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A primer on global economic sharing

Share
The World's Resources



June 2014

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Share The World's Resources (STWR) is a civil society organisation with consultative status at the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC). We call for extensive reforms to the world economy to ensure a fairer sharing of wealth, power and resources within and between nations. For more information about our work, visit www.sharing.org.

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Introduction

Humanity is in the midst of a global emergency. The policies that drive the world economy have 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.

We urgently need to move beyond the restrictive political and economic ideologies of the past and embrace solutions that meet the common needs of people in all nations - which will be impossible to achieve without some degree of economic sharing both within and between countries. In an increasingly unequal and unsustainable world in which all governments need to drastically re-order their priorities, a call for economic sharing embodies the need for justice, human rights and sound environmental stewardship to guide policymaking at every level of society.

This report gives a concise introduction to the principle of sharing in relation to the interconnected global crises we face, and makes a simple case for how the world's wealth, power and resources can be shared more equitably and sustainably.

Part 1 introduces the political economy of sharing, and highlights the many broad and diverse expressions of sharing throughout the world. As these examples demonstrate, sharing has long been central to human civilisation and integral to the healthy functioning of societies. But as systems of sharing are being increasingly undermined, it is critical that we support and scale up the process of sharing within nations and internationally.

Part 2 outlines how humanity's continued failure to share is largely responsible for creating what can only be described as a global emergency. This includes the growing tragedy of poverty amidst plenty, the climate and ecological crisis in all its dimensions, and the intensifying conflict over the world's finite natural resources. Altogether, this leaves the international community with one remaining option: to finally place sharing, cooperation and ecological preservation at the forefront of policymaking and global governance.

Part 3 proposes an alternative approach to managing the world's resources based upon economic sharing and international cooperation. This process must begin with an unprecedented programme of humanitarian relief to prevent life-threatening deprivation and needless poverty-related deaths as a foremost priority, followed by a major restructuring of the global economy to address the structural causes of our present social, political, economic and environmental crises.

As the conclusion of this report makes clear, we cannot wait for governments to rethink the management of an economic system built upon massive inequality, unsustainable consumption and competition over scarce resources. Given the entrenched vested interests and structural barriers that obstruct progress, the hope for a better world rests with the participation of the global public in a call for reform that extends beyond national borders. Hence it is imperative that millions more people recognise what is at stake and take the lead as proponents for change – a solution to the world's problems depends on our united demand for a just, sustainable and peaceful future.

Part 1: What is economic sharing?

Many examples demonstrate how economic sharing has long been central to human civilisation by strengthening the social fabric of communities, improving levels of wellbeing across society and promoting social equity. But despite such notable exceptions, the fact of our global unity is still not sufficiently expressed in our international economic and political structures. The critical question facing humanity today is whether we choose to support and scale up these systems of sharing on local, national and global levels, or whether we allow them to be further undermined and dismantled by those who are ideologically opposed to putting sharing at the centre of policymaking.

The political economy of sharing

Contrary to the common misconception that people are individualistic and selfish by nature, anthropologists have shown that gifting and sharing has long formed the basis of community relationships in societies across the world. A recent spate of scientific research has built on this evidence to demonstrate that as human beings we are naturally predisposed to cooperate and share in order to maximise our chances of survival and collective wellbeing. Without the act of sharing and reciprocity, there would be no social foundations upon which to build societies and economies.¹

In this light, it is not surprising that the principles of sharing and equality are important components of many of the world's religions, as well as many secular movements such as humanism. In broadly similar ways, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and numerous other faiths all expound the importance of sharing wealth and other resources fairly, as well as the need to protect the vulnerable and those who are less well off in society. For millennia, the principle of sharing has aligned closely with the moral values and ethics that should underpin the fabric of society.

Yet despite the prevalence of sharing throughout the natural world and in family life, we have largely failed to create a global community of nations in which sharing is embodied in our international economic and political structures. Rather than seeing the family of nations as a unit and accepting that the principle of sharing must play a key role in governing our collective use of available resources, the global economy has been built on the opposing and misguided objects of national self-interest, aggressive competition and materialistic acquisition.²

After centuries of colonialism and the exploitation of weaker countries by the more powerful, a tremendous imbalance exists in living standards between the so-called developed and developing worlds, which is a crisis that lies at the heart of present-day world tensions. As the global economy increasingly hits natural resource limits and planetary thresholds, a very real threat to human survival is now posed by escalating conflicts over land, energy reserves and other key industrial inputs, notwithstanding the ecological consequences of overusing the Earth's finite resources.

Global democracy

If our collective failure to share resources within and among nations is responsible for increasing inequalities and exacerbating many of the other crises we face, then it stands to reason that we need to find ways of reforming our political and economic systems by bringing them more in line with the principle of sharing. From such a common sense perspective, the term 'economic sharing' can be used to describe the application of this principle to how economies

are organised and resources are distributed, which could include everything from land and energy to knowledge and technology. Furthermore, the concept of sharing applies to democratic forms of governance in terms of how equally power is distributed both nationally and globally, which has potentially dramatic implications for participatory politics and global democracy – not least for the major institutions that determine the rules of economic globalisation.³

In both economic and political terms, ‘sharing’ can be a direct path to the fulfilment of basic human needs and rights, and is naturally aligned with the concepts of social and economic justice. As long recognised by progressive campaigners, social justice cannot be achieved by market mechanisms or charitable giving and requires the implementation of redistributive government policies, effective laws and regulations. Relating the principle of sharing with economic policy in this way is important for debates around income and wealth inequality, in which it points to the need for distributive justice and long-term structural solutions that cut to the heart of how we organise societies.⁴

However, economic sharing is not an ideological construct or ‘ism’ that is accompanied by a specific set of policies or procedures. The principle of sharing is ubiquitous in society and precedes the doctrines of capitalism and socialism by millennia, hence it is not beholden to any current or historical political philosophy. This is not to say that existing political concepts and economic policies do not reflect or even embody the principle of sharing, as they do in many cases.⁵ Applying this simple principle to the field of political economy can also help to navigate between the divisive ‘isms’ that still drive much of the debate on how States can guarantee social and economic rights for all people.⁶

Humanity urgently needs to move beyond the restrictive ideologies of the past and embrace solutions that meet the common needs of people in all nations, both now and for future generations - which will be impossible to achieve without some degree of economic sharing. In an increasingly unequal and unsustainable world in which all governments need to drastically re-order their priorities, a call for economic sharing embodies the need for justice, human rights and sound environmental stewardship to guide policymaking at all levels of society.

