

Sharing the world's resources

An introduction

Contents

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Share The World's Resources

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Introduction

As the 21st Century unfolds, humanity is faced with a stark reality. Following the world stock market crash in 2008, people everywhere are questioning the unbridled greed, selfishness and competition that has driven the dominant economic model for decades. But the economic meltdown is just one of a long series of interrelated crises that have combined to leave billions of people in the Global South without access to the basic necessities of life. As the devastating costs of climate change and financial turmoil continue to unfold, it is no longer possible to ignore the urgent need for transforming our social, political and economic structures along more just and sustainable lines.

To meet the challenges that lie ahead, this booklet outlines the need for a new understanding of what it means for humanity to evolve and progress. Our economic systems are based on outdated assumptions about human nature, and must instead become rooted in universal values and ethics that reflect our highest ideals. Scientists now accept that human beings are naturally predisposed to cooperate and share – and these simple principles hold the key to transforming economic relationships between governments.

Nothing less than a program for survival is required, based on a clear understanding of the interdependence of all nations and the structural causes of poverty, inequality and climate change. We urgently need to implement new strategies for managing and sustainably consuming the world's natural resources, and to ensure a more equitable distribution of essential goods and services. The task ahead is unprecedented and formidable, requiring a radical transformation of the global economy – but this is the only way to co-create a more peaceful and harmonious world without insecurity or deprivation.

This booklet gives an introduction to the crises we face, outlining a way forward for governments that can be easily supported by campaigners, students and concerned citizens. In the simplest terms, it explains how our pursuit of national self-interest and international competitiveness is self-defeating, and how commercial markets are failing to secure basic needs for all people. It suggests alternative economic practices that can enable people to actively participate in civic life; it advocates a short-term program of emergency redistribution that could rapidly eliminate hunger and needless deprivation; and it outlines the necessary longer-term structural reforms of the global economy. Together, these ideas provide a practical vision of a sustainable future world guided by the enduring principles of cooperation and sharing.

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We are facing an unparalleled series of crises. The old obsession with protecting national interests, the drive to maximise profits at all costs, and the materialistic pursuit of economic growth has failed to benefit the world's poor and led to catastrophic consequences for planet earth. The incidence of hunger is more widespread than ever before in human history, surpassing 1 billion people in 2009 despite the record harvests of food being reaped in recent years. At least 1.4 billion people live in extreme poverty, a number equivalent to more than four times the population of the United States. One out of every five people does not have access to clean drinking water. More than a billion people lack access to basic health care services, while over a billion people – the majority of them women – lack a basic education. Every week, more than 115,000 people move into a slum somewhere in Africa, Asia or Latin America. Every day, around 50,000 people die needlessly as a result of being denied the essentials of life.

In response to these immense challenges, international aid has proven largely ineffective, inadequate, and incapable of enabling governments to secure the basic needs of all citizens. Developed countries were cutting back on foreign aid commitments even before the economic downturn, while the agreed aid target of 0.7 percent of rich countries' GDP has never been met since the target was conceived 40 years ago. The Millennium Development Goals of merely halving the incidence of hunger and extreme poverty, even if reached by 2015, will still leave hundreds of millions of people in a state of undernourishment and deprivation. When several trillion dollars was rapidly summoned to bail out failed banks in late 2008, it became impossible to understand why the governments of rich nations could not afford a fraction of this sum to 'bail out' the world's poor.

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The enduring gap between rich and poor, both within and between countries, is a crisis that lies at the heart of our political and economic problems. For decades, 20 percent of the world population have controlled 80 percent of the economy and resources. By 2008, more than half of the world's assets were owned by the richest 2 percent of adults, while the bottom half of the world adult population owned only 1 percent of wealth. The vast discrepancies in living standards between the Global North and South, which provides no basis for a stable and secure future, can only be redressed through a more equitable

distribution of resources at the international level. This will require more inclusive structures of global governance and a new economic framework that goes far beyond existing development efforts to reduce poverty, decrease poor country debt and provide overseas aid.

In both the richest and poorest nations, commercialisation has infiltrated every aspect of life and compromised spiritual, ethical and moral values. The globalised consumer culture holds no higher aspiration than the accumulation of material wealth, even though studies have shown that rising income fails to significantly increase an individual's well-being once a minimum standard of living is secured. The organisation of society as a competitive struggle for social position through wealth and acquisition has led to rampant individualism and the consequences of crime, disaffection and the disintegration of family and community ties. Yet governments continue to measure success in terms of economic growth, pursuing ever-greater levels of GDP – regardless of the harmful social consequences of a consumption-driven economy.

