

Global Sustainability through Global Law

Only within the moment of time represented by the present century has one species, man, acquired significant power to alter the nature of his world.

—Rachel Carson

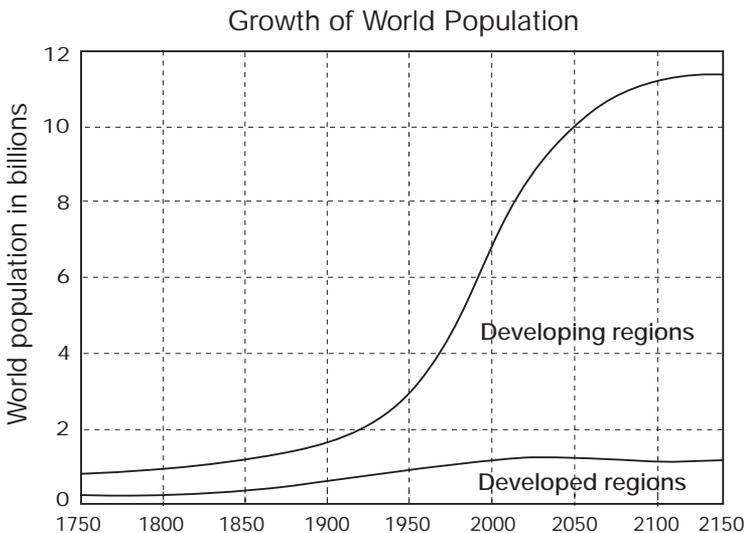
As the world has gotten smaller, its problems have become larger—and global in scope. Many social, economic, and environmental ills cannot be solved within individual nations, especially in this era of economic globalization. An economic downturn in the United States causes people to lose their jobs in Bogota, or Hong Kong, or Athens. Environmental damage and overpopulation in the developing world leads to millions of illegal immigrants hopping borders to wealthier countries. The over-consumption of fossil fuels in the developed world and the clear-cutting of forests in the developing world is causing global warming, which in turn is affecting agriculture by destabilizing weather conditions worldwide.

When immigrants and refugees start pouring across borders, it is the international community that is best equipped to solve the underlying problems that are causing the migrations. Polluted seas and rising ocean levels due to glacial melting are every nation's concern. Global warming equally affects all living things on this planet. In an interconnected and

interdependent world, all nations and all people are affected more than ever by the actions of their neighbors around the globe. The isolated nation-state and impotent organizations like the UN are no longer able to cope with such global problems; only democratic global government can.

The population crisis is accelerating

One of the world's most pressing problems is the daunting fact that human population growth is out of control, virtually guaranteeing us a future with more crowding and continued destruction of natural resources. While it is true that women in both developed and developing countries bear fewer children than ever before, population remains a crisis because of increased longevity; on all continents, survival rates are higher than ever before. In the last century, humankind has eliminated its natural predators, provided a relatively steady food supply, and conquered many diseases.



Source: UN Projections, PBS.org

Two thousand years ago, there were only about 200 million human beings on the earth. Not until the early 1800s did the population reach one billion. It doubled to two billion only 123 years later, in 1927. The third billion took only another thirty-three years; we reached it in 1960. The fourth billion took a mere thirteen years, occurring in 1974. The fifth billion was added in twelve years, in 1987. The sixth billion came twelve years later, in 1999. Today the current population is 6.3 billion and growing. The UN projects that world population will rise to between eight and ten billion in 2050.¹

The most dramatic increase in the size of the human population has thus occurred in the last two hundred years, when it grew six-fold from one billion in the early 1800s to over six billion by 2003. Historians agree that this increase correlates directly with the rise of the Industrial Revolution and the widespread use of fossil fuels in agriculture.

The introduction of petroleum-based fertilizers and mechanized farming based on fossil fuel energy has expanded the carrying capacity of the earth. The increased quantity and quality of the food supply has allowed for a much faster rate of population growth. Modern industry—combined with the rise of scientific medicine and other arts of civilization—continues to increase longevity as well.

The inherent risk of a food supply based on petroleum should be obvious: Petroleum is a nonrenewable resource whose worldwide supply and production is peaking—according to some reliable estimates—between 2006 and 2015.² A declining oil supply will lead to an increase in production costs in all agricultural sectors. Increased cost of food, combined with an expanding population almost completely dependent on petroleum-based agriculture, is a formula for disaster. Unless population growth is brought under control and new

sources of energy are brought online, the human species faces a precarious future.