Sharing locally and nationally

Through its many expressions, the process of economic sharing already underpins a huge variety of practices, institutions and policies that operate at the local and national level. One of the most familiar examples of sharing is in the form of charitable giving by individuals and organisations, or else through volunteering

efforts and other philanthropic activities. In many ways, charity constitutes an elementary form of sharing, albeit an important one given the entrenched social and environmental problems that exist across the world. However, sharing in the form of philanthropy is widely criticised for its lack of democratic transparency, and for addressing the symptoms of inequality and not the underlying structural causes. For such reasons, charity and philanthropy is often regarded as a substitute for real justice that allows governments to escape some of their broader responsibilities to citizens and the world as a whole.⁷

Other well-recognised examples of economic sharing on the local level include the use of land in agricultural communities, which was traditionally shared by farmers who managed it cooperatively as a commons. The right to save and share seeds has also played an integral role in farming practices around the world, even though major agribusiness corporations are relentlessly pushing to outlaw this practice through patenting laws.⁸ Despite the increasing exclusion of small-scale and family farms that results from the current globalised food system, the tradition of sharing is also promoted in community supported agriculture (CSA) projects in which the responsibilities, risks and rewards of producing food are shared between farmers and the local community.⁹

In recent years, a resurgence of community-led initiatives in both rich industrialised and less developed countries embody a process of economic sharing in different ways. These include the many cooperatives in the food and retail sectors, where employees participate in the decision-making process and share the proceeds of business activity with employees.¹⁰ Many trusts have also been created at local levels that successfully manage land and other shared resources, such as forests, without intervention from the State or private sector.¹¹ The practice of economic sharing is also evident in local sustainability initiatives across the world, which often work to redistribute economic activity among communities and build alternatives to unsustainable patterns of production and consumption.¹²

The sharing economy

More recently, the 'sharing economy' movement has rapidly grown in popularity throughout Western Europe, North America and other regions, which encompasses everything from online crowd-funding initiatives to food banks, mutual aid societies and gift economies. In particular, collaborative consumption has emerged as a new economic model that allows people to share various goods and services with their peers via internet-mediated sharing platforms, in everything from cars and food to office space and professional expertise. As the many proponents of the sharing economy maintain, 'accessing' rather than 'owning' resources works to save money, build community and utilise resources more efficiently, while reducing levels of personal consumption and carbon emissions in the process.¹³

Yet sharing is even more fundamental to how we organise our societies than these examples demonstrate. For instance, the process of participatory democracy can embody the principle of sharing as it seeks to share political power more equitably with citizens. And arguably the most advanced form of economic sharing that exists in the modern world is the pooling of a nation's financial resources to ensure that everyone has access to healthcare, education, social security and other essential public services.

Social welfare systems in developed countries are far from perfect and not always efficiently administered, but they represent a natural evolution of the human propensity to share that builds on practices that have been familiar to people for millennia. They are also an expression of social justice, solidarity and equitable wealth distribution that can reduce inequalities and strengthen social cohesion within countries. Moreover, systems of universal social protection are widely supported by many millions of people who have long recognised the role that effective 'sharing economies' can play in creating a fairer, more just and healthier society.¹⁴

All these and many more examples demonstrate how economic sharing has long been central to human civilisation by strengthening the social fabric of communities, improving levels of wellbeing across society and promoting social equity. The critical question facing humanity today is whether we choose to support and scale up national and local systems of sharing, or whether we allow them to be further undermined and dismantled by those who are ideologically opposed to putting sharing at the centre of policymaking.

Global economic sharing

We live in a globalised world where the crises we face, from wealth disparities to climate change and resource wars, affect all nations to a greater or lesser extent. Systems of worldwide communication, trade and finance mean that people in different countries live highly interconnected and interdependent lives, yet the benefits of economic activity remain extremely skewed in favour of high-income countries. Given this reality and the enormous discrepancies that exist in levels of affluence between rich and poor nations, any process of economic sharing cannot be limited to a solely national context and must be actively applied on a planetary scale.

On the national level, an effective process of economic sharing can help governments to realise their long-standing commitment to protect socio-economic rights by ensuring that all people have access to essential goods and services. A majority of UN member states have already adopted a number of legally binding human rights instruments that embody these commitments, including the

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.¹⁵ On the international stage, however, there is a huge disparity between those rights enjoyed in the richest countries – such as the right to food, the right to adequate housing or the right to an education – and the daily infringement of these basic rights for millions of men, women and children in less developed countries. This reality points to the need for governments to finally recognise their extraterritorial human rights obligations by sharing resources more equitably *on a global as well as a national basis*.¹⁶

In a climate and resource constrained world, a process of global economic sharing can also play a major role in addressing environmental crises and reducing interstate conflict over vital resource interests. As many environmentalists propose, ensuring that all nations can access resources equitably without transgressing ecological thresholds will require a ‘fair shares’ approach to managing the global commons. In the longer term, sharing finite resources more equitably and sustainably will necessitate a new global governance framework that will have immense implications for the way we extract, distribute and consume the Earth’s produce.¹⁷

The emergence of global sharing

History provides some important examples of the recognition that humanity must work cooperatively as an international community in line with the principle of sharing. The establishment of the United Nations after the Second World War was one of the first major expressions of sharing in political and global terms, as it facilitates international cooperation on a wide range of issues including peace and security, economic development, social progress and human rights.¹⁸ Not long after the UN was created, a major exercise in cross-border economic sharing was kick-started by the United States government, which embarked on a massive transfer of financial resources to a number of European countries that had been devastated by war. Although historians debate how altruistic the ‘Marshall Plan’ was, it demonstrated the great potential of international resource sharing that has inspired many proposals for a ‘global Marshall Plan’ today, mainly in the form of a massive relief effort for developing nations.¹⁹

A more contemporary example of global economic sharing is Official Development Assistance (ODA) that OECD countries have been providing to developing nations since the 1960s, although foreign aid comes with so many associated problems that it cannot be considered a true or effective form of economic sharing on an international level.²⁰ A further example is the important precedent in international law known as the Common Heritage of Mankind, which enables certain cultural and natural resources to be recognised as ‘shared commons’ that should be protected from exploitation by individual nation states or corporations, and held in trust for the benefit of future generations.²¹

Despite these notable exceptions, the fact of our global unity is still not sufficiently expressed in our international economic and political structures. Rather than scaling up and strengthening diverse forms of global economic sharing, the world's 'operating system' is still based on the competitive geopolitical interests of the most powerful and wealthy nations. At the same time, the main institutions that set the rules for international trade and finance - 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.²²

A more inclusive international framework urgently needs to be established through the United Nations and its relevant agencies. The UN is the only multilateral and fully representative global institution in existence with the necessary mandate and capacity to coordinate the process of restructuring the world economy, despite being in need of significant reform and democratisation (particularly by abolishing the Security Council with its arbitrary power of veto, and renewing the UN's independence as a forum for economic policy-making). After more than 60 years, the UN Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Rights still embody some of the highest ideals expressed by humanity. If the UN is fundamentally renewed and entrusted with more authority, it could be in a position to foster the growing sense of community between nations and facilitate economic sharing on a global scale.²³

Part 2:
Why nations
need
to share

Our failure to share resources internationally has led to the creation of a global economic system that is inherently unjust, highly unequal and environmentally unsustainable. Humanity is now facing a series of interrelated global crises as a consequence that includes massive poverty and rising levels of inequality, climate change and the ecological crisis in all its dimensions, as well as ongoing conflicts over the world's dwindling natural resources. The following section outlines the extent of this global emergency and the need for an alternative approach to managing the world's resources based upon economic sharing and international cooperation.

