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STATE OF THE WORLD

Transforming Cultures

From Consumerism to Sustainability

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2010

STATE OF THE WORLD

Transforming Cultures

From Consumerism to Sustainability

Advance Praise for *State of the World 2010*:

“If we continue to think of ourselves mostly as consumers, it’s going to be very hard to bring our environmental troubles under control. But it’s also going to be very hard to live the rounded and joyful lives that could be ours. This is a subversive volume in all the best ways!”

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—**Muhammad Yunus**, founder of the *Grameen Bank*

“This year’s *State of the World* report is a cultural mindbomb exploding with devastating force. I hope it wakes a few people up.”

—**Kalle Lasn**, Editor of *Adbusters* magazine

Like a tsunami, consumerism has engulfed human cultures and Earth’s ecosystems. Left unaddressed, we risk global disaster. But if we channel this wave, intentionally transforming our cultures to center on sustainability, we will not only prevent catastrophe but may usher in an era of sustainability—one that allows all people to thrive while protecting, even restoring, Earth.

In this year’s *State of the World* report, 50+ renowned researchers and practitioners describe how we can harness the world’s leading institutions—education, the media, business, governments, traditions, and social movements—to reorient cultures toward sustainability.



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extreme close-up

Several million pounds of plastic enter the world’s oceans every hour, portrayed on the cover by the 2.4 million bits of plastic that make up *Gyre*, Chris Jordan’s 8- by 11-foot reincarnation of the famous 1820s woodblock print, *The Great Wave Off Kanagawa*, by the Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai.

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Broadening the Understanding of Security

Michael Renner

In 1985, when the world was still trapped in the Cold War standoff, political scientist Daniel Deudney called for “large-scale cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union in the manned exploitation of deep space and multilateral efforts to secure earth by making better use of space technologies.” He argued that such a common, collaborative project could be “harnessed to transform the superpower relationship and to create a common security system.”¹

Whether space exploration was then or is ever the right vehicle for bringing about a more cooperative and peaceful world order is debatable. But the underlying argument is worth pondering: can humanity, in rallying around a common purpose, leave behind its costly history of conflicts and divisions? The Cold War is long over, but security concerns have hardly vanished. Nations around the world, and especially the poorest countries and communities, confront a multitude of interlinked challenges and pressures. These include rising competition for resources, environmental breakdown and the specter of severe climate disruptions, a resurgence of infectious diseases, demographic pressures, poverty and growing wealth disparities, and convulsive eco-

nomic transformations that often translate into joblessness and livelihood insecurity.

Understanding how these social, economic, and environmental conditions can undermine human security and may even translate into conflicts and instability requires a broader definition of security, one that understands the influence of economic, demographic, and environmental pressures that cannot be resolved by force of arms. Recent years have indeed seen a growing recognition of such dynamics.

Key Challenges

A number of these conditions and dynamics can be seen as an outgrowth of the dominant economic model premised on essentially unlimited resource consumption. This model is not only putting humanity on a collision course with the planet’s ecological limits, it has also led to tremendous social and economic inequality.

Nonrenewable resources. Throughout history the pursuit of resources such as fossil fuels, metals, and minerals has led to repeated outside interventions in resource-rich countries. The specter of peak oil and comparable contradictions between surging demand for and

Michael Renner is a senior researcher at the Worldwatch Institute who focuses on security and economics.

finite deposits of other resources raise the likelihood of intensifying geopolitical rivalries. But resource wealth has also fueled serious human rights violations, corrupt systems of governance, and even a series of civil wars. Revenues from mining and logging operations have mostly benefited a small minority, while the social and environmental burdens have typically been shouldered by poor and disadvantaged communities.²

Renewable resources. Water, arable land, forests, and fisheries are essential for all of human life, and the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of farmers, ranchers, and nomadic pastoralists depend directly on them. Distributional disputes may grow more pronounced with resource depletion and pollution. Almost one third of the world—estimates vary between 1.4 billion and 2 billion people—already live in water-scarce regions. Aside from population growth and poor management practices, climate change impacts could increase the affected number of people by anywhere from 60 million to 1 billion people by 2050. A recent study found that due to such impacts as rising temperatures and increased drought, half of the world's population could face severe food shortages by the end of this century.³

Disease burdens. Food shortages make affected populations more vulnerable to diseases. The world is experiencing a resurgence of infectious diseases, with the poor being the most vulnerable. Pathogens are crossing borders with increasing ease, facilitated by international travel and trade, migration, and social upheaval. In addition, logging, road-building, and dam construction bring humans close to new pathogens. And climate change enables vectors for diseases like malaria or dengue fever to spread. At the same time, an increasing number of societies are confronting an epidemic of obesity—a symptom of overconsumption and sedentary lifestyles.