Although the crises we face are interlinked and multidimensional, the G8 and other rich nations offer no vision of change towards a more sustainable world. The old formula, based on deregulation, privatisation, and the liberalisation of trade and finance, was unmasked by the economic crisis and shown to be incapable of promoting lasting human development. Multilateral institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have failed the world's poor, and the myth that economic growth will eventually benefit all has long been shattered. As we also know, endless growth is unsustainable on a planet with finite resources. This impasse is further compounded by ecological degradation and climate change – the side-effects of economic 'progress' that disproportionately affect the poorest people who are least to blame for causing these multiple crises.

We urgently need a new paradigm for human advancement, beginning with a fundamental reordering of world priorities: an immediate end to hunger, the securing of universal basic needs, and a rapid safeguarding of the environment and atmosphere. No longer can national self-interest, international competition and excessive commercialisation form the foundation of our global economic framework. As the following sections in this booklet make clear, a sustainable and peaceful future begins with a fairer sharing of the world's resources, requiring a shift in power relations from North to South, and from financial and commercial interests to the world's majority population.

The multiple crises that confront the world are urging nations to acknowledge our global interdependence, and to accept that humankind is part of an extended family that shares the same basic needs and rights. This holistic understanding of our relationship to each other and the planet transcends nations and cultures, and builds on ethics and values common to faith groups around the world. It also reflects the strong sense of solidarity and internationalism which lies at the heart of the global justice movement.

The first true political expression of our global unity was embodied in the establishment of the United Nations. Since then, international laws have been devised to help govern relationships between nations and uphold human rights. Cross-border issues such as climate change, global poverty and conflict are uniting world public opinion and compelling governments to cooperate and plan for our collective future. The globalisation of knowledge and cultures, and the ease with which we can communicate and travel around the world, has further served to unite diverse people in distant countries.

But the fact of our global unity is still not sufficiently expressed in our political and economic structures. The international community has yet to ensure that basic human needs, such as access to staple food, clean water and primary healthcare, are universally secured. This cannot be achieved until nations cooperate more effectively, share their natural and economic resources, and ensure that global governance mechanisms reflect and directly support our common needs and rights. At present, the main institutions that govern the global economy are failing to work on behalf of humanity as a whole. In particular, the major bodies that uphold the Bretton Woods mandate (the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organisation) are all widely criticised for being undemocratic and furthering the interests of large corporations and rich countries.

A more inclusive international framework urgently needs to be established through the United Nations (UN) and its agencies. Although in need of being significantly strengthened and renewed, the UN is the only multilateral governmental agency with the necessary experience and resources to coordinate the process of restructuring the world economy. The UN Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Rights have been adopted by all member states and embody some of the highest ideals expressed by humanity. If the UN is rendered more democratic and entrusted with more authority, it would be in a position to foster the growing sense of community between nations and harmonise global economic relationships.

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Being Human

Our modern economic principles can be traced back to the moral philosophy of Enlightenment thinkers during the emergence of industrial society in Britain. Drawing on the ideas of these early theorists, mainstream economists have assumed that human beings are inherently selfish, competitive, acquisitive and individualistic. Such notions about human nature are now firmly established as the principles upon which modern economies are built, and have been used to justify the proliferation of free markets as the best way to organise societies.

Particularly since the 1980s, these basic economic assumptions have increasingly dominated public policy and pushed aside ethical considerations in the pursuit of efficiency, short-term growth and profit maximisation. But the 'neoliberal' ideology that institutionalised greed and self-interest was fundamentally discredited by the collapse of banks and a world stock market crash in 2008. As a consequence, the global financial crisis reinvigorated a long-standing debate about the importance of morality and ethics in relation to the market economy.

At the same time, recent experiments by evolutionary biologists and neuro-cognitive scientists have demonstrated that human beings are biologically predisposed to cooperate and share. Without this evolutionary advantage, we may not have survived as a species. Anthropological findings have long supported this view of human nature with case studies revealing that sharing and gifting often formed the basis of economic life in traditional societies, leading individuals to prioritise their social relationships above all other concerns. As a whole, these findings challenge many of the core assumptions of classical economic theory – in particular the firmly held belief that people in any society will always act competitively to maximise their economic interests.

The time is now ripe to overhaul our outdated assumptions about human nature, to reconnect our public life with fundamental values, and to rethink the role of markets in achieving the common good. As a starting point, integrating the principle of sharing into our economic system would have far-reaching implications for how we distribute and consume the planet's wealth and resources. If humanity is to survive the formidable challenges that define our generation – including climate change, diminishing fossil fuels and global conflict – it is necessary to forge new ethical understandings that embrace our collective values and global interdependence. Most of all, it is time to build a more sustainable, cooperative and equitable international economy – one that reflects and supports what it really means to be human.