Besides putting our own survival at risk, the human population explosion is also causing serious stress to the natural ecosystems of the world. For instance, we continue to clear forests at a catastrophic rate in order to create farmland to feed more and more people. Rainforests in particular are disappearing at a rate of one and a half acres per second; having once covered 14 percent of the planet's surface, they now cover only 6 percent. At this rate of destruction, the planet's rainforests will be gone in forty years.³

This process of wiping out natural ecosystems is the single most environmentally destructive act of humankind—causing, among other things, a massive wave of extinctions of plant and animal species. We lose at least one species every twenty minutes, some twenty-seven thousand species a year—a rate and scale of extinction that has not occurred since the era 65 million years ago when the dinosaurs became extinct. With the animal kingdom being destroyed at such a pace, we humans cannot be far behind.

The system that supports life on our planet is a rich but vulnerable web of life that will inevitably collapse after so many of its constituent threads are removed. The destruction of ecosystems that took millions of years to evolve cannot be restored in a generation or two; much of the environmental damage now occurring—species extinction in particular—is irreversible.

We can't go back to being hunters and gatherers, but we *can* control the population growth and land use practices that are driving environmental destruction. An important symbolic step in this direction was the awarding of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize to Wangari Maathai, a remarkable Kenyan activist

who founded a movement that empowered women to plant millions of trees in ravaged forestland all over Africa. With the formation of a global government, world parks comparable to national parks could be established in developing countries to protect land that is crucial to the entire planet's biosystem, with the expense shared by the world community. The creation of world parks and other land management practices could salvage rainforests and other ecologically sensitive areas in countries that cannot possibly plan for or manage this sort of global challenge on their own. It should be remembered that, in dealing with ecological destruction, one of the advantages of a world government is that it could factor in the needs of all nations and globally manage scarce resources on behalf of the planet as a whole.

Overpopulation has a global solution

Overpopulation is a direct cause of human misery throughout the world—especially in the developing world, where increasingly scarce resources cause people to compete daily for their basic needs. Many developing nations face a grave future of poverty and environmental destruction if their populations continue expanding at their current rate—in fact, many already do. The Malthusian theory of population growth stated that there is a reverse correlation between population and food supply. Malthus, however, missed the wild card of new technology's effect on food production. As long as the petroleum supply holds out (or as renewable replacements are found), farmers will produce a constantly increasing supply of food, thanks to energy-intensive technological innovations such as irrigation and factory farming. But the ultimate effect is clear: The resulting population increase will

eventually use up scarce natural resources, leading to the threat of irreversible environmental destruction.

Happily, there has been some success in controlling the human population explosion. The world population growth rate peaked at two percent in the late 1960s and is currently about 1.3 percent. Global average births are now 2.7 children per woman, down from five in the early 1950s.⁴ This success is largely due to three things: (1) changes in lifestyle as development has occurred; (2) UN programs that provide access to birth control and family planning education to developing countries; and (3) the severe birth control policies in China, the world's most populous nation with 1.2 billion people. In 1979 the Chinese government mandated that each couple could have only one child—a drastic but effective way to control population growth.

Over 97 percent of the current population increase occurs in the developing world.⁵ The developing world's lack of both education and access to birth control, as well as the low status of women, greatly contribute to the population explosion. Developed societies, on the other hand, have reached zero growth, i.e., the number of births about equals the number of deaths each year. When all the data are considered, the rate of growth and family size has been decreasing in both the developed and the developing parts of the world. Unfortunately, when you have a world population of 6.3 billion, even a small growth rate creates a large number of people. Each year there is an increase of 79 million people, about the size of the population of Germany or the Philippines. And, as noted earlier, increased longevity is also a key factor in the growth of populations. The question remains: Can population be stabilized sufficiently before the planet that sustains us all is irreversibly damaged? In the meantime, what

can we do to reduce the tally of 24,000 people who die every day from hunger or hunger-related causes?

The first steps in managing population growth are to raise awareness of the problem and find the political will to deal with it as an international problem. In other words, *the solutions must be global because the problem itself is global*. It is not helpful to merely tighten up border controls to try to stop the flow of immigrants. The developed world needs to be proactive; it must endeavor to get to the root causes of the problem.

The UN has been instrumental in providing family planning assistance to developing nations, but it is limited by lack of funds. (The total UN budget for a year is \$11 billion, compared to a US military budget of \$400 billion.) The task of assisting developing countries requires not just family planning, but also clean water and adequate food and health care. The UN has made a good start, but a global government with a steady financial base could do so much more.

