

AN URGENT CALL FOR ACTION

José Alberto Mujica Cordano

THREE years have passed since the Rio+20 Summit of world leaders was held, and we find ourselves moving full speed ahead towards 2015—a year we have identified as the deadline to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, and ensure universal primary education and basic healthcare for all, as well as foster a global partnership for development—these are but some of the Millennium Development Goals that are supposed to be met by the end of next year.

The Rio+20 Summit of heads of state and government approved a document entitled *The Future We Want*, in which all of us agreed on an ambitious framework to achieve sustainable development by satisfying the needs of the people and the planet—one which is supposed to provide economic change and opportunity for poverty-stricken people, whilst promoting social justice and environmental protection. This is called the post-2015 agenda.

The UN system, acting in concert with and under the direction of UN Member States, is working hard to ensure we work out the necessary arrangements to be ready to launch, by December 2015, one unified global agenda for sustainable development.

I do not seek to minimize the efforts of many on all levels to help achieve such goals, nor to hide the fact that some very important successes have taken place in recent times.

For instance, in our own region—the unequal and unjust Latin America—tens of millions have overcome years of poverty and have succeeded in achieving better education and healthcare standards—some have even reached the utopia promised by Brazil's former president Lula da Silva that all his compatriots will have three meals a day. This is perhaps something of little importance for some, but it was a revolutionary call to arms for millions in Brazil and beyond.

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For millions of others, in our region and others, similar improvements were recorded in education, healthcare and basic rights. I also do not forget that, according to the United Nations, median life expectancy in the 1950s was 47 years, while in the period between 2005 and 2010 it became 65 to 68 years for men, and 70 years for women.

Now, without minimizing any of this, if we look at the planet as a whole—if we look at our species—let us ask ourselves: what is it that we have truly achieved? Where do we really stand? Can we say that we are better?

My answer to these questions is “no, definitely not; we are not better.”

The same urgent problems that were proclaimed in the 1970s are still present; in fact, they are getting worse. In many cases, they have reached levels of extreme alarm. On top of all that, many new problems have been added to the list.

We have not done anything to stop the insane course of this model of production and consumerism. Every day, production and wealth generation is greater, while injustices increase. Everyday, the uncontrolled cost of exploiting our planet's limited resources and ensuing the damage to the environment keep growing—the worst scientific forecasts are

being fulfilled when it comes to climate change and global warming. And so everyday, the acceleration and proximity of the abyss grows unchecked.

We do not have to look far or even exaggerate any figures in order to demonstrate this. All we have to do is enumerate a few facts that scientists and experts from top international organizations have showed to the world.

The same urgent problems that were proclaimed in the 1970s are still present; in fact, they are getting worse.

First, if left unchecked, the damage done by climate change could alter between one and two percent of global GDP by 2100 if world temperatures rise by 2.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels. This

damage estimate increases to between two and four percent of global GDP if there is a rise of four degrees Celsius.

Second, over the last decade, the level of CO₂ emissions from fossil fuel consumption has followed the most pessimistic projections outlined in a special report on possible emission scenarios published in 2000 by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Third, desertification is advancing at a rate of between 50,000 to 70,000 square kilometers per year, with 38 million square kilometers—approximately one quarter of the world's landmass—now desert.

Fourth, the world's average sea level, relatively constant for almost three thousand years, has registered a rise of 17 centimeters during the twentieth century, and projections are that it will rise another 40 centimeters by 2100.

Fifth, the world lost more than 100 million hectares of forest between 2005 and 2010; and it lost 20 percent of marine and swamp habitat between 1970 and 1980. In some regions, 95 percent of wetlands have been lost. Coral reefs have eroded by 38 percent since 1980.

Sixth, between 1960 and the present day, the quantity of grains produced in the world (e.g. wheat, rice, soya, etc.) has tripled, while the world's population has doubled, meaning that the amount of food produced per capita has grown by 50 percent. Yet, between 30 and 50 percent of the four billion tons of food produced across the world are wasted or not consumed. Meanwhile, approximately one billion people still go to bed hungry every night.

Seventh, of the approximately 800 million people who are acutely hungry, 80 percent live in rural areas. Let me underline that the year 2008 (the year of the food crisis) was a record year in terms of food production.

Eighth, 85 ultra-rich individuals possess more wealth than 40 percent of humanity.