Disasters. A combination of ecosystem destruction, population growth, and economic

marginalization of the poor has led to more frequent and more devastating disaster events. The number of natural disasters (excluding geological events such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions) has risen from 233 in the 1950s to more than 3,800 in the current decade, and the number of people affected has grown from nearly 20 million to 2 billion. The pace is likely to accelerate as climate change translates into more intense storms, flooding, and heat waves. Disasters can undermine human security by exacerbating poverty, deepening inequalities, and undermining the long-term habitability of some areas. The experiences of Haiti, Nicaragua, Bangladesh, India, and China suggest that unrest and political crisis can erupt where relief and reconstruction efforts are slow or incompetent.⁴

Unemployment. The global economic crisis that broke into full view in late 2008 sharpened concerns about unemployment, uncertain economic prospects, and the growing move toward the informal sector in the world economy. Almost half the world's workforce, some 1.5 billion people, is classified by the International Labour Organization as being in vulnerable employment arrangements; more than 1.2 billion workers are mired in poverty, earning less than \$2 a day. Close to 190 million people were unemployed altogether in 2008, a number that was expected to rise by 30–60 million in 2009. North Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America have particularly high rates of joblessness. The unemployment figure for young people, at 12 percent, was double the overall rate. When large numbers of young adults face bleak prospects for earning enough to establish and support a family, their discontent can translate into societal instability.⁵

Population movements. A range of factors contribute to population movements, and sometimes the boundaries between voluntary and involuntary flows are blurred. In addition to 42 million international refugees and

internally displaced persons fleeing warfare and persecution, some 25 million people are thought to have been uprooted by natural disasters. As many as 105 million people have been made homeless by projects such as dams, mines, roads, and factories. Environmental degradation is behind at least some of these numbers. Projections of the number who may get displaced due to climate change by 2050 vary from a low of 25 million to a high of 1 billion. Refugees and migrants may be seen as unwelcome competitors for land, water, jobs, and social services, possibly leading to social unrest and violence.⁶

The Need for New Priorities

Over the years, academics and policymakers have come to accept the validity of a broader view of human security than just a military one. Roughly a dozen governments engage in an ongoing dialogue through the Human Security Network. A number of national government agencies and intergovernmental bodies have developed policy guidelines, commissioned research and strategy papers, and convened meetings to assess conflict prevention and post-conflict peacebuilding efforts in this broader context. In 2007, for the first time ever, the United Nations Security Council discussed the security implications of climate change, including border disputes, migration, societal stress, humanitarian crises, and shortages of energy, water, arable land, and fish stocks.⁷

These developments notwithstanding, government policies and budget priorities do not indicate any major shift. And much of this discussion remains solidly within the national security mindset, steeped in traditional perceptions of “threats” as opposed to common vulnerabilities. Reflecting the views of U.S. military and intelligence agencies, an August 2009 *New York Times* article warned of military interventions in response to climate-induced

crises that “could topple governments, feed terrorist movements or destabilize entire regions.” But instead of a militarization of environmental and human security challenges, a fundamental re-evaluation of security policies is needed.⁸

Traditional security perspectives remain dominant in most national budgets. In 2008, the world spent almost \$1.5 trillion for military purposes—the largest amount since the end of World War II and many times more than is available for human security priorities. Western countries did increase their development aid to \$120 billion in 2008, up from \$52 billion (in current dollars) 10 years earlier. Aid by non-Western donors and multilateral agencies brings the total for development assistance to about \$139 billion. That still leaves a military-to-aid budget ratio of more than 10 to 1.⁹

Budgets for climate change are also increasing but are still small compared with military budgets. In fiscal year 2010, the United States will spend \$65 on the military for each \$1 devoted to climate programs. The nuclear weapons budget—\$9.9 billion—is more than four times the amount requested for renewable energy and energy efficiency programs. In Germany, the military-to-climate budget ratio was 9 to 1 in 2008, and in Japan it was 11 to 1.¹⁰

