

The Challenge of Global Problems

A GREAT DEAL has been spoken and written about global problems. There is no need to repeat it. My aim is different: to approach global problems as one of the major challenges facing humanity on the verge of the twenty-first century and to ask, above all, what demands this challenge places on world politics.

First, we should call attention to the fact that global problems have a quality that differs from other challenges humankind faces. Delay or refusal to search for answers to the challenge of global problems could lead to the gradual extinction of humanity.

Prognoses differ regarding the number of years remaining before worsening global problems, especially environmental problems, become catastrophic. Understandably, not all such predictions can be accurate since the mechanisms in the evolution of global problems have not been studied thoroughly, and various factors as yet unknown may exist that will influence our present course. Therefore I will not repeat predictions that have already been made or make new ones. One thing is clear, though: The human race has only decades, not centuries, to resolve its global problems. Historically this time frame is minuscule. But for the practical needs of science and politics it is fairly substantial. In these years much can be thought through and undertaken.

The discussion about resolving, even if only partially, our global problems, which we know are a matter of life and death, has entered a new stage, with both positive and negative characteristics. On the positive side is the increasing awareness of the dangers of continuing along our current path and the growing understanding that measures must be taken regarding relations between human beings and the rest of nature in order to improve the situation. Scientists have recently focused their attention on anthropogenic

changes in the earth's climate that are exhausting our natural resources and affecting the ability of humankind to provide itself with basic needs, including food.

Many works have been devoted to the topic of globalization. Two recent ones are worth mentioning: Alvin and Heidi Toffler's *War and Anti-War* and Erwin Laszlo's *The Third Millennium—Challenge and Prognosis*. These two books examine the entire range of problems facing the international community and the relation between those problems and the evolution of population patterns, as well as natural evolution, and the close connection between these processes.

It should be noted that in the business world increasing attention is being paid to global issues. Many large and small companies have been working seriously and sometimes effectively to reduce the consumption of energy and natural resources in production and have taken steps to minimize or eliminate the environmentally harmful consequences of production. Of course these efforts so far have been insufficient. As a rule, they follow the traditional path of merely refining the very technological processes that are essentially incapable of ensuring a radical improvement in the environment. At the same time the operations of these very same companies in the developing countries often proceed entirely along the old lines, engaging in fairly dirty production. Still, it is necessary to take note of a certain shift in business activity regarding this matter.

All this represents something positive, but what about the negative side? The greatest negative aspect is that politics continues to lag significantly behind science. It is true that after the Rio de Janeiro Conference in 1992 several world conferences on global problems were held as well as various meetings of government ministers of both developed and developing countries. But although the subject has not been forgotten, the practical consequences of all these measures so far have not amounted to much.

One gets the impression that economic egoism, the pursuit of profits at all costs, as well as national ambitions (above all, those of the developed countries) have thus far taken precedence over considerations not only of human solidarity but even the interests of one's own future. The world continues to live at the expense of future generations. We are living on borrowed time, with the risk that we will never repay the loan. This failure could ruin our descendants' lives, the lives of coming generations.

The general situation in the world continues to worsen. The proposition cannot be made that the root of this is someone's ill intentions. We cannot

imagine that someone is deliberately trying to make the world situation worse and bring us all closer to catastrophe. On the other hand, not everything can be written off by attributing it to sloppiness, carelessness, or irrational action.

The root of the evil, it seems to me, is found in the very paradigm of development, the very concept of progress, and the incentives to progress that developed over many centuries and still persist today. This boils down to the fact that for centuries progress for society has been equated with continual technical advances—the instruments for maintaining the necessary domination of human beings over the forces of nature, the concept of “man as the king of creation.” This approach has led, on the one hand, to an unlimited expansion of the demands placed on natural resources—which are largely nonrenewable—and, on the other, to the depletion and poisoning of the biosphere, including disruption of its internal balance and capacity for self-renewal.

Further, we are talking about a concept of progress that constantly encourages consumption on a larger scale, the unlimited expansion of the needs of society. A significant proportion of these needs—and with the passage of time this has become an irrationally large proportion—is artificially created and serves exclusively to extract additional profit. Thus the measure of progress and the driving forces behind growth have been material consumption and unlimited consumerism.

Essentially profit and money have become the only “reliable” incentives for the development of society, but by their very nature these incentives ignore fundamentally important human needs, including education, culture, and spiritual growth, which are the factors of real progress. In *Megamachine*, the French writer Serge Latouche concluded that in a purely market-based economy nothing that could be done will be done unless it is profitable.