Ninth, the infant mortality rate in Europe and North America is about six per thousand births, whilst reaching 74 in Africa.

Tenth, of the world's 925 million undernourished people, 578 million live in Africa and the Asia-Pacific region—which in the case of sub-Saharan Africa constitutes 30 percent of the total population.

Eleventh, between 1970 and 2008, more than 95 percent of deaths related to natural disasters occurred in developing countries.

PLUS ÇA CHANGE...

The UN Environmental Program's Global Environment Outlook Assessment Report begins with a statement from 1970 by the then-UN Secretary-General U Thant, which I would like to quote here:

As we watch the sun go down, evening after evening, through the smog across the poisoned waters of our native Earth, we must ask ourselves seriously whether we really wish some future universal historian on another planet to say about us: 'With all their genius and with all their skill, they ran out of foresight and air and food and water and ideas.'

Today, we can fully agree with this gloomy prognosis, which has been further aggravated by years of inaction. The difference between then

and now, however, is that we know much more today—we can anticipate; we have more cultural and investigative means at our disposal. More than ever before in our history, the world has access to enormous resources—and they are fully sufficient to confront the crisis.

So, wherein lies the problem? What is causing the paralysis—the absence of a concerted response?

I have repeated my answer many times before. In my opinion, our fundamental problem is not the environment, even though we have environmental crisis. The cause that explains why we cannot confront it is political—that is to say, we have a problem called politics; the environmental problem is a consequence of the political problem.

We have entered a phase of humanity in which we need to begin to think like a species, not as individual countries. It is necessary to defend life as a species. We need to think globally, holistically, so as to cover our entire planet irrespective of differences in governance; for what we have right now is a ruthless struggle for economic interests—and so we are without a moral compass.

The globalized economy has no other driving force than furthering the private interests of the few, with each country or group looking after its own interests. Moreover, our production system is a prisoner in the cage of the banks—which, as a whole, represent the true pinnacle of world power.

National governments—even the major powers—take the short-term view; politicians are primarily concerned with achieving good results in their next election. Meanwhile, no one cares to look at humanity as a whole; it is difficult to look and think as a species. But let me say that when, for instance, a group of African women walk five kilometers to fill two buckets of water, it is not an African problem, it is a problem for all humanity.

How long will we accept that the world economy—and everything that we produce—keeps being regulated by a currency called the U.S. dollar, which is like a rubber band that stretches according to decisions made by gentlemen bankers?

The world is crying out for global rules. Today it is necessary to define working hours, the possible convergence of currencies, the way we

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finance global water conservation efforts and the fight against desertification, the way we recycle, and counter global warming.

We have rapidly entered a new era—but our politicians, cultural figures, political parties, the young and old, all somehow remain defenseless against the dreadful accumulation of changes we see all around us. We cannot manage globalization because our thinking is not global—and we do not know whether it is because of cultural constraints or because we have reached our biological limits.

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We are bearing witness to a brutal expansion of the forces of production and the accumulation of both capital and knowledge as never before in human history; we have never before had the intellectual tools we have today.

We cannot even say that there is no money, for the world is spending \$ 2 million every minute—that's \$ 5 billion a day—on military expenditure.

So, we have the money. The question is: how, and for what purpose, are we spending it? Not only are we spending an inordinate amount on weapons, but we have constructed a civilization based on waste—a 'use it and throw-it-

away' society—a civilization which demands that we spend and use and invent new things just to throw them away immediately, in order to buy something else.

By opposing this culture of waste—of producing in order to squander—I am not proposing that we stop growing and producing, nor that we should paralyze the economy and nationalize everything. My argument is that there is an enormous market of hope before us, and that we must seize the opportunity presented by the UN post-2015 agenda.

What if we really set out to eliminate poverty and destitution—and not just in one country, but on a universal scale? What if millions of hungry people in Africa had the opportunity to feed themselves and to consume? What dynamism would they give to the world economy!

I believe it is imperative for us to reach a broad consensus to unleash solidarity toward the most oppressed, and discourage waste and speculation through taxation. In order to help the poor, we have to mobilize the large economies not to produce disposable products, but useful and lasting goods, without calculations regarding product obsolescence.



Illustration: Studio ETC

Capitalism's vacillations

We have to aim for a global state of affairs in which it is less profitable to wage wars than to implement a Neo-Keynesian economic theory on a planetary level, and so do away with the world's most flagrant social, economic, and environmental embarrassments.

