GLOBAL Dashboard

Shooting the rapids: multilateralism and global risks

A paper presented to heads of state at the Progressive Governance Summit, 5 April 2008

Alex Evans and David Steven

Notes from the Future
www.globaldashboard.org

Executive summary

The international system is becoming more complex, as growing numbers of actors are confronted by fluid and interlinked threats.

Two drivers of change stand out: *scarcity*, limits to the sustainable consumption of highly strategic commodities such as energy, land, water, food and 'atmospheric space' for emissions; and *instability*, the tendency for complex systems to experience unpredictable and unsettling shifts.

As a result, the multilateral system needs to get better at managing global risks and building resilience to their impacts. But we need reform to cut deeper and move faster than it has in the past.

The first step, we argue, is to start with *function* rather than *form*. In other words, leaders should focus on the outcomes they want from the international system, rather than its organisations, structures, and other institutional paraphernalia.

Three kinds of outcome are important:

1. *Shared operating systems* for global risks: the beliefs, thinking and structures that represent an institutional 'solution' for a particular problem. The end point is to rewire our collective response and create a framework for joint action.

2. To do that, we need *shared awareness.* This is not about a report or 'stakeholder dialogue', but about a concerted attempt to build a common understanding of an issue around which a coalition can coalesce.

3. Once the necessary degree of shared awareness exists, it will be possible to move to *shared platforms*: the networks of state and non-state actors who can campaign around a collective goal or vision, providing the foundation on which a new operating system can be built.

Leaders have an important role to play. They can force debate on the most contentious questions, while setting out ideas that coalitions can cluster around. However, they must aim for a distributed approach, cultivating alliances around global challenges.

Change is most likely to happen at a time of crisis, but only if like-minded governments have plans in place for when space opens up for radical solutions. This requires a renewed commitment to progressive values and a willingness to fight for an international system that has a vision of the future at its heart.

One ¦ The New Risks

Shooting the rapids

Multilateralism has always been born out of crisis. The League of Nations grew from the ashes of the First World War, while in 1945, the new international system was fundamentally concerned with rebuilding stricken economies and the need to prevent another war (literally: the UN Charter still refers to 'enemy powers'). Later, the G8 emerged from the 1973 oil shock, and the recession that followed.

Since then, the furious majesty of globalisation has been unleashed upon the world. Trade now accounts for almost a fifth of world GDP.[1] Technological innovation has been frenetic, radically changing the way we live, work and communicate, while the world's population has grown by a billion people every dozen or so years.[2] At a time of such dramatic change, our economic, social and political systems have come under great pressure. On the whole, they've coped – just.

Now, the world looks poised to face another crisis and shoot a new set of rapids. The critical point could be the 'perfect storm' of a systemic shock perhaps, or the culmination of a number of slower-burn issues. Perhaps it will simply be the realisation that, at present, we lack the will or capacity to solve the strategic challenges on the world's to-do list.

Whichever way it comes, political space for change will appear suddenly and only *briefly*. This short window will present you with the opportunity to tackle globalisation's central paradox – that it has bought both increased prosperity and increased risk. The challenge will be to find a way of *decoupling* that link, so that tomorrow's globalisation continues to offer growing prosperity (and to more of the world's people), but does so within systems that are more resilient when things go wrong.

To succeed, you will need to:

- Promote a stronger understanding of the changing nature of the risks the world now faces.

- Rally a growing coalition around a renewed vision of what you think the international system is for.

- Drive through a programme of multilateral reform that focuses on delivering results, not on restructuring organisations.

The new global risks

The starting point for this challenge is a new understanding of global vulnerability – a problem that can be viewed through four lenses.

First, ***we are much more susceptible to shocks than we like to think***. Disasters have always been catastrophic for their direct victims. But interdependence makes it ever more likely that a localized event will have much wider impact.[3] As we have made our economic systems more efficient, we have also made them less resilient, by taking away buffers and reducing margins of error.[4] In a catastrophe, urban centres can quickly stop functioning, as Hurricane Katrina or the 2003 European heat wave both showed. Meanwhile, the world's poorest people tend to be in the front line of the impacts of global risks – a powerful moral imperative for the international community to do more to protect them.