Also putting a brake on the UN's efforts in this direction—besides the general lack of funds—has been the particular lack of support from the UN's main contributor, the United States government. The US approach to world population control has for many years been lacking. For example, in 2002, the US withdrew \$34 million from the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA).⁶ The successful domestic effort of the American Christian right to discredit global population control policy because of its use of family planning and abortion has been a key factor that has rendered the US largely ineffective on the critical issue of world population.

Ironically, while abortion is legal in America, US foreign policy involves dictating antiabortion policies to other

countries. Under the current voluntary system of funding of the UN, countries can withhold payment for programs they don't like. Selective payment policies like these will be eliminated under the mandatory tax collection system of a democratic global government—just as it is with any government.

The so-called Global Gag Rule is the term often used to designate the US policy that denies foreign organizations receiving US family planning funds the right to engage in public debate on abortion or to perform legal abortions. The rule was originally proposed by the Reagan administration at the 1984 UN International Conference on Population in Mexico City. This policy remained in place from 1984 to 1993, ending during the eight years of the Clinton presidency, but it was reinstated by George W. Bush in 2001 on his first day in office as president. We know what works in controlling population growth: the provision of contraceptives, reproductive health and family planning services, clean water, health care, and incentives to limit family size; reduction of childhood mortality rates; and education for both men and women. In 1989 Iran faced water shortages and a population that had doubled from 1968 to 1988. It managed to institute a population control program that succeeded in reducing its birth rate. The Iranians used education and free access to birth control. Iran found the political will and translated it into effective programs that used financial incentives and social pressure. Cuba, with a population growth rate of only 0.7 percent⁷ is another success story. The Cuban government provides family planning services at no cost to all citizens.

The developing world needs access to education, family planning, and technology. Women need to be given more rights and choices before they become pregnant. When the leaders and peoples of the world realize how greatly

overpopulation affects the earth and everyone's well-being, the political will can be found to control it. But because we live in an interconnected and interdependent world, it does little good for one country to limit its population, only to be overrun by its neighbors. Population growth needs to be dealt with on a global level. The developed countries that have stabilized their population growth need to help the developing countries to also achieve this goal. Such policies can best be carried out by a democratic global government and especially by an end to war, which will free up the resources to do the job.

Global government is needed to address the AIDS epidemic

Infectious diseases know no borders, and thanks to modern transportation, deadly diseases can spread quickly and silently around the globe. The unchecked appearance of a mutant strain of virus or bacteria anywhere in the world can quickly become a threat to every one of us. The so-called avian influenza (or "bird flu") that recently struck in Southeast Asia is one such example that is currently causing great concern.

But no disease in modern times has been more devastating or has spread as fast as AIDS. The rate of increase of this disease since it was discovered in 1981 has been staggering, and scientists fear that we are only at the beginning of the most deadly plague known to humanity. As of 2004 AIDS had already claimed 24 million lives worldwide. It killed three million people in 2004, and five million more were newly infected. Worldwide it is estimated that about 40 million people are living with HIV/AIDS. Almost 30 million of those infected live in sub-Saharan Africa where the devastation is extensive.⁸ Whole areas of this region have lost large segments of the adult population; in fact, UN officials now believe that AIDS is a

major cause of Africa's current food crisis. It is a sign, they say, of how basic building blocks of society can crumble in the face of a devastating disease that urgently requires more global attention. Because AIDS is an international problem reaching into every corner of the globe, a huge international response is now needed.

What is needed most is an effective and inexpensive vaccine. Experts and activists have indicated that the amount of money and effort expended in that direction needs to be drastically increased.

In the meantime, it is essential to stop the spread of the disease through a simple, low-tech method: education for prevention. Nearly half of all new HIV infections and one-third of all new sexually transmitted infectious diseases occur to people younger than twenty-five. These young people need education, because AIDS is a preventable disease; it is not like the flu or tuberculosis, which can be contracted easily through the air. Condoms could be distributed free or their cost greatly subsidized to encourage safe sex. Intensive education programs on prevention should be stepped up in both the developed and the developing countries. As hundreds of millions of people may die in the next fifty years, these are not extreme ideas. The current uncoordinated approach is failing to stop or slow the epidemic.

When the world experienced an outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003, the response was strong and involved mandatory quarantines. This strategy halted the disease without the benefit of either a vaccine or a cure. Although China, the nation with the most cases, stumbled at first, it eventually stepped up to the challenge. Had it not done so, and had it lost control of the disease, SARS would have spread throughout the world. Our great fear

should be that the next outbreak of some new infectious disease might occur in a nation that does not react quickly enough or cannot control it within its own borders.