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For countless generations, economic activities and social relationships within small towns and communities have been closely interrelated. Local residents often provided most of the goods and services needed in their community, and many small farms still base their agricultural practices on sharing seeds, land or produce with families and neighbours. These traditional ways of living and working enabled members of a community to participate in local economic activity and share its benefits more equitably.

But sustainable, inclusive and locally-based economies are being rapidly displaced as a result of economic globalisation. Increasingly, economic activity is concentrated in the hands of a small number of multinational corporations that dominate the production and supply of most commodities. The financial benefits from their activities accumulate to small groups of distant shareholders, and the primary focus of these enterprises is to maximise profits – often regardless of social or environmental consequences.

Despite this growing concentration of financial power, local cooperatives and mutual enterprises continue to redistribute economic activity back into towns and villages, enabling more people to share in the productive work available. City gardens and farmers markets, where people grow and consume food locally, are now growing in popularity across most wealthy countries. It is also common for people to volunteer their time to community projects, and to adopt more sustainable modes of living by consuming responsibly. This trend towards ‘localisation’ is often facilitated through the use of alternative currencies, time banking, community supported agriculture, renewable energy projects and other initiatives that serve to bind local regions together.

Governments can facilitate this transformation by supporting policies that increase the control that citizens have over their local economies. Activists and non-governmental organisations have long campaigned for governments to direct more funding to local initiatives, including the creation of local banks, investing in local green energy projects, and regulating large corporations so that small businesses can flourish.

Strengthening local economies also has the potential to significantly reduce poverty in the developing world. For example, by encouraging the building of small rural and city farms, millions of people could benefit from sustainable local food production. An increased focus on domestic markets would also boost opportunities for stable employment in local industries. International aid could assist in this process by empowering people to re-establish local economies that supply many goods and services to the community. In this way, development efforts can directly focus on securing basic needs, rather than upholding the unequal power relationships that underlie a globalised system of finance and trade.

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More self-reliant local communities are a key part of the transition to a people-centred, environmentally sustainable way of life. But the revival of local economies must be part of a wider transformation of the global economy – a process that should also be guided by the principles of cooperation and sharing. Some governments already share resources nationally through systems of welfare and the provision of social safety nets. By redistributing public revenues, state welfare systems often provide education, healthcare, housing and social security as a basic human right. In most industrialised countries, society as a whole effectively takes some responsibility for providing essential resources and services to the underprivileged, the elderly and those who cannot afford them.

Yet the basic welfare taken for granted by those in the richest countries is still a dream for the majority world population. For over 60 years, the international community has pledged itself to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which stipulates that: “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, medical care and necessary social services...” But despite decades of international commitments, overseas development assistance remains insufficient, misdirected and often provided with conditions that benefit the donor countries. Relationships between nations are still governed by self-interest and competition, and the urgent need to share the world’s resources more equitably is hampered by an outmoded system of international politics and inadequate structures of global governance.

The decades-long failure of the international community to create a fairer economy is responsible for the preventable hardship and death of millions of people every year – creating more suffering than any war or environmental catastrophe in human history. In light of the economic and climate crises that are already exacerbating this critical situation, it is clear that united action on an unprecedented scale is the only option left to humanity. A crucial first step is for governments to redistribute the resources needed to immediately eradicate hunger and extreme poverty. This fundamental reordering of global priorities should form the first part of a more comprehensive program of economic reform that can provide universal access to essential goods and services, and end conflict over the world’s natural resources.

Emergency redistribution

An emergency program of international redistribution is only a short-term measure and not a comprehensive solution. But since restructuring the global economy and its institutions requires a lengthy process of negotiation and reform, an immediate transfer of resources to the poorer areas of the world is the only practical way for governments to eliminate hunger and unnecessary deprivation within a short number of years. If the political will to cooperate and share resources is mobilised as part of a new

culture of international solidarity and generosity, this program could replace the insufficient Millennium Development Goals of merely halving the incidence of hunger and extreme poverty by 2015. An ambitious global assistance program of this scope would surpass all previous development efforts and require firm commitments from governments to do whatever it takes to achieve the desired goal, regardless of cost implications.

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In the first instance, the responsibility for mobilising the needed resources rests with the governments of more affluent countries. These nations must proceed in a spirit of altruism, and any resources donated must be free of all conditions that favour the donor countries. Where possible they should be provided directly to communities and utilised in a way that respects and empowers local people, local economies and traditional cultures. This would lessen the possibility of corruption by political, economic or commercial interests, as is often the case with the current system of overseas aid.