A global emergency

Despite the wealth of scientific evidence that demonstrates how human beings are naturally predisposed to cooperate and share, mainstream economists and politicians still base much of their decision-making on the assumption that people are inherently selfish, competitive and acquisitive. This one-sided perspective of human nature has defined centuries of aggressive empire building and the politics of domination and control, and it still underpins how societies and nations are organised and the way the global economy functions.²⁴

The influence of this ideological approach to economics is apparent in the policies of governments on both sides of the political spectrum. The dominant trend in most countries is to overemphasise the role of market forces in shaping society by downsizing the State, rolling back government regulations and encouraging the privatisation of public resources. With the pursuit of economic growth driving policy decisions, social progress is largely dependent on promoting consumerism regardless of the social and environmental costs.²⁵

Since the 1980s, a radically different approach to international development took shape under the guise of economic globalisation and ‘structural adjustment’, which aimed to remove all barriers to economic activity between nations and limit government intervention so that market forces can drive the global economy. With increasing vigour over recent decades, almost all governments have pursued policies that favour large-scale corporate activity, debt-fuelled finance, reduced barriers to global trade and increased capital flows between states. As a result, trade between countries remains premised on national self-interest, international competition and a ‘survival of the fittest’ attitude to business that has shifted economic power towards transnational corporations and largely unaccountable global institutions.²⁶

The ‘neoliberal’ ideology that institutionalised greed and self-interest may have been discredited by the global financial crisis in 2008, but it continues to dominate policy discourse and practice in both the Global North and the South. Previous economic ideals based on egalitarian values, redistribution and social rights have been replaced by a new ‘common sense’ that takes for granted the supposed naturalness of the market and the primacy of profit-making – assumptions that continue to set the parameters of public discussions and media debates. Commercialisation now permeates almost every aspect of life, and has drawn entire populations into a financialised and marketised view of the world that disinclines a majority of citizens from perceiving an alternative to the status quo.²⁷

Sharing as a solution to global crises

Yet the world situation today starkly challenges the vision that expanding the free market and private ownership will create greater economic efficiency and social well-being. The economic freedom promised through the liberalisation of market forces has, in reality, resulted in a freedom for the very few and a contradiction of the core free market promise – that increased wealth will be shared. Our failure to share resources internationally has led to the creation of a global economic system that is inherently unjust, highly unequal and environmentally unsustainable. Humanity is now facing a series of interrelated global crises as a consequence that includes massive poverty and rising levels of inequality, climate change and the ecological crisis in all its dimensions, as well as ongoing conflicts over the world's dwindling natural resources.²⁸

It takes little imagination to see how nations could apply economic sharing as a solution to these critical global issues. In simple terms, a just sharing of the world's wealth, power and resources is fundamental to bridging the gap between rich and poor countries and meeting basic needs for all. Establishing a new international framework for sharing natural resources more equitably and sustainably (such as land, minerals and fossil fuels) is also essential for safeguarding the environment, ending centuries of inter-state conflict and fostering global solidarity.

From this truly common sense perspective, a new economic paradigm based on sharing rather than competing for the world's resources presents a pragmatic way forward for the international community in light of the major crises we face. At the same time, it presents a revolutionary challenge to the status quo that necessitates a drastic departure from a prevailing ideology based on economic selfishness, rampant commercialisation and purely materialistic goals.

Global poverty and inequality

The most pressing reason for establishing an international framework that facilitates economic sharing is to create a more equal world where basic human needs are met universally. Governments first committed to this goal in 1948 when the UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states in Article 25 (1): “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 and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.”²⁹

More than 65 years later, achieving these basic entitlements for all the world's people still remains a distant hope and vague aspiration of the international community. Even in many of the richest countries poverty rates have been rising for a decade, and the situation is rapidly deteriorating as austerity measures are rolling back social safety nets and weakening essential public services. Five years after the financial crisis of 2008, for example, about 50 million people in the US – 1 in 6 of the population – were officially hungry, even before dramatic cuts to government food assistance programmes.³⁰ Across Europe, where the social gains of previous decades are now under sharp attack, analysts have been forewarning of a divided continent with entrenched poverty for more than a decade.³¹

Nothing describes the dangerous shift away from the practice of sharing within societies more than the growing levels of hunger and needless deprivation in the affluent parts of the world. But there is no escaping the fact that the impact of extreme poverty remains generally far more severe in the poorest countries of sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Latin America, among other low- and middle-income regions. Despite rapid advancements in standards of living for a large proportion of the world population in recent decades, an unacceptable number of people are still denied access to the basic necessities of life.

Even if the Millennium Development Goal for halving extreme poverty is met, around one billion people will officially live without adequate means for survival in 2015 – although unofficial estimates are even higher.³² Altogether, 95% of people who live in developing countries survive on the equivalent of less than \$10 a day (comparable to what \$10 would buy in the United States) – an almost impossible task for someone living in a high-income country.³³ The controversial 'dollar-a-day' measure of poverty also fails to reflect the harsh reality of life for millions of people in the majority world, not least in the fast-growing slums of developing cities.³⁴

Poverty amidst plenty

In an interconnected global society with an abundance of wealth, technological capacity and expertise, it is morally reprehensible and economically short-sighted not to have ended extreme poverty decades ago. But this will be impossible without simultaneously redressing levels of global inequality, which have steadily increased since the 1980s when corporate-driven policies of economic globalisation were widely adopted. In order to tackle this growing crisis of poverty amidst plenty, far greater emphasis must be placed on reforming the unjust policies and institutions that maintain a divided and increasingly unequal world.³⁵

Today, highly biased regimes of international trade, finance and taxation mean that at least ten times as much finance flows from developing countries to the rich world than is provided

by donor governments as overseas aid.³⁶ As a result of these unjust arrangements of the global economy, the wealthiest 20 percent of the world's population enjoy nearly 83 percent of total global income, whereas the poorest 20 percent receive a mere 1 percent.³⁷ In recent years, this concentration of wealth has become increasingly extreme, with one percent of the richest people in the world owning \$110 trillion – 65 times the total wealth of the bottom half of the world's population.³⁸

This astonishing misdistribution of wealth and income highlights just how distorted the world's priorities are when many millions of people still cannot access the essential resources that others take for granted. As global justice campaigners often repeat, the underlying causes of this gross inequity are political in nature as they stem from the policy choices that governments make, the institutions that govern economic relationships, and the unrivalled power and influence of the world's largest corporations.³⁹

Without reforming these structural conditions, international aid and other forms of financial redistribution will never be an adequate means for ending poverty or reducing the gap between rich and poor. If the global economy is to serve the interests of all people, it must be primarily geared towards guaranteeing the fulfilment of social and economic rights in perpetuity – founded upon a genuine form of multilateral cooperation and economic sharing.