Second, ***our consumption levels are beginning to hit the buffers***. A global population set to reach ten billion by mid-century, a burgeoning global middle class, and a media-driven universalising of high material expectations, are now colliding with the blunt reality of limited supply of certain highly strategic resources – including oil, food, water, land and 'atmospheric space' for our emissions.[5] This reality will inevitably change the basis of economies that are currently built around abundant access to all these things. You can expect innovation to ease the transition to a less resource-intensive model, but changes of this magnitude are seldom painless, so we should prepare for a rocky ride.[6]

Third, ***critical systems are now so complex that we can weaken them by accident, stupidity or oversight***. Globally, there is massive under-investment in physical infrastructure, which, as a result, is showing increasing strain. Even the Internet, supposedly invulnerable, has more bottlenecks than we like to think – as recent incidents have shown.[*] And we have become cavalier in our dispersal of risk. The world's financial system is experiencing turbulence on a scale not seen for decades, as investors have found themselves exposed to 'parts of the capital markets that most of us had never heard of', in the words of Lehman Brothers' chief US economist.[7] There may be wisdom in crowds, but it seems there is ignorance too.[†]

---

* In February 2008, five undersea cables were severed, apparently by accident, resulting in widespread disruption to Middle Eastern and Asian IT networks. On 26 February 2008 an internet service provider in Pakistan trying to censor YouTube accidentally took down the video site all over the world.
† As a review by regulators put it, the most vulnerable firms (the dominos that will fall first) "tended to champion the expansion of risk without commensurate focus on controls. Valuations were built on wishful thinking. They assumed they knew more about market conditions than they did. And they paid far too little attention to how badly it was possible for things to go wrong". Source: *Observation on Risk Management Practices during the Recent Market Turbulence*, 6 March 2008, Senior Supervisors Group.

Finally, there is *intentional systems disruption*. Al-Qaeda understands the power of achieving maximum impact through minimum effort, and is explicit in its intention to 'bleed America to the point of bankruptcy'. This is a lesson others will learn, as they explore the potential for 'attacking the critical networks…that underpin modern life,' and discover a kind of mass disruption with even more favourable cost benefit ratios than mass murder. As with all terrorism, we shouldn't get too fixated on the physical destruction: it is the psychological impact that matters most. Rupert Smith captures well the essence of 'war among the people', where the aim is to 'turn the power of the state against itself…to win the clash of wills rather than the trial of strength'.

The multilateralism we have

How does today's multilateralism shape up in the face of these risks and vulnerabilities?

We should start by noting some successes. Armed conflicts around the world have fallen by more than 40% since the early 1990s. More wars have stopped than started since 1988. Conflict between states, and average deaths per war, have been falling for much longer.[8] The UN deserves huge credit for these successes, although terrible blunders like Rwanda and Darfur still happen. The EU, meanwhile, has succeeded in its primary goal of achieving lasting peace in Europe, and has become a model for international integration.

Meanwhile, multilateralism has contributed to progress in development. Hundreds of millions have been lifted out of poverty in emerging economies, thanks to engagement with the international economy. A rules-based trading system for all is an unprecedented achievement, with China now a flourishing member of the WTO. And soon, the world will be able to declare itself polio-free; only last month Somalia, one of the most dangerous places on earth, was able to do just that, thanks to the WHO.[9]

Even so, the international system still badly needs reform – as you and your colleagues recognised in 2005, the last time you tried to tackle the issue. At that time, the stars were badly aligned. Amid the palpable air of mistrust and resentment between blocs in the UN post-Iraq and oil for food, it was always going to be a tall order to use the World Summit to move towards a multilateral system built for 21st century challenges. As a result, much of the momentum for change seems to have been dissipated.

Work carried out then, however, means you are not starting from scratch today. The analysis conducted by the High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change remains highly relevant. It recognised:

- Fundamental changes in our 'security climate', with 'unique opportunities for cooperation … matched by an unprecedented scope for destruction'.

- The urgent need for a broader concept of collective security, based on the need to respond to a set of increasingly interconnected risks.

