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A Jolt in Consciousness

Contribution to GTI Forum [After the Pandemic: Which Future?](#)

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We are at a tipping point, where the future could go in any of the three directions of GTI's [scenarios](#): the basic continuity of Conventional Worlds, the descent of Barbarization, or the progression of Great Transitions. Powerful forces are mobilizing enormous financial resources to return to business-as-usual for the benefit of the rich and powerful, planting the seeds of the next crisis in the process. At the same time, the world could easily turn towards barbarism as authoritarian politicians fan the flames of populism, xenophobia, racism, and fragmentation feeding off the anger and frustration of those left behind by the neoliberal economy.

How do we resist these forces of disintegration and tip the balance towards the Great Transition?

The forces of integration have also been building momentum, with information systems uniting the world as never before and empowering a sense of belonging to one human family. Increasing numbers, particularly among the young, are working to overcome the forces that divide us and to lay the foundations for an emerging world civilization. Until now, they have had little success in overcoming the momentum of the dominant system.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created possibilities that previously seemed unrealistic. The brakes have been slammed on the globalized economy that has been plundering the planet's resources, affecting every country simultaneously. The unsustainable debt bubble that has been maintaining economic momentum is now expanding, fed by massive government expenditures to prevent economic collapse, making a financial crisis almost inevitable. While wealthy urban areas were struck first, it was only a matter of time before COVID-19 hit Third World cities and the rural poor, disrupting agriculture and raising the risk of global famine. None of this has reversed

the climate crisis that is setting back development and imposing increasing costs on society. The chaos and suffering on the horizon could be horrendous. It is hard to imagine how we might return to life as it was before. At the same time, many obstacles to change are being weakened or swept away.

The door may now be opening for a significant transformation in human society. A consumerist lifestyle that seemed essential to many now appears superficial and meaningless, as more important human values and social relationships emerge. People that labored invisibly in the lower reaches of our communities suddenly are appreciated for the critical services they perform. The persistence of poverty in distant countries that has long been ignored is now understood as an immediate threat to our global future.

A complete reimagining of the whole economic system may be necessary to start over on a more moderate, just, and sustainable basis. What should be our priority faced with such challenges? Beyond assuring our immediate health and safety, there is a desperate need for positive ways forward. In part, these must be spiritual in nature, reinforcing a sense of solidarity for all the members of our human family, building a spirit of community with everyone of good will, and helping people to rise to their higher human purpose. More generally, many around the world are questioning the basic assumptions underlying our consumer society and asking fundamental questions about what is really important in life. They are finding that much of what they considered necessities were not after all. Cut off from normal interactions, they are discovering how important human contact and social relationships really are.

This can help to build wide public support for rapid and constructive change, the paradigm shift called for in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda, a fundamental transformation to a society and economy rooted in justice and sustainability.

We now have an opportunity to imagine in more detail what the Great Transition might do to address the crises that are now so obvious. What global health system should we build that would guarantee to every human being an adequate level of care in a pandemic, as well as during normal times, and that would integrate the world's capacities to respond to such emerging threats? How might we use the new information technologies to better coordinate global food production,

both ensuring decent incomes to farmers and rural workers at the base of supply chains, and guaranteeing a healthy diet to everyone on the planet? What global financial system could raise the revenue to provide such services as basic human rights through graduated taxation on all forms of wealth creation, guaranteeing a minimum income to everyone in need, and preventing the present excessive accumulation of individual wealth? What system of global governance could ensure world peace, protect and manage the global environmental commons, eliminate corruption and extreme inequality, and ensure national autonomy and diversity in a spirit of subsidiarity?¹

We need to be able to convince both world leaders and the global public that there are practical and positive ways forward towards the Great Transition, and that now is the time to start. We may not be able to prevent the crises on the immediate horizon, but we can already start planning and building what should come after. We do not have all the answers, but we have through our values a direction of travel and a willingness to learn. If we share openly, listen to each other in all our diversity, explore contributions from whatever source, act on the best ideas, and reflect together on the results, we can move forward. In these dark times, we all need to rise to the occasion and to face the future positively and creatively.

Endnotes

1. See my recent book with Augusto Lopez-Claros and Maja Groff: *Global Governance and the Emergence of Global Institutions for the 21st Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

About the Author



Arthur Dahl is President of the International Environment Forum and a retired Deputy Assistant Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). He has consulted for the World Bank on indicators of development, advised projects on values-based indicators of education for sustainable development, and served as co-coordinator of the UNEP Major Groups & Stakeholders Advisory Group on International Environmental Governance. As a specialist on coral reefs and small island developing states, he spent many years in the South Pacific where he organized the Pacific Regional Environment Programme.

About the Publication

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