The environmental crisis

A call for greater economic sharing has long been at the heart of the international debate on climate change and sustainable development. The crux of the issue is how to ensure that the world's finite resources are consumed fairly and at a rate that does not exceed the regenerative and absorptive capacity of the biosphere. Whether discussed in terms of ecological footprints or 'fair shares' in a world of limits, all people should have an equal right to share the earth's resources without irreversibly damaging the planet or depriving future generations of access to these resources.

To date, governments have abysmally failed to agree on a policy framework for capping carbon emissions and equitably sharing the remaining 'carbon space' of the atmosphere among all nations.⁴⁰ But climate change and environmental pollution is only one aspect of a much wider ecological crisis that has resulted from our over-exploitation and degradation of the natural world. Approximately 60% of the planet's ecosystems have been significantly degraded by human activity in the past 50 years, which starkly indicates the rapid loss of biodiversity worldwide that is threatening human well-being and civilisation as we know it.⁴¹

Humanity is currently consuming natural resources at a rate 50% faster than the planet can replenish them, and as a result we already require the equivalent of one and a half planets to support today's consumption levels.⁴² Yet demand for resources of all kinds is increasing exponentially, especially for food, oil, land and water. Hence the issues of resource scarcity and environmental limits have risen up the global agenda in recent years, and are becoming ever more pressing due to both a growing population and rising affluence in emerging economies.⁴³

Fair shares

However, the challenge of sharing the planet's resources is inherently linked to the huge imbalances in consumption patterns across the world. Currently, the wealthiest 20% of the world's population – most of whom live in rich countries – consume 80% of global resources, and are therefore responsible for the vast majority of climate change and environmental destruction. Meanwhile, the poorest 20% of the population lack sufficient access to essentials such as food, clean water and energy, and account for just 1.3% of global resource consumption.⁴⁴ It is also the poor that suffer disproportionately from the harmful effects of climate change and resource depletion, which further contributes to growing inequalities and often increases poverty and social conflict.⁴⁵

This leads to serious issues around fairness and equity in the discussions around planetary boundaries and sustainable limits. If the world's finite resources are to be made accessible to all people but consumed at a sustainable rate, high-income countries will clearly have to reduce their use of natural resources considerably in order to enable poorer nations to grow their economies and improve their material standard of living. At the same time, poor countries will have to aim towards a less materially intensive model of development than compared to today's industrialised nations, in accordance with international environmental objectives.⁴⁶

There is no way around this basic adjustment needed to achieve equity-based sustainable development, which will ultimately require reconceptualising notions of prosperity and wholesale economic reorganisation. Creating a sustainable and just world will remain impossible to achieve unless we change patterns of production and consumption that deplete natural resources, erode biodiversity and pollute the atmosphere, and until we place the rights of Mother Earth before commercial interests.⁴⁷ Such a transformation may seem unachievable within the current political and economic context, but the certainty of irreversible damage to the Earth's life-support systems leaves the international community with one remaining option – to place economic sharing and environmental stewardship at the forefront of policymaking and global governance.

Conflict over resources

An alarming consequence of humanity's continued failure to share resources is the escalation of interstate conflict over land, fossil fuel reserves and other key industrial materials. Almost every government now assigns a great strategic significance to resource security, particularly in relation to oil and gas supplies. The result is a new global landscape in which competition over vital resources is becoming the governing principle behind the accumulation and deployment of military power. With the proliferation of nuclear weapons continuing unabated, however, any intensification of the struggle to secure the world's untapped natural resources increases the likelihood of a catastrophic war among the major industrial powers.

The need for a vigorous military role in protecting energy assets abroad has long been a presiding theme for many of the world's nations, and remains increasingly central to both foreign policy and national security strategies.⁴⁸ Between 1965 and 1990 alone, 73 civil wars over resources occurred in which more than a thousand people a year died,⁴⁹ and at least 18 international conflicts have been triggered by competition for resources since then.⁵⁰ Many analysts also maintain that securing key resource interests was a key factor justifying intervention in the Persian Gulf War in 1991, as well as the invasion of Iraq in 2003.⁵¹

Even today, the possibility of future violent conflict grows as nations race to control oil and gas reserves in the Arctic, the East and South China Seas, around the Falkland Islands and elsewhere. As governments continue on their current trajectory of aggressively competing to control the planet's scarce natural resources, a number of factors all but guarantee a further escalation of violent conflict in the immediate future. This includes a growing world population and a rapidly expanding consumer class in developing countries, which is spurring an enormous increase in demand for energy and raw materials. The impact of climate change will also further exacerbate resource scarcity by dramatically constraining access to food, water, land and other vital resources over coming decades.⁵²

A cooperative approach

Despite a distinct lack of public debate on this issue, there can be little doubt that a viable resource security strategy for the 21st century must be based on an alternative framework of international cooperation and resource sharing rather than national self-interest and recurring conflict. While there are various options for how such a framework could function, it would be essential to establish robust and impartial international institutions in order to ensure equitable access to the world's existing resource stockpiles,

alleviate shortages in times of acute scarcity or emergency, and guarantee universal access to critical commodities. Working through the UN system, the international community could also reduce the pressure on global fossil fuel reserves by channelling investment into renewables and sharing alternative energy technologies as they emerge.⁵³

A cooperative approach to resource security is not only necessary for avoiding conflict and addressing social and environmental crises, but it would also salvage significant financial resources from global military budgets and foster goodwill among nations. Even to engage in the formidable process of negotiating such a strategy, governments will have to overcome the zero-sum, nationalistic impulses that currently dominate what is essentially a 'winner takes all' global resource acquisition paradigm – particularly in relation to fossil fuels. At the same time, policymakers must be prepared to mitigate rapidly escalating consumption rates that drive the unsustainable demand for energy and raw materials. In the end, this will mean fundamentally rethinking the dominant economic model that requires ever-higher levels of consumption for its continued success, and adopting new industrial processes that are not dependent on supplies of finite resources.

