

**Fair shares in a world of limits: the new front line for international development**

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In case you haven’t had a chance to read the [paper](http://wwf.org.uk/wwf_articles.cfm?unewsid=5104), here’s the argument in one sentence: As the 21st century global economy hits natural resource limits and planetary boundaries, fundamental questions about fair shares will start to arise – and these questions will increasingly come to be seen as the new front line for international development.

All of us here are aware that demand for resources of all kinds – especially food, oil, land, water and ‘carbon space’ for greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere – is growing exponentially. That’s just a logical consequence of the world’s population continuing to grow, and the global middle class becoming larger and more affluent.

And we’re also aware that even as demand grows, supply is in many cases struggling to keep up. The yield gains of the agricultural ‘Green Revolution’ are running out of steam. Competition for land and water is intensifying – between farmers and pastoralists, food and fuel, urban and rural. Investment in new oil production is inadequate to meet future demand, according to the International Energy Agency, even before peak oil is taken into account. Carbon space is acutely limited if the world is to limit global warming to anything close to two degrees Celsius.

More broadly, we’re increasingly aware of planetary limits of other kinds. Johan Rockstrom’s work at the Stockholm Resilience Centre, which highlights nine key [planetary boundaries](http://www.nature.com/news/specials/planetaryboundaries/index.html) from the nitrogen cycle to stratospheric ozone and from chemical pollution to biodiversity, has become extremely [topical](http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-god-species-how-the-planet-can-survive-the-age-of-humans-by-mark-lynas-2313620.html). And it puts the issue of limits on the table in perhaps less polarising fashion than debates about limits to economic growth.

Now to be clear: recognising that limits exist in the real world does *not* mean that we’re stuck in some deterministic nightmare in which we’re doomed to end up in a neo-Malthusian tragedy of the commons.

On the contrary, I think we can be confident that markets will adapt and that technological innovations will emerge – as they always do.

But that process of transition will take time. It will need to overcome inertia, market failures, externalised costs and perverse subsidies. And until it’s complete, poor people and poor countries risk losing access to resources that they depend on for their basic needs. And so any discussion of limits is also, inevitably, a discussion about fair shares.

Now this is not merely hypothetical. We need only look around us at the issues we’re all already confronting in our work.

* Within many fragile states, disputes over access to land and water are becoming intense. In the process, they’re [multiplying the threat of violent conflict](http://www.globaldashboard.org/2010/09/10/do-resource-scarcity-and-climate-change-cause-violent-conflict/). We saw that in Darfur from 2003 to 2010 and in the post-election violence in Kenya in 2008. And we see it today in insurgencies in rural India, and in the violence currently taking place in the Horn of Africa.
* Internationally, the trend of ‘landgrabs’ has seen [80m hectares](http://www.economist.com/node/18648855) (an area considerably larger than France) acquired in deals since 2001, with poor people all too often displaced from communal lands as a result. The same theme can be seen offshore too, for instance in EU trawler fleets snapping up fishing rights off [Senegal](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13470734).
* Or take food price inflation. Whether it’s structural drivers like the US now diverting 40% of its corn crop to [biofuels](http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/poverty-matters/2011/may/31/global-food-crisis-real-cost-biofuels) and millions more consumers shifting to resource-intensive ‘western diets’ or amplifiers like export bans or futures speculation, the impact is that food prices are soaring – in the process, slipping out of reach of many of the world’s poorest.
* Or look at energy. Spiralling oil prices risk are squeezing poor, import-dependent countries out of the market: between 2004 and 2007, over a dozen African countries spent [more on oil imports than they received in aid](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/005d1f30-b5b0-11dc-896e-0000779fd2ac.html#axzz1Ry5mAjVH) and debt relief. And in the world’s mushrooming cities, electrical ‘load-shedding’ and brownouts tend to see poor consumers lose out most, if indeed they have access to electricity at all; 1.4 billion of them don’t.

Across all these examples, it’s the same underlying dynamic. When overall global consumption levels start to reach limits, it’s poor people who risk getting left without chairs when the music stops. And with supply and demand balances for key resources set to tighten still further, these examples are just trailers for forthcoming attractions.

