

Seeking Alternatives in a Global Crisis

By Federico Mayor

“The 21st century will finally be the century of the people”.

A.1) It is impossible to continue as we have until now.

As was to be expected, replacing the United Nations system and large international institutions with groups of plutocrats (G-7, G-8, G-20) and universal principles with the laws of the market has led to multiple crises that requires immediate reaction to prevent them from becoming irreversible:

- . Food crisis
- . Climate crisis
- . Social crisis
- . Financial crisis

Neoliberalism has placed military, energy, economic and media power in the hands of a very few (the “great domain”). The markets –for the most part undeservedly “rescued”- are now harass political leaders, making democracies progressively more vulnerable.

2) We are now at a turning point.

Although the majority of political decision-making is still in the hands of men, for the first time in history the percentage of women in decision-making positions has increased, gender equality is advancing and civil society is becoming aware of its power, heralding a rapid transition from subjects to citizens that in the early years of this new century and millennium will prompt transformations that were previously unthinkable.

3) The crucial role of communications.

Communication has increased globally and despite the huge amount of biased and partisan information emanating from the media, there are still audiovisual and print media that provide reliable and independent news. Noteworthy among them is the emergence in the Arab world of *Al Jazeera*, which has prompted the dissemination of information and dialogue among other cultures and countries that until recently were virtually isolated.

But in that regard the most important change (to the extent that it will shortly prompt not only an epoch of change but also a change of epoch) is the “new beginning” proclaimed in the *Earth Charter*, which thanks to cyberspace and new communications technology will be facilitated by distance participation and will have an extraordinary impact in shaping that other possible world that humanity longs for and deserves.

B.1) The Current Great Challenges

. Attempts at world governance by the “G groups.”¹

. An economy based on greed, speculation and outsourcing of production. The result of neoliberalism, in which the markets have replaced values, has been catastrophic for mankind as a whole: social inequality has increased; multinationals have not only received economic power from the Nation-States but, what is very troubling, political responsibility as well; and the lack of regulatory and sanctioning mechanisms to address supranational transgressions promotes sinister trafficking in weapons, drugs, people, patents and capital with total

impunity... The existence of tax havens is likewise one of the greatest challenges for the “normalization” that is required on a global scale.

. Immense military spending (4,000 million dollars daily) with the aggravating circumstance that the majority consists of outdated military hardware appropriate for past wars, which is useless in present-day conflicts.

. Exploitation instead of international cooperation, frequently implemented through huge consortia that blur the political responsibilities of governments and open wounds that are very difficult to heal in co-existence on an international scale.

.Untenable social inequality. Only 17% of mankind lives in the world’s “wealthy neighborhood”, the rest being distributed in progressive levels of hardship, with over 1,000 people living in conditions below the poverty line. In that regard, food security² undoubtedly deserves special attention.

.Undue delays in the courts, mechanisms, and legal institutions in charge of enforcing International Law, resulting in numerous delinquents and offenders who act with total impunity.

The majority of these challenges began in or have increased since 1989 in which, at the end of the “Cold War”, expectations of global understanding, particularly through actions coordinated by a United Nations system duly endowed with the necessary personal, technical and financial resources, could have responded to the hope generated by the bloodless fall of the Soviet Union, the elimination of racial apartheid in South Africa and the successful conclusion of several peace processes (El Salvador, Mozambique, Guatemala...).

However, in just two decades neoliberal “globalization” has prompted the multiple (social, economic, food, environmental, democratic, ethical...) crises in which we are presently immersed, although for the first time in history we have the means for mobilizing people and involving citizens in local and global government, which enable us to affirm that we are living in fascinating times in which radical changes are now feasible.

C.1) Possible solutions

... “to face great challenges it is necessary to surpass the limits of what is possible”.

*Dilma Rousseff
Brasilia, January 1, 2011*

The possible solutions –that may render many of today’s impossibles the realities of tomorrow- must inevitably be based on equal dignity for all human beings and on social justice. Placing ethical and democratic values at the forefront of public and private activities, so that social justice rather than the markets manage the economy at all levels, will enable us in a few years rectify our present misguided direction and to get back on course.