However idealistic it may seem to envisage cooperative solutions that can prevent future conflict over land, water or fossil fuels, humanity faces an unavoidable choice: either to find ways of sharing the environmental commons more equitably, or to continue on the path of intensified resource competition and risk further economic trauma, the acceleration of climate change, and the eventual possibility of a third world war.

Part 3:
How can
global
sharing
work?

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. As outlined in the sections below, a crucial first step is for UN Member States to implement an international program of emergency assistance to end life-threatening 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.

A programme for survival

Addressing the interlocking crises highlighted above represents the greatest challenge that humanity has faced in its long history, and calls for a thorough restructuring of the world economy as well as far greater understanding, commitment and solidarity between peoples and nations. In order to move beyond national self-interest and aggressive competition over vital resources, a dramatic adjustment is needed in political relations between governments on the basis of international cooperation and genuine economic sharing.

Such fundamental changes to the international economic order can only become a reality if world public opinion is focused upon eliminating poverty and safeguarding the environment as a foremost priority for the 21st Century. Given the current 'business as usual' approach to policymaking, it is unlikely that governments will accept the need for economic sharing on a global scale until the crises of inequality, resource scarcity and environmental breakdown reach a dangerous climax. Pressure from the public for change and justice will inevitably mount until such a time, and politicians may eventually have little choice but to rethink their distorted priorities or risk further social, economic and ecological chaos.

It is impossible to predict how a process of world repair and rehabilitation will unfold, but if the necessary economic transformation is to come about by democratic means it will require all-inclusive international dialogue over a period of months, if not years. The purpose of outlining these proposals is not to dictate the terms of global economic reform, but to inspire public engagement and debate on these critical issues and galvanise popular support for a campaign that calls on governments to share the world's resources.

As outlined in part 1, a reformed and democratised United Nations is the only multilateral institution in existence that can facilitate a coordinated global programme of wholesale economic reform. A broad coalition of civil society must therefore bring pressure to bear on governments to convene an international summit at the UN General Assembly to agree upon a comprehensive agenda for restructuring and cooperatively managing the global economy in the interests of all nations. These negotiations should focus on both the immediate and longer-term measures for mitigating the world's poverty, environmental and security crises, which will require a radical shift in economic relationships to embrace our collective values and global interdependence.

The sections that follow outline the key pillars of this transformative global agenda, which should include:

1. An international programme of humanitarian relief:

By definition, any process of economic sharing between and within countries must prioritise the urgent needs of the very poorest. In light of this imperative, the major concern for the first stage of global negotiations must be to organise and implement an emergency programme of humanitarian relief to prevent life-threatening deprivation and avoidable poverty-related deaths - regardless of where this occurs in the world. Such a programme needs to be agreed and implemented in the shortest possible timeframe, and will require an unprecedented mobilisation of international agencies, resources and expertise over and above existing emergency aid budgets and humanitarian programs.

2. Structural reform of the global economy: The UN General Assembly must also convene a worldwide public consultation with representatives from all countries and all sectors of society to debate, negotiate and implement a strategy for restructuring the global economy. Among the many reforms that these negotiations should consider, particular attention must be placed on guaranteeing access to adequate social protection and adequate public services for all; establishing a just and sustainable global food system; and instituting an international framework for sharing natural resources more equitably and within planetary limits.

Such an aspiration may seem radical to some, but these above two propositions broadly echo those put forward more than 30 years ago by the Report of the Independent Commission on International Development Issues (the Brandt Commission). Today the world's problems are even more complex and interlinked after three decades of economic globalisation, and the solutions needed to address global crises must go far beyond the proposals of the Commissioners who contributed to the Brandt Report. Despite the disparities that Brandt spoke of now reaching breaking point, however, we're still far away from his vision of nations coming together in a collective effort to "ensure a sustainable biological environment, and sustainable prosperity based on equitably shared resources".⁵⁴

It is imperative that world public opinion embraces the understanding that we are in the midst of a civilizational crisis, and there is little time left for governments to implement a 'programme for survival' that is our only hope of averting economic and ecological disaster.

An emergency relief programme

Whether from a moral, humanitarian or purely economic perspective, the number one priority for governments in the 21st Century should be the urgent prevention of life-threatening conditions of deprivation across the world. Every day we fail to act an additional 40,000 people are likely to die from avoidable poverty-related causes, almost all of whom live in low- and middle-income countries.⁵⁵ If we are serious about putting the principle of sharing at the heart of our response to global crises, the very first step in this process of world reconstruction must surely be an international programme of emergency relief to end all instances of unnecessary deaths due to hunger or poverty.

Government rhetoric may suggest that a great deal is being done already to help prevent extreme deprivation in less-developed countries, but this is far from the reality. Official Development Assistance (ODA) remains linked to financial restrictions and policy ‘conditionalities’ that dramatically reduce its effectiveness, while most donor countries are still failing to live up to the long-agreed pledge of providing a mere 0.7% of Gross Domestic Product in overseas aid.⁵⁶ Furthermore, of the comparatively negligible sums that are transferred from rich to poor countries as aid, few people realise that only a small proportion is used to respond to humanitarian emergencies – as little as 8% of all ODA.⁵⁷

It is high time that the international community considered life-threatening poverty to be a global emergency and treated this preventable crisis accordingly. For every person who dies in an emergency such as a natural disaster or conflict, 200 people die from poverty-related causes. Should governments not therefore broaden their conception of what a humanitarian crisis entails, and put arrangements in place at the international level to ensure that people suffering from acute economic deprivation at least have access to the minimum requirements – water, sanitation, food, nutrition, shelter and healthcare – to satisfy their basic right to life and dignity (in accordance with long-agreed international human rights declarations and conventions)?⁵⁹

A global humanitarian crisis

The structural causes of poverty are complex and political in nature, and addressing them will necessitate far-reaching changes to the policies and institutions that govern the global economy. In the longer term, the responsibility for poverty reduction and development rests with national governments who need to develop strong public sectors and redistributive tax systems, and overseas aid should not be a substitute for domestic resource mobilisation. But the least developed countries cannot afford to wait for these structural changes to take place while millions of people are facing

a condition of life-threatening poverty. The global community of nations urgently need to take a much bolder step towards saving lives and ending extreme deprivation today – and regardless of the excuses given by world leaders, doing so is eminently practical and affordable.