Bilateral and multilateral funds to assist developing countries with climate mitigation and adaptation tally about \$20 billion over the next five years or so. On an annual basis, this is about a third of what the United States alone spends on military aid to other countries and less than a quarter of the value of global arms transfers to developing countries.¹¹

Solutions

Policies that defuse conditions that may lead to grievances and disputes represent smart security policy. A robust and comprehensive approach to creating a more stable world entails measures designed to stop environ-

mental decline, break the stranglehold of poverty, and reverse the trend toward growing inequity and social insecurity that all too often breeds despair. There are a number of concepts and initiatives that create goodwill and foster cooperation around shared needs and interests and thus contain the seeds for a recalibrated security policy.

curity and discontent. A sustainable security policy will need to work to lessen human vulnerability and improve social and economic well-being. While not couched in the language of security, this goal finds expression in the Millennium Development Goals—some 21 targets of slashing poverty and hunger, combating health threats, and improving



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In the Democratic Republic of Congo these men have found work manufacturing anti-malarial, insecticide-treated bednets.

primary education to be achieved mostly by 2015. But progress toward these goals has been quite slow and uneven. The MDGs need a major boost in resources and commitment, especially in the face of the global economic crisis that threatens to reverse earlier progress on several goals.¹²

Before discussing them, however, it is necessary to acknowledge that a fundamental insecurity in international relations will continue to cast a shadow until the establishment of global political institutions with the power to act as credible guarantors of a nation's security. Such institutions might rely on trade sanctions, diplomatic pressures, or even U.N.-sanctioned use of force. At present, U.N. peacekeeping forces are often hobbled by inadequate resources, while regional alliances like NATO lack global legitimacy. Narrow calculations of national interest hold sway. However, a variety of pragmatic and imaginative steps can be taken to lay the groundwork for a new culture of security.

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). While poverty as such does not necessarily lead to violence, there is no doubt that the absence of equitable development breeds inse-

Curbing energy and materials appetites. An alternative energy policy geared toward developing renewable sources and boosting efficiency is not only essential for reducing environmental impacts and greenhouse gas emissions but can be

a tool for peace in that it helps to lower the likelihood of resource conflicts. In this context, the creation of the new International Renewable Energy Agency in January 2009 is a welcome step forward. But a recent study finds that to bring about the transition to a low-carbon economy, public R&D for clean energy and energy efficiency will need to grow at least three- to fourfold. And complementary demand-side policies are essential—boosting efficiency and promoting sufficiency through less consumption-intensive lifestyles.¹³

Reducing materials throughput is similarly key to lessening the likelihood of resource conflicts. In the past decade or so, recognition of such conflicts has risen dramatically, in part because of effective nongovernmental groups' campaigns against "blood diamonds" and other resources from conflict zones. Governments

and international agencies have responded by imposing embargoes on a number of governments and other actors profiteering from illicit resource exploitation and by promoting greater transparency. These measures will be far more effective if paired with efforts to critically examine, and curb, consumers' voracious resource appetite, which makes these commodities so lucrative in the first place.¹⁴

Environmental peacemaking. While environmental degradation can contribute to conflicts, environmental cooperation also holds great potential as a peacemaking tool. If well managed, cooperative efforts around shared ecosystems and natural resources can build trust and establish collaborative habits, especially if government contacts are augmented by vibrant civil society dialogue. Over time, such a dynamic may grow sufficiently strong to help overcome unresolved broader disputes. The notion of blending ecology and transboundary politics has been put into practice, to some extent, in two specific areas: river basin management among riparian nations and border-straddling peace parks.¹⁵

Cooperative water management efforts have been undertaken in international river basins such as the Nile, Danube, Indus, Jordan, and Mekong. These kinds of accords will be increasingly put to the test as populations and water consumption grow and as climate change heightens water scarcity in some parts of the world. Undoubtedly, the task of sustainable water stewardship is more challenging than a shared exploitation of plentiful water resources. These issues arise not just in transboundary settings but also within national borders where different communities and regions jockey for access to water.¹⁶

Peace parks are protected areas that straddle national borders and are dedicated to protecting biological diversity and promoting peace and cooperation. There are now 188 such areas worldwide. Though they can themselves be a source of conflict if they disregard

the livelihoods of local communities, conservation zones can in principle facilitate cooperation and the resolution of territorial conflicts. Most peace parks to date have been established between countries that do not have active conflicts. But one notable case in which the creation of a conservation corridor helped with conflict resolution involved the 1995 border war between Ecuador and Peru. Proposals have been made to establish peace parks in such highly disputed areas as the Kuril Island (Russia-Japan), the Siachen Glacier (Pakistan-India), the Mesopotamian marshlands (Iran-Iraq), and on the Korean peninsula.¹⁷