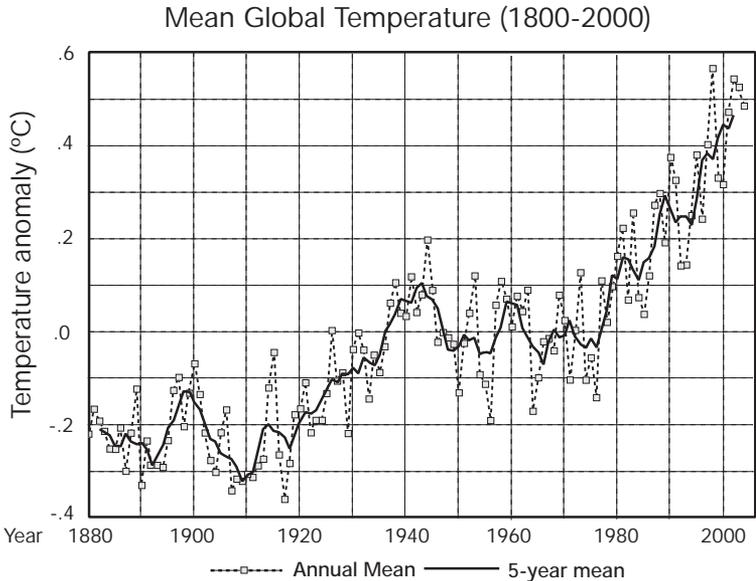
With the health of the world's peoples so interconnected, it makes sense to have a global government that could do so much more than the current World Health Organization to centralize the prevention and control of infectious diseases worldwide. No country could legitimately claim national sovereignty as a reason for not following international standards in this regard.

AIDS and the threat of other pandemics is yet another example of global problems that require a global focus. Only when the world stops spending its fortunes and genius on war will it find the will and resources to deal with such maladies as well as the overarching issue of the health and well-being of the world's people.

A solution to global warming is urgently needed

The planet has one atmosphere that is shared by all people and living things, and this vital resource is being threatened in a manner that cries out for a global remedy.

Scientists have confirmed that the decade of the 1990s was the warmest on record, and a full ten of the past twenty years have been among the warmest on record.⁹ Overall, global temperature has risen one degree Fahrenheit in the last one hundred years, with the sharpest part of this rise occurring in the last twenty years. The warmest year on record was 1998, 2002 was the second warmest, 2001 was the third warmest, and 2004 was the fourth warmest according to the World Meteorological Organization. Most alarming is the prediction



Source: NASA

that global temperatures will rise by between 2.5 and 10 degrees Fahrenheit in this century.¹⁰

With the exception of a few ideologues lingering on in the US, the global warming that is evidenced by these numbers is no longer considered a theory by the world's scientific community; it is occurring and it is measurable.

The world is also experiencing a marked rise in storm activity due to the increased evaporation of water resulting from the higher temperatures. The trend toward a disruptive warming of the Pacific ocean-atmosphere system known as El Niño has also caused significant changes in weather patterns worldwide as well as the destruction of coral reefs. Also associated with global warming is the unprecedented rate of melting of polar glaciers. In turn, sea levels have begun to rise and are expected to continue rising for the next 500 years, inevitably flooding many of the earth's most populated areas.

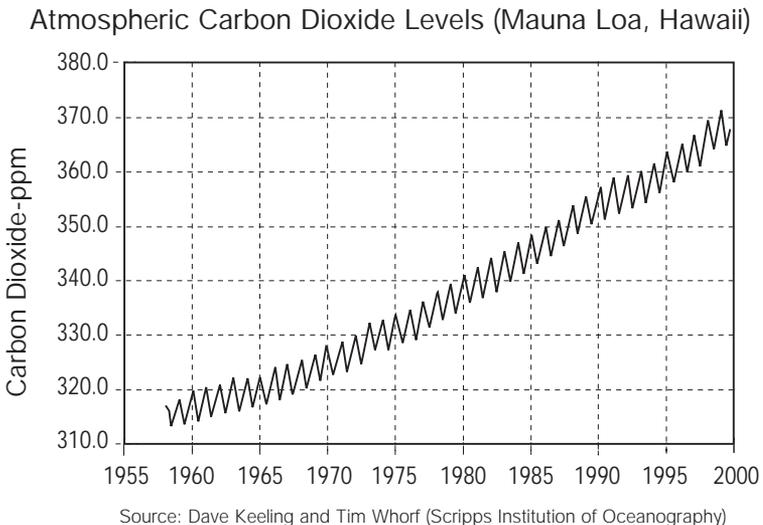
The earth has been through many cycles of climate change over the millennia, but the last ten thousand years have been an exceptionally stable period in the earth's climate history. This stability seems to have been a key factor in humankind's development of civilization. A steady and predictable climate is critical for humanity's survival; the implications of the drastic climate changes we now anticipate are far-reaching.