As STWR's report *Financing the Global Sharing Economy* outlines, there are many progressive policy options that could enable governments to rapidly mobilise several trillions of dollars to help mitigate the worst effects of poverty and hunger in the most deprived regions of the world. The institutional structures, capacity and expertise needed to utilise these additional financial resources for essential human needs is already in place, including many UN organisations, thousands of NGOs and numerous humanitarian agencies that are often critically underfunded.⁶⁰

There is no reason why an inter-governmental emergency programme cannot be launched to provide basic necessities for the world's impoverished as a leading international priority. With sufficient support from UN Member States, such an unprecedented global action plan could be initiated through the UN General Assembly in a relatively short space of time. Moreover, the necessary redistribution of financial resources from rich to poor countries could be organised within the existing political and economic framework, and independent of overseas aid budgets.

Relief efforts could also be coordinated on the basis of universal need, within rich OECD countries as well as less developed nations, even if the inevitable focus is on the poverty belts and urban centres within the Global South. Similarly, any government could provide financial or additional strategic resources to the programme, including military personnel to assist humanitarian agencies in distributing food and providing equipment or technical assistance.

An international aid effort of this nature would clearly not be a comprehensive solution to hunger and poverty, but it could provide a lifeline for the millions of people who subsist without any form of welfare provision, suitable health or working conditions, or adequate purchasing power to meet their basic needs. The necessary political will to implement such a strategy of global economic sharing was sadly lacking in the early 1980s when world leaders were considering the Brandt Commission's proposal for 'massive transfers' of funds from rich to poor countries, but the scale of the humanitarian crisis is even greater today. If governments and civil society are ever to end this moral outrage, we cannot afford the same level of political and public complacency to continue.

Reforming the global economy

An emergency relief programme can only form an initial stage in a broader agenda to overhaul the global economy and address the structural causes of our present social, political, economic and environmental crises. The scale and complexity of such a task is unparalleled; never before have representatives from all nations engaged in an effective dialogue that links the full range of critical global issues – from poverty and environmental protection to world trade and financial reform – and seeks to establish new global rules and institutions that can bring us closer to a more equal world.

In order to achieve an international consensus on how to reform the global economy, an extensive UN-led consultation process must be initiated with input from civil society groups, governments, relevant global agencies and institutions, as well as representatives from the private sector. As outlined in the following sections, the minimum aim of these negotiations should be to agree upon the reformed structural and redistributive arrangements required to:

- Guarantee access to adequate social protection and essential public services for all people in all countries.
- Establish a just and sustainable global food system and guarantee universal access to nutritious food as a basic human right.
- Ensure that all people in every country can consume a fair share of the world's resources within environmental limits.

Regardless of how nations agree to organise a global framework that enables a more equity-based and sustainable distribution of resources, the implications for existing institutions, policies and financing mechanisms are immense and all-encompassing. A new vision of our global interdependence is called for, with profound changes in international economic relations on the basis of true cooperation and shared sacrifice. A fairer distribution of wealth, power and resources on a worldwide basis will require more inclusive structures of global governance and institutional reforms that go far beyond existing development efforts to reduce poverty, push for fairer trade and provide compensatory aid.

A programme of priorities

Over six years since the financial collapse of 2008, governments have yet to restructure financial and monetary systems or impose tighter regulations on the banking sector and speculative activity. Particular attention must be paid to establishing a balanced global financial architecture with a stable international reserve

currency, and many proposals exist for money to be created through a democratic and transparent body working in the public interest.⁶¹ Furthermore, popular calls to clamp down on tax havens and cancel unjust and unpayable debts in developing countries are long overdue, and remain essential to achieving a more equal distribution of the world's financial resources.⁶²

A more viable approach to managing national economies will require a significant rethink of Western notions of development, a more holistic vision of our relationship to the natural environment, and a reconceptualisation of financial measures like GDP as the main yardstick for national and social progress.⁶³ Environmental challenges – from climate change to the depletion and degradation of natural resources – mean it is inevitable that governments must reconsider the relentless push towards trade liberalisation, as well as the dominance of consumption-led economic growth over government policy.⁶⁴ Much needs to be done to dismantle the culture of consumerism, and investment much shift dramatically towards building and sustaining a low-carbon infrastructure, alongside a vast array of energy and resource efficiency measures.⁶⁵

To counter the growing concentration of financial and economic power in the hands of a small number of multinational corporations, governments should also support policies that increase the control that citizens have over their local economies, especially in developing countries. State funding should be directed to local initiatives in order to help diversify economies and encourage social cohesion and local economic renewal, alongside greater support for cooperative businesses and mutual enterprises that redistribute economic activity back into towns and communities. An increased focus on domestic markets would also boost opportunities for stable employment in local industries, and help restore local and national self-reliance in meeting essential needs.⁶⁶

The issues highlighted above provide only a snapshot of a comprehensive agenda for economic transformation, different aspects of which are widely promoted by various campaign groups worldwide. The challenge of enacting any of these reforms is essentially a democratic one that requires civil society to reassert their right to determine the future direction of economic policy, and to ensure that politicians honour their responsibility to serve the needs of ordinary people. For governance systems to be inclusive, effective and respectful of economic and cultural diversity, citizens must be given the opportunity to engage in the decision making process at all levels of society – from the local to the global.⁶⁷

The following sections introduce the three major areas of focus for global negotiations highlighted above, and explain why these

reforms will require an unprecedented degree of international cooperation and economic sharing to ensure their success:

- Sharing the world's food
- Building a sharing society
- Sharing the global commons

Sharing the world's food

Despite the production of more than enough food to meet the nutritional needs of all the world's population, life-threatening food emergencies continue to devastate many developing countries, and at least 842 million go hungry every day.⁶⁸ Clearly, global food systems are working against the principle of sharing at a fundamental level when widespread undernourishment co-exists with large surpluses of food in global markets. From the most basic perspective, sharing food in a world of plenty infers a family of nations in which no one is permitted to die of hunger, and that demands a re-ordering of government priorities to ensure that everyone is guaranteed their right to safe, sufficient, nutritious and affordable food.⁶⁹

But the scandal of hunger is only the most egregious example of a broken food system that is in crisis at every level. Industrial farming practices have significantly degraded the natural resources upon which human life depends, and governments face enormous challenges in meeting future demand for food as a result of water shortages, fossil fuel depletion, climate change and environmental degradation. According to some estimates, the globalised industrial food system contributes over half of all greenhouse gas emissions.⁷⁰ The United Nations also reports that 75% of plant genetic diversity has already been lost as a result of the profound shift towards an environmentally destructive model of agriculture over the past century.⁷¹