- The imperative of redirecting scarce resources and attention to the most serious risks – those that could wreck large numbers of lives or those that could undermine the integrity of the system we live in.[10]

In turbulent times

A few years on, and the trends identified by the Panel have deepened, while an adequate response continues to be bedevilled by a lack of coherence, capacity and will.

International action is still fragmented by institutional silos, while risk is systemic.[*] The big picture is still only clear at the centre of organisations – in policy planning staffs, National Security Councils, Cabinet Offices and so on. But centres have limited time and attention, which makes it hard for them to imagine, or deliver the long-term cross cutting policy agendas that are needed. All too often, the urgent crowds out the essential. While increasing numbers of risks demand the attention of heads, the limited 'bandwidth' of summits, sherpa networks and telephone diplomacy means that 'initiatives' often substitute for comprehensive frameworks.

As a result, it is almost inevitable that the international system will run out of capacity in the face of the unexpected; its effectiveness degraded during turbulent times. While undoubtedly unfortunate, this is also a clue as to where you should focus your efforts. Previous reform initiatives have focused too much on the organisational paraphernalia of multilateralism: summits, bureaucracies, treaties and communiqués.

Instead, we need to focus on the *function* of multilateralism, rather than its *form*. What outcomes do we want the international system to deliver? How do we expect it to behave when under threat? And who needs to be part of the system, if it is to have greater capacity to deliver change?

---

[*] As the Panel noted, "finance ministries tend to work only with the international financial institutions, development ministers only with development programmes, ministers of agriculture only with food programmes and environment ministers only with environmental agencies."

Two ¦ A Functional Multilateralism

Foundations for reform

The foundation for effective multilateral reform lies in combining greater awareness of the nature of the risks we face, with a fresh understanding of how international politics is changing. The new threats are fluid, interlinked and hard to categorise; and so, increasingly, are the international system's constituents. Global risk management is thus like *a game with the opposite dynamic to chess* – the closer you move towards an endgame, the more pieces flood the board, as groups mobilise to advance their interests.[11]

For this reason, any reform effort must be about more than 'redrawing the organogram'. International organisations are only one part of our global system – and often the part that is most resistant to change. We need a much more *holistic* view of the international system to tackle distributed problems, including informal as much as formal institutions; horizontal networks as much as vertical organisations; and non-state actors as much as governments.[12]

We need an international system that can:

- Move beyond short-termism, to develop comprehensive systems for managing risk.

- Embed national sovereignty in a deeper context, in which the need for cooperative action between states is recognised and acted upon.

- Overcome fragmentation between silos, without falling into the trap of over-centralisation.

- Cope with the unexpected, so that breakdowns can lead to renewal rather than collapse.

- Distribute, as widely as possible, the burden of creating global public goods, while allowing like-minded actors to forge ahead with new approaches.

The function of this system is to deliver three types of outcome. As a destination, shared *operating systems*. And en route, the shared *awareness* and shared *platforms* that make these operating systems possible.[13]

Shared operating systems

Let's start with the endpoint: a shared operating system. Multilateralism is usually at its best when we don't notice it – when it presides over a stable system that ticks along, providing a public good with minimal fuss. No airplane flies without shared global standards for air traffic control, safety and security checks; no remittance gets transferred without international banking protocols. The fact that both systems are

organised by the private sector isn't the point: the important thing is that the *function* is delivered, regardless of the *form* the operating system takes.

What might an operating system for managing a key global risk look like? Take climate change. It is relatively easy to imagine the system's main parameters. There would be an agreed ceiling on greenhouse gas concentrations, and a 'global emissions budget' derived from it. Property rights to this budget would be decided according to a formula that provided countries (or indeed citizens) with a fair share of this scarce resource. A global emissions trading system would tick quietly along, moving the world back to climate stability, and our economies towards decarbonisation.

