

Summary: The crises we face can be tackled if we learn from our past successes, while avoiding the temptation to oversimplify the problems of sustainable development. Diversity, and the unequal distribution of resources on the planet, if approached correctly, can be a boon to progress, not an obstacle.

The greatest problems, as well as the boundless opportunity that drives world trade and communication stem from the inequality of resources on the Earth's surface. We build a structure on top of this diversity that allows us to embrace trade as equals. Economics aims to give everything a value commensurate with its utility to a trading partner. Philosophy, and the rights and government it has produced, make race irrelevant and shows up the futility of wars and conflicts. Underneath, the differences of course remain. But like the layers of oil paints that are built up to produce form and shape in a painting do not detract from its beauty but enhance it, so human and ecological difference is the sublime textured pattern of life on Earth.

Natural resources are scattered around the planet without regard to population or politics. If it were otherwise, there would be no trade, no communication, no civilisation. Entrepreneurs are thankful for this disparity. So why should environmentalists be otherwise? The world's cards are shuffled, and it is up to its inhabitants to play them right. One nation is a bread basket, another sits atop aquifers and caverns of oil, another has natural beauty that attracts tourists. And that is to say nothing of the multitude of talents and skills honed and developed by every culture over millenia.

There is a harmful tendency to ignore the minutiae of sustainable development problems in the pursuit of a simple bullet-point solution to our crises. Ethanol from plants is used to cleanly fuel cars; it works for a while, until production expands and the food we make from these same plants becomes scarce. So-called oil for food programmes collapse when it becomes clear that a one-for-one barter does not work when different societies place a higher value on one or the other and the difference is siphoned off in corruption and inefficiency. Gas drilling can harm fish. Fish and fears for their conservation can block hydroelectric dam construction. Both fuel and food are vital resources, but this does not mean they are exchangeable. Quite the opposite - they should be separated at all costs, lest a change in demand for one leads to either famine or economic failure.

To date the most successful international endeavour is the United Nations. The crisis facing the world in 1945 was the frightening possibility of another, even more devastating war. By 1953 both world superpowers had a nuclear bomb, the planet was split in two belligerent halves, each with the nuclear trigger at the ready. The UN this year celebrated the 60-year anniversary of the declaration of human rights, rights which most signatories have enjoyed for some time now. The construction of the Large Hadron Collider, a project with no less an ambitious goal than to study the origin of the universe, is another success story of human co-operation. The Collider is the creation of CERN, a European organisation that reached out on a global scale to attract the planet's best minds, and serves as a hub for half the world's particle physicists. Co-operation on a global scale is the only way to tackle the problem of continuing humanity's progress in a sustainable fashion.

The crisis we face now may not be as immediate as nuclear annihilation, but is every bit as grave. The enemy, again, is ourselves, and our self-destructive way of life. Consumers on an individual basis are now conscious of more than price. They are concerned about where their food has come from, how safe it is and what harm it does to the environment. Nations are re-examining their energy sources and maintaining their stubborn grip on domestic agriculture as new, capable rivals emerge. On the international level, though, barriers remain, trade is inefficient and ultimately reckless and dangerous.

The sooner we realise that inefficient trade and competition is harming us all, the sooner we can overcome the barriers to co-operation. A project in India recently persuaded a large group of small landholders to irrigate their land together instead of separately. This simple intervention from an outside NGO managed to overcome the individual hostilities between the landholders that were barriers to their collective development. In effect, this project is a microcosm of what must be done on a global scale, between nations.

The major barrier is the backward and inward views held by many nations and a reluctance to band

together. Man is a social animal, realised Socrates 2,400 years ago. United we stand and divided we fall, proclaimed a song during the American War of Independence. Humanity though history has ceaselessly changed and diversified, but has always prospered in co-operation. We have changed, but the logic remains the same.