A new paradigm in global agriculture is urgently called for. If we accept that food is an essential for life that should be shared at every level – family, community, national and international – then we cannot continue to treat grains and other staples as 'commodities', just like any other merchandise. Yet the entire edifice of the global food economy is based on the belief that food should be grown for profit, not human need, which has far-reaching implications for food and farming systems if sharing is to guide the process of global economic reform.⁷²

This is starkly illustrated, for example, by the intellectual property rights regime, which is in many ways the antithesis of sharing – built as it is upon the belief that corporations have rights to

privatise and 'own' the genetic commons, while smallholder farmers are even deprived of their right to share and save seeds.⁷³ Stock market speculation on basic foods is also a scandal when millions of people are starving in the world, with clear evidence now suggesting that betting on food prices in financial markets has caused drastic price swings in recent years, with catastrophic consequences for the poorest households.⁷⁴

Transforming global food systems

Reversing these trends necessitates action and cooperation on a global scale. For example, there is an imperative need to establish fairer regional and global trade arrangements, which at present enable the largest corporate players to reap colossal profits from the international trade in agricultural commodities – especially in the midst of food price crises.⁷⁵ In a dramatic reorientation of agricultural trade policy, governments should rather aim to establish higher levels of food self-sufficiency, re-regulate markets and reduce dependency on imports, both within OECD countries and across the Global South.⁷⁶

Put simply, a more just and sustainable food system depends on people and communities being empowered to grow and share food. This new direction is rigorously articulated by a food sovereignty movement that rejects the corporate vision of agriculture in favour of a more localised, ecological and people-led approach to farming.⁷⁷ Indeed the scientific case for small-scale, low-impact farming has already been won: in 2008, the conclusions of more than 400 experts was released in the UN-sponsored IAASTD study, which gave a damning verdict on modern systems of industrial agriculture and presented policymakers with an effective blueprint to confront today's global food crisis.⁷⁸

The practice of sharing has a pivotal role to play in a new paradigm for food and agriculture, but it clearly needs to be a true form of economic sharing that addresses the power structures and politics underlying an unjust global economy. It is imperative that governments finally accept their responsibility to guarantee access to nutritious food for all the world's people, and thereby enact policies to democratise and localise food economies in line with the principles of sharing and cooperation. In sum, the political challenge for the international community could not be more critical and deep-seated: to reinstate the spiritual, non-material value of food that allows it to be treated as more than just a commodity – and ultimately shared universally as a basic human right.⁷⁹

Building a sharing society

As a priority for longer-term global reform efforts, governments must ensure that economic systems are primarily geared towards meeting the essential needs of all citizens. An emergency relief programme and existing forms of overseas aid must give way to the creation of nationwide systems of social protection and public service provision, in line with longstanding international human rights commitments. Governments in both hemispheres – and particularly in the South – need to be empowered to develop more self-sufficient and sustainable economies, which must become the overarching goal of social and economic policy in the 21st century.

Systems of social welfare and public service provision are essentially complex ‘sharing economies’ that exist in a variety of forms throughout the world. Through the process of progressive taxation and redistribution, citizens collectively share a portion of the nation’s financial resources for the benefit of society as a whole. Although often far from perfect, national systems of social protection are an expression of solidarity and social justice that can redistribute wealth, reduce inequalities and strengthen social cohesion within countries.⁸⁰

Many experts recognise that the universal provision of social protection (including health services, education, housing, water and sanitation, public infrastructure and transport, as well as social security benefits) has to be part of a country’s social contract and cannot be left to the private or charity sectors. This inevitably requires a strong interventionist role for governments, strictly regulated markets, the decommodification of public services, and the democratic participation of all citizens who need to be empowered to articulate their needs.⁸¹

It also depends upon strong tax authorities and effective financial administrations, which is a major challenge for many poor countries that have a large informal sector and internal problems of corruption and mismanagement. There remains a huge gap between how much tax revenue is raised by most low-income countries, and where they need to get to in order to end aid dependence and indebtedness.⁸²

For many decades, poorer countries have been severely constrained in their ability to raise enough domestic revenue to guarantee universal access to public goods and services. Due to a combination of factors such as investment abroad, illicit capital flight and sovereign debt repayments, far more money flows from poor to rich countries than flows the other way.⁸³ The pressure towards trade liberalisation and tariff reduction – enforced by ‘free market’ economic programmes – has further deprived many governments in the South of vital income.⁸⁴ Indeed, the infamous

Structural Adjustment Programmes in the 1980s and 1990s effectively dismantled the basic safety nets that existed across much of the developing world.⁸⁵

A global sharing economy

Even in high-income countries today government policies are generally going in the wrong direction, particularly across Europe where IMF-led austerity programmes are rolling back systems of social welfare and undermining public services. To reverse the effects of these divisive and damaging measures that go against the very notion of a sharing society, a renewed social and economic model must invest in public services for all people and build fair and redistributive tax systems, founded upon an economic policy in harmony with the environment and climate.⁸⁶

Yet even the most basic welfare taken for granted by those in developed countries is still a dream for the majority world population, with 4 out of every 5 people denied a minimal set of social protection guarantees.⁸⁷ Consequently, high-income countries have a responsibility to do much more to assist poorer nations to strengthen domestic taxation and social protection systems, while enabling them to develop the productive capacity they need to generate decent employment and a vibrant, diversified economy. As a minimum, the international community should urgently establish a global fund to provide financial support to low-income countries as they strive to develop robust and self-sufficient public sectors.⁸⁸

In the longer term, it will remain impossible to pursue a sustainable and inclusive agenda for development until we extend the principles that underpin domestic systems of sharing to encompass the global community of nations. In other words, we need to establish an effective 'global sharing economy' based on national and international forms of redistribution that can ensure that everyone is guaranteed access to essential goods and services, which is the first major step towards realising a truly united world that upholds the human rights of all people.