The real danger is not so much the phenomenon of climate change itself, but the *rate* of change. The fragile biosphere that supports plants, animals, and human societies can be drastically disrupted by quick changes in temperature. Crop yields and farming in general also become less predictable. Scientists call this man-made destabilization of the atmosphere global *warming*, implying that it will be a gentle, steady increase in temperature—but it might be more accurate to use words like *baking*, *frying*, or *scorching*. The scary fact is that scientists don't know how severe the temperature increase might be in the coming decades; global climate change resulting from pollution won't necessarily occur in a slow, steady progression. We may reach a critical threshold at which point the warming process could suddenly leap forward, causing drastic temperature changes within a few years. With our knowledge thus limited, wisdom requires that we pursue a path of caution if humanity is going to safeguard the valuable resources of this planet. Scientifically speaking, it borders on insanity for humankind to be pumping vast quantities of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and not expect *some* kind of change. It would be unconscionable for us to ignore this.

There will be both winners and losers in any scenario resulting from a rapid rise in the earth's temperature. The growing seasons of northern areas like Canada and Siberia will

increase, and that may be to their benefit; other regions will face extreme weather changes that will make farming more difficult. The greatest losers may be the areas affected by killer heat waves, like the one in Chicago in 1995 that caused the deaths of five hundred people or the scorching summer of 2003 in Europe that caused over ten thousand heat-related deaths in France alone.¹¹ Meanwhile, tropical diseases like malaria will spread north; and food production all over the world will be disrupted by droughts and floods as weather patterns become even more unstable.

Global warming is caused primarily by the burning of fossil fuels, which emit carbon dioxide (the primary greenhouse gas), and by the clearing of forests. (Forests give off oxygen and absorb carbon dioxide, which stabilizes the climate.) Because of the developed world's massive dependence on fossil fuels, the carbon dioxide content in the atmosphere today is approximately 31 percent greater than it was in 1750 at the onset of the fossil-fuel era.¹² Carbon dioxide levels are now higher than at any time in the last 15 million years.¹³



Fossil fuels are industrial society's main energy source. The cars we drive run on fossil fuel, our buildings are heated and cooled by fossil fuels, and most of the electricity that runs our homes and factories is created in plants that run on fossil fuels. The number of cars on the planet in 1950 was 50 million. In 2003 it was 500 million.¹⁴ Countries that currently have few automobiles are increasingly emulating the US lifestyle and over time will drastically add to the total number of internal combustion engines producing greenhouse gases. We are expanding the fossil fuel bonanza with little regard for its environmental costs.

Global warming, like most problems, is easier to prevent than it is to fix. We have a window of opportunity in the next few years that will allow us to prevent a major catastrophe for the planet. People all over the world need to take action *now* to change energy-use patterns to prevent the future climate change that may create hardships for generations to come. Global warming can be confronted by changing the way we produce and use energy and by controlling population growth.

The world is attempting to deal with global warming through the Kyoto Protocol (1997), which formalized a voluntary set of agreements reached at the Rio Summit in 1992. Generally, the agreement entails limiting greenhouse gases to 1990 levels or below. In 2004, the world crossed a historic threshold with Russia's ratification of Kyoto, which, along with the ratifications of 130 other countries (excluding the US), turned the Kyoto Protocol into a formal treaty. But treaty law lacks a strong enforcement mechanism—and this planet's future is too important to rest on voluntary compliance and promises. A nation's right to do what it pleases ends when it negatively impacts other nations. Global government is the best way to handle the implementation of the laws necessary

to address global warming. A democratic world legislature could mandate rules applicable to all countries that would describe permissible levels of emissions of greenhouse gases. These laws would be enforced by a world executive, while global courts would interpret the complexities of global environmental law. Through a democratic process that would engage the world's people, a global government could transform the ineffective Kyoto Protocol into enforceable law.

The world's environment is the life support system of the whole planet; it is a shared resource of all nations, and the peoples of this world are its sovereign. The control of this life support system can best be done in a coordinated manner by a democratic global government that creates rules that bring order out of chaos and promote the common good over the greed of the few.

Any scientist can testify that a dead ocean means a dead planet. . . . No national law, no national precautions can save the planet. The ocean, more than any other part of our planet . . . is a classic example of the absolute need for international, global action.

—Thor Heyerdahl