Extreme inequality is seen in the distribution of production and consumption; this is not an age-old feature but a comparatively new one in our present stage of development. A handful of developed countries representing about one-fourth of the population of the earth disposes of more than 80 percent of all income, while the remaining three-quarters account for 19 percent. Approximately 45 percent of the world’s scientific research is carried out in the industrially developed countries. “Progress” today for the bulk of the world’s population can be equated, at best, with stagnation and, at worst, outright regression. I could go on in the same vein, but the pre-

ceding discussion is sufficient for us to conclude that the modern concept of progress is deficient and dangerous. A change is needed in the very essence of this concept if we are to find a way out of the existing impasse.

To make such a change we need a radical turnaround in our thinking, one that is global, historically long-lasting, and humanist in the fullest and truest sense of the word. What is needed is a revolution in consciousness that would provide the grounds for and ensure a new approach to the basic way of life and forms of behavior of human beings in today's world.

But the process of changing consciousness is a prolonged and difficult one. And it is made even more difficult by the fact that at the present stage of history humanity is required to make a transition from unthinking wastefulness to rational self-restraint and yet maintain the level of consumption necessary for the harmonious development of human beings. Meanwhile attention must be given to our individual spiritual values and to the spiritual reconstruction of social consciousness. Improvement of social consciousness is the task of a politics based on a sober, sensible, and carefully thought-out approach to the problems I have listed—a politics based on the consideration that all global problems are interconnected.

So then, population growth brings about increasing consumption of energy and natural resources and thus worsens the environmental crisis and threatens the viability of life on earth. Like population growth, the environmental crisis deepens divisions between developing and developed countries, between North and South, and makes it more difficult to overcome the sharp contradictions that arise in this connection. The deepening of this division, in turn, creates new obstacles on the path toward resolving environmental problems.

The task of world politics is to understand the systemic nature and interconnectedness of global problems. As of now this mind-set does not exist. Only at the Rio de Janeiro Conference were global problems examined in their totality, although of course the depth and extent to which this was done varied greatly. The search for an answer to the challenge of global problems must be comprehensive, but cannot exclude special emphasis on particular problems, depending on their urgency and importance.

Today it seems that the environmental crisis is the most urgent and important one. This worsening crisis is perceptibly affecting people's health. The World Health Organization in the 1980s determined that an individual's health depends 20 percent on genetics, 20 percent on environmental conditions, 50 percent on lifestyle, and 10 percent on medicine. (Medicine plays an

enormous role in saving the lives of those who are seriously ill, but on the level of maintaining health in general its effect has proved insufficient thus far.) These proportions are changing: The negative effect of environmental factors is increasing and, as a corollary, genetic factors are playing a greater role as a result of genetic changes brought about by environment pollutants. The remaining percentages, in contrast, are decreasing.

Two Russian scientists, Yu. M. Gorsky and V. V. Lavshuk, have estimated that if the environmental crisis in Russia continues to worsen, by the year 2005 we can expect the contribution of environmental factors to people's health to rise to 40 percent and the genetic factors to 30 percent, while lifestyle factors will decrease to 25 percent and medicine to 5 percent. This will represent a serious danger for subsequent generations in Russia. Resolving the environmental crisis presents itself more and more as a matter of saving the human race and its gene pool.

Another problem is the population explosion. When people first started talking seriously about the environmental disaster and the need to reduce the burden we are imposing on nature, little was said about the demographic problem. Today, in the opinion of the most serious researchers, the population explosion could become the decisive factor impelling us toward disaster. Since 1955, the earth's population has doubled and now numbers approximately 6 billion. If present trends continue, by the middle of the next century the population could grow to 12.5 billion, and, according to some estimates, to as much as 20 billion. Some argue, however, that by that time population size will stabilize. But at what point will that occur? The United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) has developed a program to keep population from rising beyond 7.8 billion by the year 2050. If the necessary efforts are made, it would then be possible to provide everyone on earth with the necessary food and other resources. This would be difficult to achieve but, as the specialists assert, it would be possible.

In the past the question of population growth caused serious tensions between developed and developing countries. Today, according to the UNFPA, this conflict has largely been overcome. The developing countries agree, in principle, on limiting population growth, as this is a necessary precondition for their normal environmental and social development. The demographic problem, of course, is bound to produce many disputes, including those connected with the views of major religions, as was confirmed at the 1994 Cairo Conference on population problems. But there is

no alternative. Each country, keeping in mind its own responsibility for the future, must itself decide what measures to take. As worldwide experience has shown, population growth tends to decline or even stop (and then stabilize) as the standard of living and of culture in everyday life rises and as general and medical education increase.