Sharing the global commons

Guaranteeing access to essential goods and services for all people would go a long way to establishing a global economy that serves the common good, but it falls short of ensuring that the overarching economic framework is inherently fair and environmentally sustainable. New economic arrangements also need to reverse decades of privatisation, corporate control and profiteering over the Earth's natural resources (such as water, oil, gas and minerals) so that nations can share the global commons more equitably and sustainably.⁸⁹ This presents an epochal challenge for the

international community at a time when humanity as a whole is already consuming resources and emitting waste and pollutants 50% faster than they can be replenished or reabsorbed.⁹⁰

Clearly this state of affairs cannot continue indefinitely, and governments may eventually be forced – through public pressure or intensifying ecological catastrophe – to abandon the current economic logic in favour of a cooperative strategy for sharing the world rather than keeping it divided. Two basic prerequisites will remain essential to successfully negotiating such a transition. Firstly, governments have to accept the need to limit resource use in both national and global terms. Instead of the endless drive to increase economic growth and maximise profits, the goal of economic policy must shift towards a sustainable sufficiency in which nations aim to maximise well-being and guarantee ‘enough’ for everybody, rather than encouraging the consumption of ‘more’ of everything.⁹¹

Secondly, nations will have to collectively formulate a recognition that natural resources form part of our shared commons, and should therefore be managed in a way that benefits all people as well as future generations. This important reconceptualization could enable a shift away from today’s private and State ownership models, and towards a new form of global resource management based on non-ownership and trusteeship.⁹²

Transitioning to a sustainable world

New governance regimes for sharing natural resources could take many forms. For example, in line with the Common Heritage of Humankind principle that already exists in international law, many of the commons that are truly global in nature, like the oceans and atmosphere, could be held in a global public trust and managed by elected representatives, or else by newly created United Nations agencies. Another option for governments is to maintain sovereignty over the natural resources held within their jurisdiction, but agree to a coordinated international programme of sustainable use of those resources and the sharing of national surpluses.⁹³

Such economic arrangements may finally make it possible for governments to progressively reduce and equalise global consumption levels so that every person can meet their needs within the limits of a finite planet. To achieve this, over-consuming countries would have to take the lead in significantly reducing their national resource use, while less developed countries increase theirs until a convergence in levels of material throughput and carbon emissions is eventually reached. At the same time, a progressively tighter cap on the overall rate at which nations consume resources could ensure that global consumption patterns are gradually but definitely reduced to a sustainable level.⁹⁴ To facilitate this dramatic shift towards ‘fair share’ ecological footprints, the international community will also need to adopt

a low-carbon development strategy by significantly reducing dependence on non-renewable fuels and investing heavily in alternative sources of clean energy.

The implications of implementing any form of global mechanism for sharing natural resources cannot be underestimated. For example, the transition to an era of cooperative resource management is dependent on more inclusive governance at all levels, the democratisation of global institutions (including the United Nations), and a shift in power relations from North to South. An orderly transition will inevitably have to be negotiated and coordinated by UN Member States, which presupposes a degree of international cooperation that is increasingly lacking today. World leaders have yet to move beyond the self-interest and aggressive competition that characterises foreign policy, and are heavily invested in maintaining the dominant economic model that prioritises short-term business interests ahead of a healthy ecosystem and social justice.⁹⁵

Hence we cannot wait for governments to rethink the management of an economic system built upon endless consumption and competition over scarce resources. A solution to global environmental and resource security crises can only be brought about by the active engagement of civil society, with concerted efforts to overcome the corporate and political forces that stand in the way of creating a truly cooperative and sharing world.

A global movement for sharing

In response to a call for an emergency programme of humanitarian relief alongside a wholesale restructuring of the global economy, it is possible to view such a proposition as utopian considering the political underpinnings of our world. At present, the dominant trend is still towards the centralisation of state and market power, and the shifting of real power away from ordinary people and communities towards largely undemocratic global institutions and multinational corporations.⁹⁶

For too long, governments have put short-term political interests and commercial profits before the welfare of all people and the sustainability of the biosphere. Public policy under the influence of neoliberal ideology has created a world economy that is structurally dependent upon unsustainable levels of production and consumption for its continued success. Decades of failed global conferences on interconnected issues such as climate change, international trade and sustainable development have also starkly illustrated the sheer lack of cooperation and goodwill that exists between nations today.

A major reason for the failure of these high-level talks and summits is widely recognised: policymaking has long been captured by powerful corporations and business lobby groups that have the ability to maintain their vested interests at all costs. 'Business as usual' is the anthem of this lobby, and their influence over governmental decision-making – including negotiations at the United Nations – has now reached an apex.⁹⁷

As humanity moves ever closer to social, economic and environmental tipping points, it is clear that we can no longer rely on governments alone to create the future we want. The hope for a better world rests with the participation of the global public in a call for reform that extends beyond national borders. As the worldwide mobilisation of people power since 2011 has demonstrated, only a united and informed public opinion is stronger than the private interests that obstruct progressive change from taking place. The responsibility to take a stand falls squarely on the shoulders of ordinary people, not just the usual campaigners and NGOs. It is imperative that millions more people recognise what is at stake and take the lead as proponents for change - the wellbeing of planet earth and future generations largely depends on this shift in global consciousness.⁹⁸

A united peoples voice

Already, popular uprisings in almost every country are demonstrating in the streets for sharing, freedom and justice, and are connected by their revulsion against an economic system that has caused such huge inequalities in income and wealth. From Wall Street to Gezi Park to the Puerta del Sol, an implicit call for economic sharing is being expressed in many diverse forms. This includes the widespread mobilisations for an alternative to austerity measures; for the sharing and conservation of natural resources; for shared public spaces and the non-enclosure of the commons; and for the right priorities in public spending on behalf of the common good.⁹⁹

At the same time, longstanding campaigns for tax, trade and debt justice all reflect the need to redistribute wealth and political power downward. All of these movements and many others are ultimately demanding a fairer sharing of wealth, power and resources and the protection of the natural world. In the crucial period ahead, concerned citizens from every walk of life must widely support these causes and activities if there is to be hope for creating a more just, sustainable and peaceful future. Humanity as a whole still lacks a broad-based acceptance of the need for planetary reconstruction, even despite a growing awareness among civil society of the unfolding human and environmental catastrophe. Without a global movement of ordinary people that share a collective vision of change, it may remain impossible to overcome the vested interests and structural barriers to progress that we face.

In the end, the case for global economic sharing can be summarised with a simple appeal to our common humanity and compassion. Only a collective demand for a fairer and more equal world is likely to unify citizens of both the richest and poorest nations on a common platform. Hence the urgent process of world rehabilitation must begin with a united people's voice that speaks on behalf of the poorest and most disenfranchised, and gives the highest priority to the elimination of extreme deprivation and needless poverty-related deaths.

If the case for sharing on an international basis captures the public imagination as quickly as the calls for redistribution within individual countries, then an end to gross inequality, ecological crisis and global conflict could finally become a realistic possibility.

Notes

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Share The World's Resources

We urgently need to move beyond the restrictive political and economic ideologies of the past and embrace solutions that meet the common needs of people in all countries - which will be impossible to achieve without some degree of economic sharing both within and between nations. In an increasingly unequal and unsustainable world in which all governments need to drastically re-order their priorities, a call for economic sharing embodies the need for justice, human rights and sound environmental stewardship to guide policymaking at every level of society. This primer outlines the extent of the interconnected global crises we face, as well as the need for an alternative approach to managing the world's resources based upon international cooperation and economic sharing.