Peacekeeping and environmental restoration. United Nations peacekeeping and post-conflict efforts increasingly take into account environmental dimensions. Some 11 peacekeeping missions in countries like the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Sudan (Darfur), Liberia, Georgia, Lebanon, and Timor-Leste have participated in tree planting efforts. These initiatives are seen as important both locally—countering deforestation—and globally in the fight against climate change. U.N. officials recognize that traditional peacekeeping alone is unlikely to have lasting success without these and such environment-related efforts as rehabilitation, recycling, disaster relief, flood protection, and water quality.¹⁸

Since 1999, the U.N. Environment Programme has done a number of detailed post-crisis environmental assessments, identifying environmental risks to health, livelihoods, and security. Assessments have been carried out in the Balkans, Ukraine, Lebanon, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Sudan, Rwanda, Nigeria, the DRC, and Afghanistan. These help improve the understanding of environmental factors in conflict and pinpoint how environmental restoration can help stabilize war-torn societies.¹⁹

Disaster diplomacy. Disasters that strike in active or latent conflict zones may inflict suffering that cuts across the divides of conflict,

often triggering goodwill and possibly jolting the political landscape. Common relief and reconstruction needs offer opportunities for collaboration, which in turn can build trust, break ingrained conflict dynamics, and perhaps facilitate reconciliation among adversaries. There have been attempts at disaster diplomacy in relations between Greece and Turkey, China and Taiwan, India and Pakistan, Ethiopia and Eritrea, and other nations.²⁰

Still, there are no guaranteed outcomes. The aftermath of the 2004 tsunami disaster had diametrically opposite outcomes in two of the hardest-hit areas. In Indonesia's Aceh province, the disaster helped trigger a process that led to a successful peace agreement. But in Sri Lanka, a groundswell of popular-level goodwill did not reach to the elite political level, and post-tsunami aid became a divisive issue. Humanitarianism does not automatically create peace, but it can offer a window of opportunity for conflict transformation.²¹

Health diplomacy. Conceptually similar to disaster diplomacy, the notion of health diplomacy has been proposed as a way to generate goodwill by providing medical assistance to other countries, improving relations, and resolving conflicts, as well as advancing common public health objectives. This is especially important in the face of what some have called disease globalization (rapidly spreading epidemics like SARS or avian flu).²²

Cuba has been a pioneer in this regard. It has engaged in vigorous "medical diplomacy" since the 1960s. It has invited thousands of students from many developing countries to be trained in its medical schools, sent thousands of its own doctors and nurses to provide care to poor communities abroad, and dispatched disaster-relief teams to several countries. In 2006, close to 29,000 Cubans served in 68 countries (though by far most of them were in Venezuela under an "oil for doctors" scheme). Achieving dramatic improvements in the health of assisted populations, Cuba's efforts have

focused heavily on capacity building and preventive medicine. The programs have largely been free from political conditionality.²³

Greening employment. Employment is affected by a multitude of factors, but disregarding environmental and resource constraints will be increasingly costly for businesses and workers. Yet "greening" technologies and workplaces through large-scale public and private investment—generating so-called green jobs—could inject a new positive dynamic into labor markets. The economic stimulus programs passed by many governments in response to the global economic crisis entailed substantial green spending. There have also been calls for a far more ambitious Global Green New Deal. Much of the green jobs discussion has focused on industrial countries and a handful of emerging economies with regard to high-tech sectors like wind and solar energy or electric vehicles. But green jobs also offer important opportunities for poverty reduction and livelihood promotion in developing countries. This involves support for recycling and composting efforts and investments to protect biodiversity, restore degraded farmland and watersheds, and make farming more organic and climate-resilient.²⁴

The concepts and initiatives just described need to be replicated and scaled up. And close attention is warranted to ensuring that they are not undertaken in isolation but actually reinforce each other. In part this will take substantial investments—with resources channeled from outdated, adversarial security policies toward programs that can address the roots of insecurity and promote cooperative behavior. But a more fundamental need is institutional renewal and profound cultural change—moving away from a warrior culture that always sees new enemies lurking and toward an understanding that different nations and communities need to make peace not only with each other but also with nature.

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