a whole. All of the concerns of civil society who advocate for a fairer economy and more equality could then come into play: for progressive tax systems and the closure of tax havens, the cancellation of unjust debt, the redirection of military spending and perverse subsidies towards addressing environmental threats and global poverty, international taxes

that target transnational corporations and address public concerns – including a financial transaction tax to offset the costs of the havoc wreaked by speculative markets, and so on. Through such widespread policies of redistribution, global forms of taxation and a more equitable sharing of government revenue, it could be possible to rapidly meet national and global commitments to securing the basic rights of the poor and vulnerable throughout the world. At the same time, the whole of society will need to be mobilised in major programmes of environmental repair and ‘ecological conversion’ to avert climate chaos and further planetary destruction.⁶⁸ And in the longer term, alternative mechanisms will be needed to distribute the world’s natural resources and economic power more evenly between countries, requiring more inclusive systems of global governance also guided by the principle of sharing.⁶⁹

This process of world rehabilitation may only begin with a united people’s voice that speaks on behalf of the poorest and most disenfranchised, and gives the highest priority to the elimination of extreme deprivation and needless poverty-related deaths. Based on this appeal to our common humanity and compassion, we can reframe the original questions about a global movement of ordinary people in even more simple terms. Is it possible to imagine a vast swathe of the world population, in the rich world as well as the poor, rising up to demand a more equal distribution of the food, raw materials and energy sources of the planet? Can we foresee masses of ordinary people who genuinely identify themselves as brothers and sisters of one human family, and who therefore demand that all the resources, technology and scientific know-how of the world are freely shared among everyone? Can we imagine a worldwide popular movement that demands a fairer sharing of global resources as its all-embracing cause?

From competition to cooperation

It is impossible to overestimate the scale of this challenge when the world’s ‘operating system’ is based on the competitive geopolitical interests of twenty or thirty wealthy nations, and held in place by the overriding control of multilateral banks and corporations. So long as governments compete for economic ascendancy and power, there is no global vision of a better world that acts in the best interests of all humanity. A huge leap is required to move from competition between nation states towards the cooperative management of the world economy, which is the prerequisite for a ‘global community’ that is committed to the equality and value of all people.⁷⁰ Even the most enlightened heads of state and parliamentarians, however comprehensive their plans for the economic and social betterment of people’s conditions, will remain unable to break the impasse of political short-termism and selfish nationalistic thinking without massive and informed public support. The responsibility for change rests with us, the ordinary people of the world, and we must demonstrate the values of caring, mutual respect, generosity and sharing among ourselves if the same values are to become expressed in our political and economic institutions. We already express these core human values in our homes and communities, but

now we must demonstrate the perennial ethic of sharing on a global basis between the people of different nations.

If this is a revolution, it is a revolution of people coming together for the first time in human history without any traces of ideology or political 'isms'. The changes cannot be led by any political party or civil society organisation, but must come about through the free assembly, discussion and activity of 'world citizens' in every country. This is where the fearless Arab protesters, the Indignados and Occupy have led the way, in which movements the young have demonstrated their capacity for leading this burgeoning new force in international affairs – a united voice of the people, consciously mobilised in all nations towards a common set of principles and aims. To see the incredible aerial photographs of millions gathered in Tahrir Square, the enormous general assemblies at Zuccoti Park in late 2011, or the mass rallies in Madrid and dozens of other cities is to witness the untapped potential of the people's voice to lead government decisions. We still have a long way to go before realising a truly global citizens movement committed to sharing and conserving the world's resources, with the rights of the poorest and most excluded taking pride of place in our hearts and minds. When that happens – which it must, if a fundamental restructuring of the global economy is to lead to justice and peace – there will be no gainsaying the power of ordinary people to transform the world.

Notes

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When will ordinary people rise up? How a united voice of the public could transform the world

Written by Adam Parsons
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About Share The World's Resources

Share The World's Resources (STWR) advocates for natural resources such as oil and water to be sustainably managed in the interests of the global public, and for essential goods and services (including staple food, adequate shelter and primary healthcare) to be made universally accessible.

As a non-governmental organisation with consultative status at the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC), STWR campaigns for governments to rapidly secure basic human needs through greater international cooperation and economic sharing.

Our website presents a selection of the latest international news, articles and videos on a wide range of global issues including globalisation, climate change, corporate power, alternative economics and people's movements.

You can find us on Facebook and Twitter, or sign up to our newsletters.

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