It would be in the interest of all responsible governments to redirect the services of their military personnel and equipment to assist with transportation and to help provide humanitarian support in recipient countries. If the global public are motivated to participate in the program, their assistance could be coordinated through local voluntary and non-governmental organisations. The detailed knowledge and experience of many UN agencies would also be invaluable in supporting these operations.

A similar initiative to transfer essential resources from ‘North to South’ was first proposed in 1980 by the Independent Commission on International Development Issues (the Brandt Report) but, despite widespread approval, the necessary political will to implement an emergency program was lacking. Humanity cannot afford this level of complacency again; not to act is to condemn millions of people to needless deprivation and starvation.

Without fundamental reform of the institutions, structures and practices that determine global economic activity, it is impossible to create a fair and sustainable world. An emergency program of redistribution must be followed by measures that reduce dependency on international assistance and enable countries to become largely self-sufficient in securing their basic needs.

For decades, development policy has been driven by the belief that control of the economy should be transferred from the public to the private sector. Just as common land was progressively 'enclosed' in the Middle Ages, other shared resources such as seeds, information and technology are increasingly privatised and controlled by multinational corporations. International rules are put in place (enforced by the World Trade Organisation) to help maintain this market-based system that encourages private ownership over public resources in order to profit from their use and exploitation. In a similar way, it is now commonplace for healthcare, education and water to be provided by private companies, making such basic services and utilities inaccessible to those who cannot afford them. Staple foods, traditionally grown for personal and local consumption, are now highly commoditised and often priced out of reach for those without sufficient purchasing power – leading to rising levels of hunger, food price crises and civil unrest in many low-income countries.

The purely market-based approach has consistently failed to secure basic needs for the world's majority poor. Alternative mechanisms must ensure that the poorest people are guaranteed immediate access to the essentials of life as a human right. Given the interdependency of nations and the uneven distribution of the world's natural resources and economic power, this presents a huge challenge for the international community to develop more inclusive systems of global governance guided by the principle of sharing.

Essential resources, goods and services

Economic sharing can be directly applied to how we manage the world's natural resources. Water, seeds, oil, gas, forests, minerals and even the atmosphere are all forms of 'global commons' that can be shared more equitably and sustainably. One option is to ensure that such resources are recognised as a shared commons and protected through a 'trust' or similar international mechanism. If such an agreement is negotiated between nations or through a global body (such as the United Nations), a shared resource could be managed in the interests of all citizens, protected from exploitation by the private sector, and managed in an environmentally sustainable manner that preserves it for future generations.

Other basic goods and services that are essential for life and health should also be made accessible to all through more effective forms of public provision. Where required, governments can be offered assistance from UN bodies to provide welfare services to their

citizens, and this could gradually replace private sector alternatives that the poor often cannot afford. If given a clear mandate and the necessary resources, specialist agencies such as the World Health Organisation and UNESCO could facilitate universal access to primary healthcare and education. It is similarly possible for multilateral agencies to promote access to essential utilities by, for example, establishing renewable energy, water and sanitation infrastructure and services.

“the global economy must be primarily geared towards securing basic human needs”

At the national level, legal and structural reforms could ensure that land is made available for small-scale agriculture and public housing programs. In particular, staple food can be grown locally by smallholder and family farmers to help ensure food security, without the emphasis on maximum profit and scale that is the overriding objective of industrial agriculture. UN agencies such as the World Food Program and the Food and Agriculture Organisation are in a position to support such programs by redistributing the resources required to build capacity for local food security. Similar reforms are necessary to provide resources for building adequate shelter for the poor in both rural and urban areas, especially for the millions of people living in the burgeoning slums of rapidly-urbanising cities.

In all cases, the focus should be on assisting nations in increasing their own capacity to provide these essential goods and services in the longer term. This will require a significant rethink of Western notions of 'development', a more holistic vision of man's relationship to the natural environment, and a reconceptualisation of financial measures like GDP and income per capita as the main yardsticks for national and social progress. The inevitable consequence of such a shift in policy is a radical reform of existing mechanisms of international trade, finance and development aid; the cancellation of unsustainable debt burdens; the rolling back of privatisation and the intellectual property rights regime; and a major restructuring or decommissioning of existing international institutions such as the IMF, World Bank and WTO. The establishment and governance of a fairer international economic order should be coordinated by a reformed, democratic and more effective UN system. If the global economy is to serve the interests of all people, it must be primarily geared towards securing basic human needs in perpetuity – founded upon a genuine form of multilateral cooperation and economic sharing.

