

Vinyl 2010 Essay Competition

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Summary:

A crisis is a social phenomenon affecting the lives of many people, and so is often considered too big a force to be dealt with by individuals. However, the government often cannot react quickly enough or address all facets of the crisis, where socially involved people can form active networks and achieve tangible progress. One way is to use the model of the European Commission town twinning program to connect volunteer organizations from across the globe. After the initial contact is made possible, they can team up and address issues both locally and globally, with some, mostly diplomatic, help from their governments.

Essay:

Coping with a crisis is usually considered the government's priority, and most people feel the food and energy crisis to be too overwhelming for a single individual to be able to help in any way. However, a sure approach to solving a problem is dividing it into small, doable steps. Crises can be alleviated in the same way, and while governments work out the bigger parts of the problem, there are many smaller but significant steps groups of individuals can take. Individuals are much more flexible than political mechanisms and can offer quick and much needed relief to problems the government may not even see or be able to address effectively.

There are two sides to a crisis. First, there is a dearth of resources in some places; and second – there is plenty in others. It is a problem to have surpluses because usually this surplus goes to waste while it can be used to alleviate the crisis in other places. Moreover, waste is also a source of problems. The totality of this issue is inefficiency in dealing with the resources combined with a growing population worsening the existing inequalities – some societies have less than they need, others more. A crisis is the consequence of the unequal distribution of natural or economic wealth among the countries; an inequality aggravated by the constant growth of the world's population. Crises in the distribution of vital resources such as food, fresh water and energy affects people's lives the most and tends to have long-term consequences.

What causes such crises, other than a dearth of resources? The second option is for a country to have enough resources itself, but its government does not distribute them among the people, thus creating an artificial shortage. Third, a country could be importing from neighboring countries, and when conflicts occur, this supply chain is broken, and a crisis ensues. The ideal scenarios that follow are then two – either a country has sufficient resources and the government helps make sure everyone has access to them, or the country does not have its own but has well-working diplomatic relations with other countries, which supply the needed resources.

So the question is how to achieve either of the happy scenarios. I have always believed in the power of the individual to bring about change. A single person is an agile unit of society, flexible, non-bureaucratic, and an engine of change. It takes a long time to get a political mechanism working, while people usually are ready to get ahead. I do not mean

just the power of single acknowledged leaders, such as Gandhi or Margaret Thatcher but the power of any person with a will for change. A healthy, thorough process of improving the wellbeing of society will start with energetic, thinking individuals. And this process can start with small steps. It is not hard to find small groups of people interested in using resources rationally, and willing to work to achieve it. What will happen, if one connects these groups of initiative-takers and allows them to work together? What can trigger such a process is a free flow of information between countries and their citizens. The government merely needs to facilitate these people and let the synergy from the combined efforts of such determined people start the healing process.

The European Commission town twinning program is a good illustration of how this could work. People from different parts of the world could get together in an intricate network, where groups with similar interests can work on solving issues together. Although the town twinning is mostly a tool for cultural exchange, if taken further, it could develop into a strong network of cooperating active citizens. The most important role governments should play is to facilitate this process by providing diplomatic support when needed, and perhaps cooperating with projects which go beyond the expertise or span of small organizations.

One hypothetical example of such cooperation could be: a volunteer organization in Bulgaria, a part of this future network of involved people, works on implementing energy-saving devices in the country. However, when they try to popularize energy-saving light bulbs, the lack of lampshades for these bulbs on the market hinders their progress. An organization with similar interests in Romania becomes a part of the network and helps negotiate with a local lampshade producer who could start exporting to Bulgaria, thus removing that first obstacle. Once people with similar beliefs and determination are connected with each other, it is a matter of time until they start pacing forward. And such groups are born from people's discontent or desire to improve their situation, so they are much more targeted and quick to act than any action the government could take.

Barack Obama said in his inaugural speech: "And to those nations like ours that enjoy relative plenty, we say we can no longer afford indifference to suffering outside our borders; nor can we consume the world's resources without regard to effect." Indeed, this is the way to face the crises that our societies go through. More and more people start caring about the global problems people are facing and want to work on solving these problems. Such individuals form a healing force that can win many supporters and help the governments overcome the crises afflicting the global society.