

Summary

While it is true that we are faced with a growing food and energy crisis, it is important that these issues are not seen, or dealt with, in isolation. These and other crises we face must rather be recognised as the symptoms of a rather deeper malaise, one anchored within the depths of the human condition.

We live in ambiguous times. Shades of grey have always filled the cleft between black and white but today this discontinuity stands more as a chasm. It is the gradual closure of this uncertain interspace of moral standing that will guide us to a sustainable future.

Main Body

With the passing of each generation mankind faces a novel set of challenges. It is our innate ability to respond in the face of changing circumstances that confers upon us the right to call the world our own. Currently, we stand at a precipice seemingly born of the laws of economics but with the implication, certainly, of failings inherent in the human condition. The changes that follow must make the human experience a more sustainable one, and two specific areas where we face challenges are to do with food and energy.

Our way of life in the developed world, and increasingly in emerging nations, is powered by the use of energy. For the most part, this is potential energy, that which has through natural processes been locked away deep under our feet. Its release has undeniably revolutionised every facet of society but we now become increasingly aware of the potential pitfalls that await us if we do not continue to innovate. These are twofold: first there is the reality that such energy is a finite resource, already the search for new reserves has become cripplingly expensive; second is the knowledge that emissions resulting from combustion of such fuels are changing our ecosystem in a potentially damaging and irreversible manner.

A few decades ago, there was a great optimism as far as the world food supply was concerned. New innovations greatly expanded the total world food production capability and it seemed apparent that malnutrition would in due course be eradicated. Years later we still await this most basic example of human accomplishment. Skewed income distributions and an ever burgeoning population – especially where it cannot be sustained, combined with continued regional strife leading to poverty, difficulties of distribution and yes, apathy, ensures that in the year 2009 over a billion people live in hunger. Yet we maintain that this is a world at the pinnacle of civilisation.

At the intersection of the food and energy crisis is the issue of biofuels. The jury remains out as far as potential environmental benefits go, and it is easy to regard biofuels as simply renewable fossil fuels. It is clear that the diversion of agricultural land to the production of energy impacts foodgrain prices internationally, with the poor suffering the brunt of the effect. While a limited biofuels programme may have its place as a stopgap during the transition between non-renewable and renewable energy sources, its long term viability is very much in question. At the immediate present, the most promising avenue towards ameliorating the energy crisis appears to be accelerated investment in technologies and infrastructure programmes that contribute to increased energy efficiency.

Conflict, be it international or internal, greatly affects the global prognosis. It is astounding that this relic of our past continues to dog us so, and until mutual diplomacy can be relied upon we face many added challenges. Conflict channels away vital resources and restricts freedom of ideas and communication. The emerging and particularly insidious variety – terrorism – presents particular challenges quite separate from the manner of dispute we have witnessed previously. World leaders must do more to recognise and address the ideological origins of this phenomenon and the socioeconomic disenfranchisement experienced by many of its proponents.

We must not examine the challenges we encounter in isolation. It is my fervent belief that at the root of the obstacles that currently hinder us is an altered sense of direction: the direction which we use to shape our actions. It is therefore of paramount importance to stress that the implementation of any plan to pull us back from the precipice requires change at the very core of human behaviour. We must strive to let our collective actions be guided by the highest moral standards. The failure suffered by the global financial system has been a timely reminder of the inherent frailties of the winner takes all economy that has governed our world of late. This exposure has the potential to ease the path of leaders unafraid to implement policy designed not for the instant gratification – or appeasement - of the voting public but for the progression of the human race in an equitable, sustainable and tangible manner. This must be a goal national leaders share for the world, not just their own fiefdoms. In the age of globalisation there is no place for the pettier, more short-sighted aspects of patriotism.

The world requires leaders able to instil in their people the virtues of an almost forgotten age – the tenets of fairness, conscientiousness, dedication and yes: sacrifice. The pursuit of monetary gain alone is not, in a healthy society, sufficient to motivate sustainable progress; somewhere along the line the critical link between remuneration and the creation of real value has been lost.

Well being can be defined loosely as a state of health, happiness and prosperity. Medical science has contributed greatly to our health, but it seems that beyond a certain level, a tenuous, perhaps divergent relationship exists between the pursuit of prosperity and that of happiness. It was the head of the obscure Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan who once said that his focus was not merely upon gross national product but also on “gross national happiness”. No doubt it would contribute to our well being to be safe in the knowledge that most of our fellow human beings share it.

We speak of “progress”, we yearn and we strive for “progress”, perhaps it is time to stop and remember, consider, and maybe even reconsider just what it is we mean when we say “progress”.