Despite the increasingly urgent need for change, policymakers – particularly in wealthy countries – seem unwilling to re-examine their outdated assumptions about how the economy should work. Progressive ideas are rejected and agreements to cut CO2 emissions, negotiate fairer trade rules or reduce military armaments all fail to achieve the desired goals. Time is running out – more than half the world is suffering in abject poverty, the threat of global terrorism and war continues to escalate, and we are edging ever closer to irreversible environmental damage.

As world leaders seek to resurrect the old economic order, millions of people are calling for a better world that ensures all people live in dignity, with the basics guaranteed. Social movements in every country are campaigning for justice and a more humane form of development – one that protects the vulnerable, sustains the environment and promotes peaceful international relations. Campaigners have long protested against the dictates of those international financial institutions that favour the wealthiest nations, enforce an unjust global trading system and allow the richest societies to benefit from the debt burdens of poorer countries. They condemn the activities of large corporations that dominate the policy-making process, externalise costs, and promote greed and wasteful consumerism. They envisage a more inclusive world order in which people live productive and fulfilling lives, where local communities flourish, and where nations cooperate for the global common good.

“world public opinion is considered by many to be the new superpower in international affairs”

This growing, diverse movement identifies its interests with global society as a whole and not just the citizens of any one nation. Through utilising the communications revolution and adopting collective forms of spontaneous action across national borders, it is considered by many to be the new superpower in world affairs. The movement is still in its infancy and disparate, and its voice remains uncoordinated. But when fused and directed, world public opinion has the potential to influence government decisions through its demands for fundamental, far-reaching change.

In response to the interlinked crises that we face, recommendations for transforming the global economy are now commonplace. All that is lacking is the political will to act. It is therefore up to the people of goodwill in every nation to identify and unite around common themes, and to influence policymaking at every opportunity. The principle of sharing presents, in

simple terms, a way forward that can help connect progressive campaigners and provide a practical tool for influencing political and economic reform, acting as both a guide for policymakers as well as a rallying platform for activists.

There is no justifiable excuse for world leaders to continue with business as usual: under a broad coalition of civil society, the time to act is now.

A human perspective

Sharing is a simple solution to complex problems that reflects the moral values and ethics that should underpin the fabric of society. Everyone understands and practices sharing within their family or community. By relating the principle of sharing to social and economic policy, it simplifies and brings to life important global issues and complex economic thinking in a way that anyone can relate to.

Moving beyond ‘isms’

Unlike capitalism, socialism or communism, sharing is not a dogmatic, ‘one size fits all’ ideology. Nor is it a set of prescribed methods or processes implemented from the ‘top down’ by an unaccountable or absentee authority. Applying this simple principle to the field of political economy navigates between the divisive ‘isms’ that still drive much of the debate on economic and social rights.

A uniting approach

As a campaign platform, banner or slogan, sharing has the potential to unite the world’s environmental, peace and justice movements under a single call for change. The principle of sharing pertains to the interconnected global issues that all these movements seek to highlight, whilst resonating with the ideals of faith groups and concerned citizens in all corners of the globe.

A positive proposal

Sharing constitutes an active, solutions-based strategy that goes beyond analysing and critiquing the existing problems in the world. The positive approach that sharing embodies also avoids the potential for conflict with other ideas that can arise from an oppositional or ‘anti’ stance, such as anti-globalisation or anti-capitalism.

Guiding policy

The principle of sharing is a basic human value that policymakers can instinctively grasp and advocate for. Not only can it be adopted by civil society to hold political leaders to account, but it also provides a moral compass for governments that can help inform their position on a range of issues and guide the process of economic reform.

Share The World's Resources

Humanity has reached an impasse. Despite ongoing development efforts since the foundation of the United Nations, the international community has failed to end global poverty or prevent environmental degradation. More than half the world still struggles without sufficient access to staple food, clean water or essential medicine. The policies that drive the global economy have also magnified the gap between rich and poor, led to conflict over the planet's natural resources, and resulted in an ecological crisis that threatens life on earth.

A new blueprint for a fair and sustainable world is urgently needed. Nation states must move beyond the old pursuits of self-interest and competition, and embrace an alternative approach to managing the world's resources based upon the principles of sharing and cooperation. At this critical juncture in human history, only a united global public can pressure governments to reorder their distorted priorities, cooperate more effectively, and share the resources of the world more equitably. A crucial first step is for governments to implement an international program of emergency assistance to eliminate hunger and unnecessary deprivation, followed by a longer-term transformation of the global economy in order to secure an adequate standard of living for all within ecological limits.

This booklet presents the key ideas that form the basis of research and campaign activities at Share The World's Resources – an advocacy organisation with consultative status at the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.