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We the People of Earth: Toward Global Democracy

WE CONFRONT DAUNTING TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CHALLENGES

hobbled by twentieth century institutions. In a world ever more interdependent, deepening global-scale risks – climate change, financial instability, terrorism, to name a few – threaten the planetary commonweal, even the continuity of civilization. Yet coherent and timely responses lie beyond the grasp of our myopic and disputatious state-centric political order. Closing this perilous gap between obsolete geo-politics and emerging geo-realities delineates an urgent political endeavor: constructing a legitimate and effective system of world governance. Key steps on that path involve reforming the United Nations and nurturing new venues for the meaningful exercise of global citizenship.

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The challenge

We live in a time of profound transformation as an emerging global system interlaces peoples, generations, and species into a single community of fate. In the interregnum between the old order now fading and a new one in the throes of birth, dangers of unprecedented magnitude and complexity loom. At the same time, the nascent planetary phase of civilization opens critical opportunities for social evolution in the decades ahead.¹ The degree of peril – and richness of possibility – depends on our prospects for organizing collective life on the planet under an ecological and humane purview.

How then shall we approach governance of our global society? An adequate answer must address a fundamental contradiction of this era: the holism of our collective challenges versus the fragmentation of our political order. A growing litany of critical supra-national problems – climate change, financial stability, cultural conflict, food security, oil depletion, economic globalization, species loss, and the list goes on – calls for coordinated policy at the scale of the problem within a new paradigm of development that puts concern for long-term sustainability at its core. However, the current international system, based on the narrow interests of sovereign nation-states, is ill-suited to the imperative for integrated, visionary action.

Of course, many decisions can and should be delegated to the most local level feasible (following the “principle of subsidiarity”). But a global layer must be added to the nested system of governance if we are to confront the irreducible risks of this planetary phase and exploit the opportunities for civilization that it offers. Without effective world governance, much like a failed state with no legitimate authority to steer the body politic, the world community will continue to drift toward calamity. Though now inadequate and obsolete, the modern world system based on the sanctity of the nation-state tenaciously holds on, even as its sway erodes, and regional formations, transnational corporations, and civil society organizations diminish its power. During the age of nationalism, states consolidated the fragmented polities within their borders; analogously, the integration of peoples into a coherent global formation is now a major issue on the historical agenda of this age. Thus, building world democratic governance has become an essential political project that commands our attention with increasing urgency.

Current reality

What has been achieved that we can build on? The United Nations, backbone of the international system, stands as a crowning achievement of international cooperation. The humanistic principles enshrined in its Charter of 1945, and expanded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, serve both as ethical beacons and pragmatic foundation for international law. Spurred by civil society advocates, the United Nations has championed the least fortunate, moderated environmental depredation, promoted justice (through the International Court of Justice, for example), and advanced the cause of peace and disarmament. On the other hand, the fragmentation of the UN’s sprawling family of agencies crippled its effectiveness, and the subservience of collective to national interest compromised the ideal captured in the

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opening words of the organization’s founding charter: “we the peoples of the United Nations.” The new supranational level of governance envisioned by many of its founders soon became another arena for nationalist struggle.²

Governed by a General Assembly, where each state has one vote, and a powerful Security Council, with each of the five permanent members holding veto power, the UN process tends to advance the interests of strong nations. The Bretton Woods financial institutions (International Monetary Fund and the World Bank), created in 1944 as independent special agencies, are governed through a shareholder system giving the largest economies the most say, so that these institutions often serve as instruments of the richest countries. The independence of the IMF and WB leaves the UN’s own Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) with little influence on financial and economic matters. It has taken the global scale of the current financial crisis to draw attention back to the fateful cleavage between the institutions that approve plans and those with the wherewithal to implement them. In 1994, the World Trade Organization was formed as an independent entity (a decision consonant with the neo-liberal ideology then hegemonic), though its actions – and inactions – ripple throughout the global system, undermining the potential coherence of international governance structures.