Or think of an operating system for humanitarian relief. Funding would be raised automatically, *before* disaster strikes – rather than, as now, a frantic passing around of the hat when the crisis is well underway, through the antiquated Consolidated Appeals Process. Agencies would co-ordinate their work, rather than seeing big agencies like the World Food Programme free to go their own way. Top-down mechanisms would be complemented by bottom-up co-ordination, for instance using IT systems to allow NGOs to share out tasks. Interoperability would be far higher, duplication of effort, much lower.

The point about successful shared operating systems is their *stability* and *sustainability*. That's not to say that they are static – far from it. Brittle systems are systems that fail; systems with resilience and longevity, on the other hand, are flexible, adapting themselves to change over and over again. But the core long term objective (a stable climate, or the capacity to respond effectively to emergencies) is already *in the process of being delivered*, rather than being a long term aspiration.

Shared operating systems, then, are the point we are trying to reach on global risks. In reality, of course, we can't jump directly to them; if we could, there would be no problem. So how to get there? This is where *shared awareness* and *shared platforms* are relevant.

Shared awareness

Shared awareness is the precursor to change and involves building a common understanding of an issue around which a coalition can coalesce.

This may sound like a simple, even a trivial, process, but it is not. We're not talking about the circulation of a report or two, or 'stakeholder dialogue' for the sake of it, but rather, a systematic attempt to ensure that all actors are working from an agreed evidence base; that they share an analysis of what changes are needed; and that they are using a common language to recruit others to their cause.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – one of the most important recent innovations in the international system – is the example *par excellence* of a shared

awareness mechanism. In its 20 years of existence, the IPCC has institutionalised the connection between climate scientists and the international community. It has also functioned as an *anchor* for engagement, conversation and debate on the issue, and been responsible for helping bring together governments, businesses and civil society. Without its influence, there would have been little prospect for a concerted and comprehensive attempt at climate stabilisation.

As the IPCC shows, the need for shared awareness applies at every level, from top to bottom: not just between political leaders, but at working level too. Shared awareness also needs to extend *outside* governance systems to encompass relevant *publics*. Non-state actors are key players in 21st century foreign policy: progress on HIV, or climate change, or radicalisation and terrorism, is about influencing the behaviour and beliefs of millions of people, not merely a few hundred diplomats.

What's needed is a shared awareness *just* broad enough to include all relevant players, and *just* deep enough to bring in all relevant expertise. Once that is in place, it becomes possible to start moving towards shared platforms.

Shared platforms

Here, shared awareness is moving towards joint action – but not yet as far as the stable state of a shared operating system. Instead, things are in *flux*.

The Education for All Fast Track Initiative, for example, is a partnership between donor and developing countries that aims to make faster progress towards the education MDG. The FTI is not a comprehensive solution, but was born from the recognition that 'drastic efforts' are now needed if universal primary education is to be achieved.[14] It is an *interface* for building support for the sector, and bringing greater co-ordination to donor efforts, while drawing on pressure for change from civil society organisations, which have joined together in the Global Campaign for Education.

As the FTI shows, the construction of a shared platform may have some technocratic elements to it (for example, the distribution of money) and these may be very important. But it is the development of advantageous *political conditions* that is the critical element of any shared platform. In the case of the FTI, a network of state and non-state actors has developed around a shared goal or vision. The shared platform of the FTI allows them to act together to achieve change.

Unfortunately, this process usually happens *to* the international system, rather than *because* of it. Trade talks are often derailed by groups whose interests are under immediate threat, while a 'silent majority' misses out on the benefit of greater openness. Similarly on climate, inaction now would be at the expense of future generations who lack a voice in current debates. Campaigning work on a shared platform helps lend these quieter voices more weight, while encouraging collective

action and enabling governments to look to longer-term interests – in the process, catalysing change in the international system.

Sequencing is everything

The point of a functional approach to multilateralism is that it allows us to assess the current system according to its capacity to *deliver*. In climate change, for example, we have a vigorous debate on the *problem* but have only just begun to discuss *solutions*.

The road to Copenhagen is sure to be rocky, as the political conditions for change are still far from ideal – and there is, as yet, an insufficiently broad platform on which change can be delivered. We therefore run the risk of making the mistake of believing it will be possible to jump towards a global deal – a new operating system – without putting the foundations in place.