• The “refounding” of the United Nations is one of the most important and urgent means of rectifying our present course, to endow humanity with the required guidance, coordination

and justice systems. A transition from the current plutocracy to the “democracy” that the United Nations represents, certainly including within its scope the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank for Reconstruction and Development, as well as the World Trade Organization (deliberately placed in the early 1990s outside of the System’s institutions), which along with a General Assembly with representation from member nations, but also international institutions and civil society, would provide the broad framework for governance and the international reference that the world needs. This multilateral framework must rapidly be adopted, if necessary through an immense mobilization of citizens, so that the power unduly ceded to the 20, 8, 7, 6... 2... 1 most wealthy countries of the world may cease. A diverse world urgently requires a plural system of governance, which must immediately be endowed with all of the necessary resources.³

It is certainly true that the UN cannot be replaced by G groups that, moreover, lack the institutional framework to enable them to implement decisions taken.⁴

With all of the appropriate weighting of votes, but without veto rights, there would be three councils:

- Security Council
- Social and Economic Council
- Environmental Council

Together with BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China), other regional associations would be promoted: in addition to the United States (with Canada) and the European Union, in a few years UNASUR in Latin America, the African Union, Central Asian and Southeast Asian organizations would become well established to facilitate world governance and the rapid formation of great alliances in the aforementioned areas, to avoid conflict to the extent possible.

The capacity for foresight that must be present, especially in this type of systems, would likewise facilitate adoption of preventive measures and the means for reducing the impact of natural catastrophes.

In addition, the International Court of Justice and its associate legal institutions must be afforded greater efficiency to ensure strict enforcement of international law.

In that regard, over the years the United Nations has issued a series of essential document-guides that, if implemented, would resolve many of the problems addressed.

In addition to the “classic” documents (United Nations Charter, Universal Declaration of Human Rights,... Agenda 21, Commitments for Social Development... Declaration and Action Plan for a Culture of Peace...) I would like to mention other more recent ones that could free us from the latest “pitfalls” of neoliberal globalization, such as the Declaration of the Latin American and Caribbean Unity Summit and the Cancun Declaration (on the international financial crisis; trade; energy; science and technology; social programs and the eradication of hunger and poverty; food and nutritional solidarity; education, health and public services, migration, gender; sustainable development, climate change; natural disasters; human rights; the global drug problem; terrorism ...).⁵ In that regard the Cancun

Declaration addresses practically all of the great challenges of our times... The problem is that the markets still dictate the guidelines for politicians' conduct. But as I have already indicated, this undoubtedly won't last much longer.

Regarding Spain, an excellent report entitled "Global Change Spain 2020/2050 – Energy, Economy and Society Sociedad"⁶ was recently published.

2) I am summarizing below some of the measures that should be adopted by the abovementioned councils of the new United Nations "System":

- Security Council

- Nuclear Disarmament. Implement the decisions concerning progressive arms reduction (September, 2009) recently agreed at an extraordinary session of the Security Council presided by President Barack Obama.

- New strategies. New weapons. The weapons industry "colossus" must adjust itself to the world's real security needs, ceasing to manufacture and impose on the "allies" military equipment designed for past conflicts.

A "reasonable" level of disarmament is essential in the fight against poverty and in promoting universal access to education.⁷

- Coordination to reduce the impact of natural and man-made catastrophes. It is as incomprehensible as it is unacceptable that powerful countries that are armed to the teeth are totally helpless when faced with natural disasters, even recurring ones. There already exist appropriate closely-studied measures for different types (earthquakes, floods, fire volcanic eruptions...)⁸.

- Capacity to arbitrate and resolve conflicts. When warranted, Blue Helmets and technology can be deployed proportionally in those conflicts that can't be prevented. They would likewise have the capacity to resolve disputes involving authoritarian regimes such as China, and in inadmissible situations of dominance, as is the case of Israel with respect to Palestine.