This fragmented, state-centric potpourri of international entities is ill-suited for sustained, integrated, and just global action. The lack of a functional global governance order allows the strongest states and their interests (corporate, strategic, and so on) to dominate the world arena following agendas that neither the UN system nor civil society organizations are able to effectively challenge. The diligent efforts of countless committed individuals within the multilateral institutions, and countless more who push and prod from without through civil society activism, cannot compensate for these structural deficiencies. Incremental successes do not aggregate to the scale required to mitigate and defuse perilous challenges to the integrity of the planetary social-ecological system. Notably missing from the world stage are democratic forums where global citizens can voice concerns and demand accountability, and, crucial to success, are empowered to represent the emerging political community of Earth. In an era of climate disruption that demands urgent transformation of the global economy, this “democratic deficit” is no longer only a question of justice, but of survival.

Contours of a new agenda

As twentieth century crises prompted the formation of today’s multilateral institutions, brewing twenty-first century crises spur us to modernize the system of global governance. However, instead of the reactive institution-building of the past, rapidly unfolding and possibly irreversible planetary dangers require proactive governance innovations, before a systemic crisis hits with full fury. As events develop and problems sharpen, propitious moments could arise for creating an entirely new architecture. For now, though, our task is to pursue strategies that move in the right direction in order to set the stage for subsequent adoption of a more comprehensive alternative system. The process can start with reforms to the United Nations, while deferring root-and-branch re-chartering to a later moment when it might appear as a logical and necessary step.³ The basic principles of democracy, effectiveness, and account-

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ability should guide the formulation of sound proposals for a revised global governance system, providing legitimacy and a counterweight to the risk of authoritarian hijacking.

One specific change to work towards is the creation of a bicameral system for the United Nations consisting of the existing General Assembly representing nations and a new World Parliament elected through universal suffrage and representing the citizens of the world.⁴ With the example of the evolution of the European Parliament as a guide, the fledgling World Parliament could begin modestly as an advisory popular assembly, postponing steps to strengthen it to full legislative authority and thereby increasing its political feasibility since political leaders would be asked to cede not their own, but their successors' power. Yet, even as an advisory assembly, the parliament, as the only popularly elected body at the global level, would bring enhanced accountability to the global system. In taking up transnational issues, it would offer a crucible for a truly planetary political identity to coalesce, with its democratic structure validating its claim to authority in responding to future global crises.

With the creation and gradual empowerment of a directly elected World Parliament, it will become possible to envision deeper reforms, such as the democratization of the Security Council (perhaps by election of members from the two UN chambers, periodic rotation, and no permanent membership or veto power) and the empowerment of ECOSOC (or creation of a new council) as a locus of UN oversight and authority. To the degree legitimate global authority comes to rest within a democratized UN, it becomes plausible to diminish the dependence on financial contributions from member states that has stymied effective collective action. Globalized funding mechanisms, a condition for a governance system robust enough for the common problems we now face, must be created, possibly by taxing carbon, airline traffic, and currency transactions (a mere quarter penny levy on each of the \$1.9 trillion traded daily would yield hundreds of billions of dollars annually).⁵

Moving forward

In the near term, the path to a World Parliament could begin without the UN's official imprimatur. For example, a broad group widely representative of international civil society, in collaboration with sympathetic governments, could organize a global summit to lay out the logistics of electing, housing, financing, and operating the parliament.⁶ Once free and fair elections are held, under an appropriate monitoring system set forth in the summit's treaty, a novel body of citizens would come into existence which would command immediate attention and respect.

There can be no definitive roadmap for the kind of global governance system sketched here. While we have stressed advancing a world assembly as a key focus, many other elements are critical, such as creating agencies capable of effective and timely action on critical environmental problems, human rights, and demilitarization.⁷ In light of uncertainties, an effective strategy for change will need to be multi-dimensional, ranging from systemic proposals to specific reform campaigns, and adaptive, building alliances along the way and adjusting to the dynamically changing circumstances of the global era. This interplay of change, mobilization, and consciousness is

the social energy fueling transformation.

As with any democracy, the legitimacy of global governance rests with engaged citizens who demand rights and assume responsibilities. The globalization of the human project sets the historic condition for a corresponding enlargement of identity and community. Ultimately, the prospects for a worthy planetary civilization arising from the turbulence of transition depend on the unknown of collective human agency: the future shape and scale of a movement of global citizens for such a world-historic shift in awareness and governance.⁸

Endnotes

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Explore Joining GTI

“As with any
democracy, the
legitimacy of
global governance
rests with engaged
citizens who demand
rights and assume
responsibilities.”

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