Forgetting the sequence is one of the classic pitfalls of international collective action. For instance:

- ***Shared awareness that's too broad*** leads to a talking shop with high legitimacy, low effectiveness, and minimal prospect of shared platforms (for example, the UN General Assembly; or ECOSOC).

- ***Shared awareness that's too narrow*** won't command the level of buy-in needed to deliver a shared platform (for example, the rejection of the EU Constitution by French and Dutch voters in 2005; or the rejection of much of the UN World Summit agenda by the G77 in the same year).

- ***Shared platforms developed with no shared operating system in mind,*** usually as a result of limited capacity and/or shared awareness, lead to short-term 'initiatives' that don't deliver real solutions (for example, the G8 Renewable Energy Task Force in 2000).

- ***Jumping straight to shared operating systems without developing shared awareness or shared platforms***, leads to badly designed institutions, or treaties that fail to command support or to deliver on their objectives, potentially making matters worse (for example, the UN Commission on Sustainable Development).

So, the sequence is crucial. It focuses our attention on a simple, but often overlooked, fact: success is always a matter of *influencing* change in the international arena where no one actor has over-riding authority. If we develop shared awareness on an issue, we can in turn produce a vision for a shared operating system for managing risk. Only at that point should we work back to establish the coalitions, campaign and evidence we need to get there.

Three ¦ A Recipe for Reform

From theory to practice

So the international scene is characterised by more uncertainty and more actors. In response, we have argued, leaders should focus on the outcomes they seek from the multilateral system: on *function* rather than *form*.

Of course, the process will never be neat or predictable. As von Moltke put it, 'no plan survives contact with the enemy'. That underlines the importance of small groups of like-minded leaders like you, who are prepared to work together on a common set of priorities by:

- Investing in creating shared resources (like the Stern Review on climate change) and campaigns (such as led to the Landmines Convention or the Responsibility to Protect).

- Acting in a systematic way to increase inter-operability between your governments and other like-minded actors in the international system – whether international bodies, other states, or non-state actors.

- Leading debates boldly from the front, by making unilateral commitments, implementing 'pathfinder' policies, and using crisis creatively, to push towards shared operating systems.

Asking the difficult questions

Your starting point should be to *focus hardest on the questions that are most difficult* – rather than leaving them for your successors.

This is especially important at present, for three reasons. First, the prospect of choppy waters ahead. History suggests that in such periods, it is all too easy to sleepwalk into conflict and unilateralism: look at the abrupt end to the 'first phase' of globalisation in 1914, or the disastrous failure to respond to the economic catastrophe of the 1930s. Progressive voices *must* underscore what could be lost, and what needs to be done.

Second, while we have set ourselves a 2009 deadline for a deal on climate, the most important global risk, there is so far no sign that we actually know how to *do* the deal.[15] We are moving towards shared platforms without the shared awareness in place, because we are ducking the hard questions. If stabilising the climate will need a global emissions budget, then how should that be shared out? On an equal per capita basis, or in proportion to national wealth? If a phased transition from the latter to the former, how long?

The same story applies to other scarcity issues, too. Who will pay for the $22,000 billion needed to upgrade the world's energy supply infrastructure over the next thirty

years?[16] If the effect of a growing global middle class eating more meat and dairy products (not to mention using biofuels in their cars) is to take food out of the purchasing reach of the world's poor, then what – if anything – do we propose to do about that?[17] If oil supplies can't meet demand, how will countries avoid competition for energy resources reaching hazardous levels?

And thirdly, asking the hard questions now matters because new leadership in the United States will offer opportunities for new approaches. America's post-9/11 unilateralism is now largely discredited. This is therefore a good moment to reframe the debate, and to be candid with publics that *governments on their own cannot manage global risks* – particularly without public support for unpalatable decisions about what needs to be done. The moment is ripe for a more honest debate about the shape – and costs – of potential solutions.

Looking outwards

We have already argued that we need an approach that overcomes the problems of fragmentation while avoiding the trap of over-centralisation. This implies the need for a *distributed* approach, and a new understanding of the tools we have to work with.