- Broad powers concerning legal systems that contravene human rights (the death penalty, for example).

- Peaceful co-existence. Security forces must ensure compliance with the law, progressively reducing the hugely expensive military installations that to-date represent a large part of domestic spending in addition to the armed forces, with citizens being obliged to submit to the will of the powers that be. The transition from a culture of violence and war to a culture of dialogue and peace would provide not only positive benefits in welfare and quality of life, but would also boost citizen self-esteem and reduce one of the largest and most inefficient areas of national economies. For this reason it is important to rapidly implement a genuine policy of alliances, summits and dialogue to increase transparency in relationships and behavior that at present, and unfortunately as is quite obvious, are motivated exclusively by profits, while distractedly looking the other way.

"It is important for us... to make sure that we are talking with each other in a way that heals, not that wounds", declared President Obama recently in an excellent speech in Tucson, Arizona. As he likewise did in El Cairo in June, 2009 when offering an outstretched hand to Islam instead of declaring it an "axis of evil" as his predecessor George Bush did, the current

president of the United States is attempting both at home and abroad to prompt a genuine “change of culture”, which would have so much impact and significance on the legacy that we must leave the coming generations.

- Social and Economic Council, to achieve throughout the world:

- Monetary, financial and trade regulation, especially through the corresponding, duly “remodeled” institutions (IMF, WB and WTO).

- Immediate elimination of tax havens.

- Strict supervision of supranational trafficking, particularly of drugs that, like tobacco and alcohol, would be available at moderate prices, since it has been proved that high prices have no dissuasive effect and only promote mafias and narco-terrorism, prompting serious conflicts such as Mexico is currently experiencing, especially because the largest consumers (such as the United States) insist on reducing offer (exterior) rather than demand (interior).

- Foresight and capacity for immediate action to correct speculation and outsourcing of production,⁹ with profits that conceal precarious living and working conditions.

“The financial markets have demonstrated their nearsightedness”, wrote Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz¹⁰... “Only political change will put Europe and the United States back on the road to growth”. Only with this global capacity can foresight prevent not only the markets’ harassment of political governance but also the emergence of new “bubbles”, such as the communications technology bubble in 1993 and the real estate bubble of 2008, while likewise preventing tax fraud.¹¹

- Raising funds by charging fees on electronic transactions,¹² essentially to be used in the fight against poverty¹³ and major social objectives. Income generated by copyrights of works in the public domain must also be used.¹⁴

- Implementation of a “basic income”, in ways that are most appropriate for the most vulnerable sectors of the population.¹⁵

- Redesign global economic directives based on a new general consensus (such as the Barcelona Consensus)¹⁶ and inspired in recent practice that deserves close analysis, such as the sustainable “blue economy” expressed in GNH (Gross National Happiness) implemented in Bhutan.¹⁷

- Economy based on sustainable global development to ensure the minimum conditions for a reasonable quality of life for all citizens. Specifically:

- *Nutrition*⁸: agriculture

- aquaculture

- biotechnology

- *Water*¹⁹: collection, transfer, management, and adequate production through desalinization, particularly through the use of thermo-solar energy.

- *Health*: access to the appropriate technical, clinical and therapeutic services. Demographic decrease has been compensated by greater longevity, which increases chronic treatment and neuro-degenerative illnesses. Promoting preventive measures, particularly with respect to potentially irreversible diseases such as loss of mental faculties resulting from genetic or post-natal alterations, undoubtedly constitute the greatest victory both in medical as well as social and economic terms.

- *Education*: Access for all citizens to an education that would enable them to make full use of their distinctive aptitudes (the capacity to think, imagine, invent, create) based on their own reflections and without being subjected to the dictates of another.

