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Summary:

The current food and energy crises may be unprecedented in their global impact, yet they are only symptoms of the deeper problems of structural inequality throughout the world. In keeping with the growing discourse on global citizenship, I propose that society must be redefined, widening its traditional focus national borders to encompass all humanity. This will form the basis for the development of a new social contract which recognizes the right of all to realize their well being. Only in such a situation can well being be said to exist, and therefore have the possibility of improvement.

Essay:

The impact of the food and energy crises is still reverberating throughout global society. Irrespective of age, race or geographical location, the simultaneous increases in fuel and food prices negatively affected the quality of life of many people. The real consequences are still emerging. Crises of this nature have the most adverse effects on those who are most vulnerable – the poor, traditionally marginalised and excluded groups, and countries of the developing world operating on the periphery of the global economy. They constitute the majority of the world's population, and find themselves left with limited options to secure their own survival. The subsequent financial crisis has exacerbated the situation, forcing millions into destitution while restricting opportunities for improving their conditions. This is a recipe for global catastrophe. For as the linkages between the countries and people of the world become deeper and more intricate, what affects one inevitably impacts on all. The ability of all people to meet their basic physical, mental and social needs and to participate meaningfully in society – the key components embodied in the concept of well being – has been compromised. If society is understood as a global community unlimited by geographical borders, then it is fair to argue that improving its well being involves an honest examination of the pervasive systems of inequality and exploitation in all spheres – global, regional, national and local – and a commitment to rebuilding relationships based on equity, empathy and sustainability.

Society can be said to be the critical mechanism differentiating humans from other species. It is a space for interaction, giving us identities and providing meaning for our existence. It also, through its various structures such as government and the rule of law, moderates our interactions with each other to ensure that no individual or group is chronically disadvantaged by the actions of another. Crises result from the failure of society to perform this critical function.

The current situation is the result of the wants of particular groups taking precedence over the needs of others. An illustration of this point is the removal of small subsistence farmers from lands then amalgamated to form soy plantations in parts of South America. The soya was then used as an ingredient for cattle feed needed to sustain the beef industry. Already marginalised, these farmers lost their livelihood and the means to supply themselves with food and see their villages face an uphill struggle for survival, all for the sake of providing the developed world with steak. There are many levels of inequality present – small farmers and plantation owners, local livelihoods and national industries, developing countries and the developed world. Those who have built their existence around unsustainable patterns of consumption, realised through exploitation and inequality, have been comforted by their geographic and social distance from those who suffer as a result. There has also been a claim of ignorance of any inequalities. Yet, in an age of disappearing borders, this distance is shrinking, and unprecedented exposure to information negates any excuses of ignorance. Those most affected are demanding the right to be seen as humans and not objects, to restore the humanity denied to them by corporate interests who reduced them to numbers for the bottom line. Transnational threats such as terrorism are fuelled by the discontent of those who global society has excluded and marginalised. While extreme, they are essentially manifestations of the crisis of global society.

Recognition of the root causes of societal crises represents the first step in redefining the social contract for global society. This new contract requires adherence to the principles that have only just begun to gain acceptance within the previous narrow view of society. Principles such as accountability, transparency, equity, and a duty of care to those who have been marginalised or disadvantaged in various ways, and for various reasons. Fundamental shifts in thinking are implied in the recognition of these principles. They affirm the humanity of all people, and assign value to their lives and experiences irrespective of gender, ethnicity, or economic status. They validate the existence of relationship, complete with responsibilities and rights and an acceptance of interdependence. Only with this foundation in place can well being truly be said to be possible within society, and therefore capable of improvement.

It is, undoubtedly, a mammoth task to change the collective consciousness of the planet's population. Social change is a slow and daunting process, but history has shown us that it is indeed possible. Crises such as the one we currently face represent two things. Firstly, it is a symptom of ill health, an indication of the absence of well being. If we use this medical analogy, then it is up to us to investigate and diagnose the disease, treat the symptoms, cure the illness and mitigate its risks of recurrence. Some actors are patients, others doctors, others scientists, others are caregivers. Yet it requires the work of all to manage the disease. This is a collective responsibility, which may we assume or shirk. However, the consequences are ours to bear. Secondly, crises represent opportunities to grow or to regress. The promotion of urban agriculture throughout London has done more than improve supplies of food. It has provided opportunities for people artificially separated by status and background to

discover with each other through a shared connection with the land in community gardens. It has grown vegetables and friendships, reduced the strain on budgets while providing free entertainment. It has given purpose to people's lives, enriched their interactions with each other, and provided mental and physical stimulation. It has enhanced well being. Yet it must be conceded that the urge to protect individual positions and reticence to change, is strongest during crisis.

In conclusion, it must be acknowledged that there are many challenges facing society, of which the food and energy crises are only two. It is essential that the underlying problems of structural inequity be addressed in order to assure the well being of all members of global society. Only then can well being be truly attained and improved.