This is a period of marked change for those practicing international relations. Military force is of declining utility, unless it is applied as part of a package of economic, political and diplomatic levers.[18] The nature of diplomacy, too, is being redefined – as governments struggle to develop a new theory of influence in an increasingly chaotic and porous world.[19] Neither can we be sure of our economic levers. Aid donors struggle to achieve progress on governance in fragile states – the bedrock of future development.

A more distributed approach needs to start at the top, with you and other leaders spending more time together – for ultimately, the real deal-making will be done at your level. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon underlined that last year, when his High Level Event on climate change helped to set the political conditions for a preliminary climate deal to emerge in Bali.

Shared awareness will only be created, however, if you escape from your scripts into much less choreographed gatherings. This is not a new insight (it was part of Giscard d'Estaing's vision for the G8), but it's still true. As William Lind observes, 'good decisions are far more often a product of informal conversation than of any formal meeting, briefing or process".[20]*

---

[*] He continues, "History offers a useful illustration. In 1814, the Congress of Vienna … did what aristocrats usually do. It danced, it dined, it stayed up late playing cards for high stakes, it carried on affairs, usually not affairs of state. Through all its aristocratic amusements, it conversed. In the process, it put together a peace that gave Europe almost a century of security, with few wars and those limited. In contrast, the conference of Versailles in 1919 was all business. Its dreary, interminable meetings … reflected the bottomless, plodding earnestness of the bourgeois and the Roundhead. Its product, the Treaty of Versailles, was so flawed that it spawned another great European war in just twenty years. As Kaiser Wilhelm II said from exile in Holland, the war to end war yielded a peace to end peace."

As leaders, *you* should be the ones creating the ideas that coalitions and networks can cluster around. Your role is to set out a narrative that will *frame* the analysis, and *shape* the subsequent debate. Then, you need:

- Sherpa systems with much more bandwidth, with full-time sherpas spending their time on intensive and frequent engagement with each other, and across all issues (rather than, as now, focusing on negotiating text while spending most of their time on other, more pressing, tasks).

- A bottom-up approach to organisational reform, encouraging officials to think more creatively about shared risks, while sending out signals that this kind of work is actively encouraged not only *within* your government and organisations, but – crucially – *between* them too.[*]

- A commitment to a much more open-textured approach to international diplomacy. This is not just about engagement with the public, but a directed attempt to work with targeted groups who are prepared to form part of a 'gradually expanding alliance' on a key global challenge.[†]

Looking forward

In sum, we are arguing for like-minded leaders to adopt an assertive *forward stance* in the international arena.

- First, we believe that you should push for the international system to develop **capacity for the integrated assessment of risk**. One way of doing that would be to task the UN Secretariat with preparing a new Global Risk Report – *jointly* with the international financial institutions, specialised agencies like WHO or FAO, and perhaps even with regional organisations like the EU or ASEAN.[‡]

- Second, we recommend that you develop **a function for asking awkward questions** about interlocking risks – and the unintended consequences of policy interventions. We need more 'red teams' that can actively seek out problems, evaluate policies, and help the international system learn from its mistakes.

---

[*] This happened in 2004 in the UN, when a group of reform-minded mid-level staff calling themselves the 'Low Level Panel' decided to prepare a report to tell their superiors how to fix problems in areas like recruitment, IT, personnel management and field / HQ relations.

[†] The phrase is from the World Economic Forum: "An additional institutional innovation suggested in Global Risks 2007 was the creation of an avant-garde of relevant governments and companies around different global risks. The report argued that the urgency, complexity and multiple trade-offs in global risks require structures which can respond flexibly, assemble quickly and achieve legitimacy through success. 'A process of gradually expanding alliances rather than a proposition requiring permanent consensus; may offer a better way forward. But, even under conditions of extreme interdependency, the problem of mobilizing collective action to mitigate global risks remains. One strategy to activate coalitions to mitigate global risks may lie in an improved understanding of national risk exposures and identifying clusters of countries that are exposed to the same risks in similar orders of magnitude.'" For reference see endnote 4.