- Environmental Council: this Council would coordinate and supervise compliance with guidelines for maintaining the world’s conditions for habitability, based on important

documents such as the Earth Charter.²⁰ In that regard Leonardo Boff has written about “safeguarding our Common Home”.²¹ Containing climate change and ensuring our ecological future concerns all of us as a personal daily responsibility and commitment. Briefly summarized, the following matters must be addressed:

- Sustainable energies:²² Consumption of oil and other fossil fuels that produce carbonic anhydride and other greenhouse gases is largely the cause of climate change and environmental degradation. The greed of oil producers is manifested in the fact that for many years they have attempted to hide the negative impact of using oil as practically our sole energy source.²³ During our present crisis oil prices have played the greatest role in financial collapse, currently posing a serious threat to the slight economic recovery that was commencing. It is essential to achieve renewable energies for 40-45% of consumption within the next few years, especially in cities, using solar energy (photovoltaic and thermo-solar), wind energy, sea energy, nuclear fusion when possible and, in the meantime, nuclear fission, progressively introducing other sources such as thorium... . Only then will it be possible to slow climate change before irreversible damage is done to the environment. Production of large quantities of thermo-solar energy in deserts could now be achieved with the use of graphene, obtained from an abundant mineral (graphite), which given the difficulty of storing energy would enable massive amounts to be transferred from production sites to distant places where it would be used.

But, moreover, it is limiting consumption of oil and other fossil fuels that would ultimately enable us to enjoy this fundamental substrate for all organic chemistry synthesis for a longer period.

The geostrategies of “black gold” will rapidly change in a very short time. In fact, the petroleum industry’s center of gravity is now shifting toward China, Russia and Brazil.²⁴

- Quality of the seas: The majority of carbonic anhydride recapture takes place in the oceans in which phytoplankton, with chlorophyll (as is the case with green plants) captures the most oxidized form of carbon (CO₂) together with the most oxidized form of hydrogen (H₂O) and produces reduced compounds (fuels) thanks to solar energy. In consequence, deforestation must be regulated and the quality of the seas monitored, which are presently affected by large oil tankers that, once again due to greed, discharge tank washing oil sludge into the seas instead of using the appropriate in-port installations, thus creating low-density oil residue on the ocean surface that asphyxiates phytoplankton cells, depleting the seas’ capacity as the “world’s lungs” occupying over 70% of the earth’s surface.

- Soil quality: Particularly, regulation of the use of fertilizers and pesticides by the appropriate use of transgenics, conducting thorough research projects such as the transfer of nitrogenase systems typical in legumes to rice roots, rendering them capable of directly capturing atmospheric nitrogen, thus significantly reducing the consumption of nitrogen fertilizers.

D. 1) At this point we have made concrete proposals to meet the current great challenges and to be able to commence genuine “*world governance base on knowledge and scientific rigor*”.

But a question immediately arises: How can the transition be made at the speed required from governance by the most powerful to world governance within the framework of a truly efficient United Nations system? Until now the answer was really difficult because the intervention of citizens in public matters was very limited. But finally, in the last few decades the possibility of distance participation via cyberspace has opened previously unimaginable opportunities not only to strengthen democracy, but also through massive virtual mobilizations to promote policies, strategies and actions that were heretofore impossible. The enormous powers of the media²⁵ attempt to maintain us as passive spectators, as distracted recipients, but I have no doubt –and this is our greatest present hope- that thanks to new communications technologies citizen participation will greatly increase, intervening directly in decision-making. Citizen power and awareness of the need to speak for the voiceless, for those who are invisible,²⁶ will provoke profound changes throughout the world.

Now more than ever it is essential to recapture time, to eradicate the political inefficiency, detachment and indifference of so many citizens who have been badly or misinformed by the partisan and biased communications media.

The outward changes required must commence with changes in each person's daily behavior. To achieve this great historic change from force to words, each citizen must be aware that he is capable of inventing his own future, fleeing the fatalism of what is perceived as inevitable or invincible.

Only then will it be possible to achieve the “new beginning” announced in the Earth Charter as the great objective of an inhabitable world for all, without exclusions. Yes, the 21st century can indeed be the century of the people because, as in Miquel Martí i Pol's poem, everyone will repeat: “...let me say that now is the time for love”.

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