Our world needs fewer international organizations that organize forums and conferences, which only enrich hotel chains and airline companies and, at best, produce declarations that no one collects, reads, or acts upon.

Neither the largest countries, nor multinational corporations and global financial systems, should rule the world. We need a form of high politics

combined with scientific expertise to come to power—the kind of science that does not embrace profit, but thinks of our future. We need intelligence, not interest, to be at the global helm.

Our era is marvelously revolutionary, like no other period of time known by humanity, but the world lacks a driving global consciousness.

Greed, which remains a powerful engine of material, technical and scientific progress, is rushing us headlong toward a bottomless abyss. It is as if objects—mere things of our own invention—have achieved autonomy, have taken control, and are coming to dominate over mankind.

These accumulating contradictions are getting worse, for they seem to have adopted a logic of their own, with inevitable consequences in the political sphere, from which we receive new and very alarming warning-signs.

Over the last months and years, increasing tensions have characterized international relations; the political climate at the global level and between major powers is becoming tense—with a multiplication of episodes of war, serious conflicts or destabilizing strife affecting entire regions and countries. Think only of Ukraine, Syria, the Middle East, Iraq and Afghanistan, Korea, the China Seas, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Nigeria. We could go on, for the list is virtually endless.

Latent conflicts explode and rise to the surface as undeclared wars; others, which last for years, get more complicated and become worse. In all cases, many thousands of innocent victims appeal to our conscience, and demand our intervention.

We refuse to see this. We seem incapable of recognizing the fact that the sort of circumstances in which we

live—circumstances we thought had been relegated to the past—are coming back with a vengeance. Disarmament negotiations are breaking down; we talk again of the forward-deployments of armies and weapons; and those who looked at one another as partners, or at most as competitors, are going back to being enemies again.

We need a form of high politics combined with scientific expertise to come to power—the kind of science that does not embrace profit, but thinks of our future. We need intelligence, not interest, to be at the global helm.

Those of us who are old enough to remember the Cold War know how to get accustomed to living in such a climate of tension, but we also remember how much the world suffered and how costly it was for our people to find themselves drawn into a global zero-sum game.

A key difference between then and now, however, is that in the

past we had two superpowers confronting each other in a perfectly bipolar world. At present we have, either on the front lines or behind the scenes, a large number of countries aspiring to take their places on the global stage of power. They each have enormous political and economic wherewithal, and they each desire to accumulate more of it. And almost all of them have at their disposal atomic weapons or nuclear capabilities.

The situation we will have to deal with in the months and years to come will probably be characterized by an increase in the number of bloody conflicts, sanctions and embargoes, trade restrictions, and limitations in implementing sustainable development policies. The last, I underline, is supposed to ensure a dignified life for all the inhabitants of our planet.

But, things can get even worse. If the climate continues to change and geopolitical, social and economic tensions continue to rise, we're not going to have access to the red hotline telephones the superpowers had in the days of the Cold War. This will drastically reduce our chances of stopping what could evolve into a trigger that causes events to spiral out of control.

THE TIME HAS COME

In the wake of the Rio+20 Summit, world leaders renewed their commitment to eradicate extreme poverty and ensure access to education and healthcare, as promised in the Millennium Development Goals adopted in the year 2000. In 2015, they are preparing to approve a global agenda for sustainable development.

But we have to ask ourselves: will this be possible, given our current circumstances that are so filled with tension? Will leaders devote resources to improv-

ing the lives of their fellow human beings? And even if they do, what purpose would it serve to save children dying of starvation and curable diseases if those same, still relatively poor kids, are indiscriminately killed by the thousands in the bombing of the cities in which they live?

This year marks the centenary of the outbreak of World War I and, like every year, the UN General Assembly will convene in a new session to analyze the state of the world.

I believe the time has come. The powerful of the world can and must act now to stop the global rise in tensions, to ensure peace and global governance—which is needed as never before—and to strengthen mechanisms for dialogue, cooperation and joint action at all levels.

They can ensure that the world focuses on the urgent and essential tasks that lie ahead. They can make a decision to protect the environment and avoid its destruction through the mad rush to ever-increasing consumerism. They can deliver food, healthcare and education for all inhabitants of the planet. They can guarantee self-determination for all peoples. They can defend liberty, democracy and human rights in every country across the world. And they can build a world of peace to benefit our contemporaries and the generations to come. ●