[‡] This would provide a mechanism for reaching out to private sector organisations that are active in the area, such as the World Economic Forum, and will prove especially relevant during this period of global economic crisis.

- Third, we would like you to commit to a new system of *'wargaming' joined-up responses to global risks*. Resilience cannot simply be willed into action. Systems – and their interoperability – need to be tested. The military practice their responses at strategic, operational and tactical levels. We need the international system to do the same too.

- Fourth, we think you should **start preparations for another World Summit**, which is mooted for September 2010. If it were to be preceded by another High Level Panel process, what should its remit be? How can it build on the 2005 exercise? Now is a good moment to be thinking about the broad agendas that such a process should encompass. What should they be?

- Fifth, we hope you will recognise the importance of **using pre-emptive action, and not just words**, to shape the international agenda. In Bali, the European Union used its unilateral commitment to emissions reduction to try and drive progress towards a deal. But we need more follow through on this issue, and comparable positions on others. Forging ahead on these issues is the powerful signal of seriousness that you can make.

- And finally, we urge you **to be prepared for a crisis when it comes**. As Milton Friedman once put it: "Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the political impossible becomes the politically inevitable".[21]

Four ¦ Towards a Progressive Multilateralism

Conclusion

These are challenging times for multilateralists.

We live in a world with a growing population that has mounting aspirations, is equipped with increasingly sophisticated technologies, and is able to communicate amongst itself at high speed. In the coming years, two forces will drive a fundamental change in the context. First, scarcity – the reality of limits to the sustainable consumption of a few highly strategic commodities (energy, land, water, food, 'atmospheric space' for emissions). And second, instability – the tendency for complex systems to experience unpredictable and unsettling shifts.

There is no doubt that these forces will be exploited by those who favour isolation or chaos, potentially leading to a dangerous spiral of disintegration and decay. At its most extreme, this spiral would only be stemmed once a significant depopulation had been achieved. But systemic breakdowns will not necessarily lead to outright collapse; they can also lead to processes of renewal, as when the 1906 San Francisco earthquake led to the creation of the Federal Reserve system.[*]

So political leaders – and especially *progressive* leaders – need to be in the vanguard of a much deeper engagement with the risks we face.

In part, this means accepting the limits to what governments can achieve, turning attention to points of weakness, and ensuring that global institutions focus tightly on their core mission, guaranteeing collective security; in part, it involves investing in *resilience* in the face of risk.

But above all, it spells out the need for a confident internationalism. The ability of the international system to deliver on its promises – moving to a low carbon economy, responding proportionately to security threats, supporting fragile and failing states and so on – will be decisive.

And this requires a new commitment to co-operative action. Like-minded states have no choice but to work together, inventing a new diplomacy that integrates all aspects of their hard and soft power, to deliver on shared interests rather than national ones.

---

[*] As Thomas Homer Dixon recounts in *The Upside of Down* (2006)*:* massive insurance claims from the earthquake destabilised the London insurance market; with the gold standard still extant a huge flow of gold from London to San Francisco ensued; British money supply suddenly contracted, threatening a deflationary spiral; the Bank of England doubled interest rates in a month and cracked down on purchases of US debt by British banks; US debt markets became squeezed and its economy weakened; by October 1907, a New York Bank failed amid a serious liquidity crunch; whereupon J.P. Morgan organised a group of bankers to tuck themselves away in a rural retreat, where they drafted the outline of the Federal Reserve System.

At the heart of the new agenda will be the needs of individuals, and the contribution that they, and the groups that they form, can make; a real commitment to subsidiarity, so that power is distributed more widely throughout the system and only those issues that truly belong at a global level, reside there; deep understanding of the fact that a system is only as strong as its most vulnerable members; and perhaps above all, real commitment to 'fair shares' – an essential prerequisite for bringing together countries and people of radically different income levels.

The new agenda will require a particular type of government – one that is both visionary *and* disciplined; forceful in the articulation of its beliefs, and clear in the description of its responsibilities; prepared to lead from the front, while actively enabling others to engage with it in joint action.