At the initiative of UNESCO's director general, Frederico Mayor, programs for increasing education and training, including medical training in the developing countries, are already being carried out. Ultimately the economic development of the countries of the so-called South will be of decisive importance. In other words, the enormous gap between South and North must be bridged, not only for the sake of the South but for the world as well. If the situation in the South continues to deteriorate, as it has until now, no success can be expected from efforts aimed at restoring environmental health or preventing the spread of dangerous diseases. Even the world economy will be unable to develop normally unless the problem of the less-developed South is resolved.

Another important issue is that development of the South is not a quantitative problem but a qualitative one. Thus solutions cannot be approached, as is often done, from a purely technical-economic standpoint.

The current problems in the countries of the South are a legacy of the colonial era, when the natural development of these countries was slowed, and also a result of continuing exploitation by the North, although in new forms and with new techniques.

A provocative study, entitled *The Debt of the West*, by economist and sociologist Hafez Sabet, scrupulously examines various aspects of the relations between South and North. Sabet calculates that if all aspects of the debt are taken into account, it is not the South that is in debt to the North (or more exactly to the West) by the amount of \$1.3 trillion, but it is the North that is in debt to the South by a figure forty times larger, approximately \$50 trillion. This figure is disputed by Western experts. But even if it is exaggerated, that does not change the essence of the matter.

Today we may be at a turning point in historical development. The elimination of colonial empires has given the countries of the South the possibility of returning to the sources of their own centuries-old civilizations. Disillusioned with initial attempts to mechanically copy Western civilization, and later disillusioned by what was called "a socialist orientation," the countries of the South are seeking new paths. They are reviving many tra-

ditions, values, and customs that had been lost in the past and at the same time are assimilating the most interesting and appropriate elements of worldwide experience.

Several Asian and Latin American countries with lagging development in the past have moved rapidly ahead in a relatively short time. Other countries are still seeking their roads to progress. In this process we observe inevitable distortions and excesses. But on the whole it is a healthy phenomenon. One cannot help respecting and supporting this process. It is particularly unacceptable to see in the South's new self-assertion a hostile challenge to other countries or to oppose this self-assertion at all costs and involuntarily fall back on dogmas of the colonialist era. Whether existing contradictions will become a threat for the entire world or whether matters will be arranged satisfactorily so that there will be co-development of different civilizations of a kind that will assure a less painful entry by all humanity into the twenty-first century—this will depend on mutual understanding and a serious approach toward the search for mutually acceptable solutions.

Of course many Western countries are aiding various developing countries. The European Union has such aid programs, but the resources being allocated are pitifully small compared to the needs. Moreover, the aid is by no means always used effectively.

The United Nations recommends that 0.7 percent of the gross domestic product in the advanced countries be allocated for aid to developing countries. But in fact only Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Holland have met this target. France is close behind them, with 0.63 percent. The United States spends only 0.15 percent for these purposes, Japan 0.26 percent, and Germany 0.37 percent. Alongside this aid, however, massive amounts of resources are still being extracted from countries of the South, primarily in the form of repayment of debts.

In the recent past and within the framework of the new thinking, the Soviet government proposed that the problem of development as a whole, particularly the North-South problem, be internationalized, that is, become a subject of constant concern and attention by the international community. At the summit meeting in Rio de Janeiro a statement was made about the need to coordinate efforts in this direction. But thus far only good intentions remain. I should note that it seems unrealistic and against their interests for developing countries to orient themselves toward the creation of a consumer society. This would hardly produce solid results but would only worsen the problems existing in the world, primarily the environmental cri-

sis. It seems to me that the optimal goal is to make a transition to postindustrial conditions emphasizing people's cultural and spiritual needs, as well as their health.

Countries of the South would be substantially assisted by international efforts to end local or regional conflicts and, of course, prevent new conflicts both within countries and between them. After all, internal and external conflicts have been one of the main reasons for the ruination and economic dislocation that afflict countries of the South. Today the arms spending of these countries exceeds the amount they receive each year in the form of aid. These conflicts not only devour resources but retard development and contribute to the persistence of poverty and backwardness.

The challenge of global problems is a new phenomenon in human history. For the first time in millennia it is possible that the human race will perish because of progress. Preventing such an outcome depends on people themselves. It is impossible not to agree with Erwin Laszlo, a founder of the Club of Rome and head of the Budapest Club, when he states: "*Homo sapiens* (literally, the intelligent human being) has lived to see the time when his or her existence increasingly depends on his or her intelligence."