So how should aid donors, campaigners, think tankers and others of us working in international development react?

Well first and most fundamentally, I think we need to be out there making the argument about why resource and environmental limits are so central to development.

The examples I listed a moment ago are the thin end of a very thick wedge. On top of them are amplifying factors like the low adaptive capacity of the poor, their particular reliance on natural assets like land and water for their livelihoods and wellbeing, the fact that environmental shocks are so often part of why people become poor in the first place or find it so hard to escape poverty thereafter, and so on.

Second, we need to recognise just how much of a game changer resource limits are for global fairness and equity agendas.

To be sure, inequality is rising up the development agenda anyway. While global inequality has fallen steadily in recent years, in-country inequality is rising in both Asia and developed countries – and it’s becoming a big deal politically. Already, some commentators are pushing for the post-2015 development agenda to focus on inequality rather than just on absolute or dollar a day poverty.

But once you stir limits into the equation – whether to particular resources, or to economic growth per se – arguments about equality take on a much harder-edged tint.

Left and right have long disagreed about more or less everything, except the existence of an expanding ‘cake’ to share out. As long as the cake *is* expanding, then you can argue – as the political philosopher John Rawls famously did in his *Theory of Justice* back in 1971 – that inequality is OK if the worst off people are better off, in absolute terms, than they’d be under an equal distribution. But if the cake is finite, then by definition more for the better off means less for the worse off. It’s a much starker proposition – and it will take some getting used to.

By extension, thirdly, we should underline that fair shares for the poor in a context of resource and environmental limits is *not* just about justice. It’s also a recognition of what it takes to coexist in a massively interdependent world.

If the world slides into a century of zero sum competition for scarce resources – with export bans and land grabs the opening act in a play that unfolds towards increased military spending, strategic friction and perhaps worse – then everyone will lose from the resulting instability.

Conversely, facing up to the need for fair shares is also a prerequisite for managing global commons like the atmosphere. Policymakers have spent two decades studiously ignoring the central question of how to share a safe global carbon budget out between 193 countries – with policy options that could provide the answer, like [Contraction and Convergence](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Contraction_and_Convergence), left on the shelf for someone else’s term of office. As a result of this failure to face up to the hard issues, greenhouse gas concentrations continue to climb higher every year.

Fourth, I think we could usefully point to examples where policymakers and publics *have* embraced the principle of fair shares. [Rationing in World War 2](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rationing_in_the_United_Kingdom) is the obvious case, but there are more interesting examples too. In Alaska, for instance, all adult citizens receive an equal [dividend payment](http://www.pfd.state.ak.us/forms/2010Forms/2010DividendCalculation.pdf) from the state’s oil and gas production each year – an [interesting case study](http://capanddividend.org/) for those of us involved in climate policy.

Above all, I think we need to recognise and emphasise that the resource limits and fair shares agenda is primarily global.

To be sure, there is much to be done within developing countries – from pushing for equitable natural resource governance regimes, to dramatically scaling up social protection provision that can help poor people to secure their basic needs.

But given that the key demand drivers for natural resources are global, the solutions have to be too. This is a point that too often gets ducked or kicked into the long grass – as for instance in the first report of the UN food task force, which in discussing access to food talked a lot about social protection, subsidies and humanitarian assistance, but hardly at all about biofuels, consumer waste and western diets.

The bottom line here is that unless developed countries and the ‘global middle class’ dramatically reduce their consumption levels – until such time as technological innovations are available that mean we don’t have to worry about scarcity any more – then there will simply not be enough space left for the world’s poorest countries and people. Ensuring that doesn’t happen is from now on the new front line for international development.

*Alex Evans* is the author of a new[*discussion paper*](http://www.wwf.org.uk/wwf_articles.cfm?unewsid=5104) on Resource scarcity, fair shares and development, published by[*WWF*](http://www.wwf.org.uk/)and[*Oxfam*](http://www.oxfam.org/en/grow/reports)*. He is head of the resource scarcity and climate change program at NYU’s* [*Center on International Cooperation*](http://www.cic.nyu.edu/)*, and editor of* [*Global Dashboard*](http://www.globaldashboard.org/)*.*