So finally, it becomes a question of values. The catastrophes of the first half of the twentieth century left us with a particular vision of security, and a multilateral order that was riven by two competing ideologies. Now, we have to fight again for the 'meaning' of the international system – and reform it to embody the changes we want to see.

Acknowledgements

About the authors

Alex Evans is a Non-Resident Fellow at the Center on International Cooperation (CIC) at New York University, where he runs CIC's work on climate change and global public goods. He was seconded to the UN in 2007 as part of the team co-ordinating the Secretary-General's high level event on climate change. He is also leading a joint CIC – Chatham House project on the international implications of rising food prices. From 2003 to 2006, Alex was Special Adviser to Hilary Benn, the then UK Secretary of State for International Development.

David Steven is a policy analyst, strategic consultant and researcher. He is Managing Director of River Path Associates where he specialises in international responses to global risks, the development of communications and influencing strategies, and intercultural dialogue. David's research on international development has been published by journals such as Science and World Economics. His paper on Foreign Office reform was published in September 2007 by Manchester University Press as part of its Alternative Comprehensive Spending Review.

David and Alex are currently running a Demos project entitled The New Public Diplomacy, through which they will publish a pamphlet later in the spring, and are developing a new project on the resilience of international systems. Previous joint publications include *Climate Change: the state of the debate*, published by the London Accord in December 2007. They jointly edit Global Dashboard (www.globaldashboard.org), the foreign affairs and global risks blog.

---

[1] Real Historical Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Growth Rates of GDP for Baseline Countries/Regions (in billions of 2000 dollars) 1969-2007; Updated: 3/10/08; Source: World Bank World Development Indicators, adjusted to 2000 base and estimated and projected values developed by the Economic Research Service, United States Department of Agriculture; Also reference: WTR 2007

[2] UN Population Fund, *State of World Population 2007*

[3] Wharton Risk Management and Decision Processes Centre, *Managing Large Scale Risks in a New Era of Catastrophes: insuring, mitigating and financing recovery from natural disasters in the United States*, Wharton University, March 2008

[4] World Economic Forum Global Risk Network, *Global Risks 2008*

[5] For an interesting discussion of the implications of this shift, see Martin Wolf, "The dangers of living in a zero-sum economy", *Financial Times*, 18 December 2007

[6] Alex Evans, "What will matter in 2020? – the challenge of scarcity and resilience", speech at Wilton Park conference, 31 January 2008

[7] David Leonhardt, "Can't grasp credit crisis? Join the club", *New York Times*, 19 March 2008

[8] Human Security Report Project, *Human Security Report*, 2005

[9] Global Polio Eradication Initiative, "10,000 health workers stop polio in one of the most dangerous places on earth", news release, 25 March 2008

[10] UN High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, *A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility*, 2004

[11] Alex Evans and David Steven, 'Beyond a Zero-Sum Game' in British Council ed. *Talking Transatlantic,* British Council, 2008

[12] David Bloom, David Steven, Mark Weston, 'Governance Matters' in *World Economics,* Volume 5, no 4, Oct –Dec 2004

[13] Alex Evans and David Steven, *Fixing the UK's Foreign Policy* Apparatus, May 2007. See also 'Fixing the Foreign Office'*, Comment is Free, Guardian*, May 2007, online, and David Steven, 'Foreign and Commonwealth Office' in Colin Talbot and Matt Baker, eds., *The Alternative Comprehensive Spending Review 2007,* Manchester University Press, 2007

[14] http://www.education-fast-track.org

[15] Alex Evans and David Steven, 'Climate Change: State of the Debate' in Michael Mainelli, Jan Peter Onstwedder, eds. *The London Accord Final Report,* City of London, 2007

[16] World Energy Outlook 2007

[17] Joachim von Braun, *The World Food Situation: new driving forces and required actions*, International Food Policy Research Institute, 2007

[18] See for example Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: the art of war in the modern world*, Allen Lane, 2005

[19] Alex Evans and David Steven, *The New Public Diplomacy: towards a theory of influence for 21st century foreign policy*, Demos, forthcoming

[20] William Lind, "Conversations", at http://www.lewrockwell.com/lind/lind123.html.

[21] Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, University of Chicago Press, 2002