

Sharing the World's Wealth, Power, and Resources, by Adam Parsons, Share The World's Resources

What does it mean to talk about the simple practice of sharing in economic and political terms? By way of a basic definition, we could say that economic sharing means to act cooperatively as a global community of nations; it means recognising the environmental limits that we have to work within according to the principle of equity; and it therefore means transforming the structures and institutions that perpetuate the multiple crises we face.

But if our human understanding of sharing is to mean anything at all in a world of plenty, it must surely mean an end to all instances of life-threatening deprivation and poverty-related deaths as a foremost global priority. Every day we fail to act, an additional 40,000 preventable deaths will occur from a lack of access to adequate food, clean water and essential healthcare. At the same time, ecological turmoil is triggering natural disasters that are already devastating communities and escalating poverty, displacement and deprivation. According to some estimates, climate change is now contributing to the avoidable deaths of around 400,000 people every year. And these figures don't even include the harsh impacts of austerity policies and the effects of the financial crisis, which as we know are widening inequalities and causing profound hardship for millions of people across the world.

Government rhetoric might convince us that policymakers are doing a great deal already to help prevent unnecessary hardship both at home and abroad, but this is far from the reality. We don't have to wait until 2030 to end extreme poverty, for example, when we have the means to achieve far more than this within an immediate timeframe. Providing basic social protection to all people living in extreme poverty would only require 2% of global GDP, and ensuring that the poorest people have enough food, energy and income could be achieved with little additional demand on planetary resources. Yet the only international system we currently have for aid provision remains linked to political and financial restrictions that dramatically reduce its effectiveness, and rich nations will not collectively hit the 0.7% target for another 50 years at current trends. In light of the humanitarian impacts of the global emergency we face, it is clear that government priorities remain wholly distorted and that we are not even beginning to do enough.

In a recent report called *Financing the Global Sharing Economy*, STWR illustrated how governments could mobilise more than enough money to reverse austerity measures, prevent life-threatening deprivation and mitigate the human impacts of climate change. One of the key intentions of the report was to make the simple case that governments could mobilise these resources within the framework of the current economic system, and even before initiating the more complex and lengthy process of restructuring the world economy. By implementing a variety of redistributive policies, from tax and debt justice to redirecting perverse subsidies, governments could raise several trillion dollars every year to help strengthen and scale up systems of sharing, both nationally and globally.

Such figures may be broad estimates, but they demonstrate the potential for governments to collect and redistribute huge quantities of additional public finance for critical human needs – often money that policymakers have led the public to believe does not exist or cannot be found during a time of economic crisis. Yet not since The Brandt Commission's proposal in 1980 for an 'emergency program' of assistance to developing countries have policymakers seriously considered a large scale transfer of resources from North to South as the first part of a programme of international economic restructuring. The necessary political will to implement Brandt's program of economic sharing was sadly lacking at the time, but the scale of the world's humanitarian emergency is even greater today. If governments are ever to end this moral travesty, we simply cannot afford the same level of political complacency to continue.

Global economic restructuring

To be clear, any such program to redistribute the world's financial resources will not address the underlying causes of poverty, inequality or climate change. Addressing these systemic causes presents a huge challenge that will ultimately require substantial reforms to our economic systems, from the way we extract, produce, distribute and consume resources to the influence that multinational corporations wield over society and policymaking.

These critical reforms cannot occur until governments move beyond the self-interest and aggressive competition that characterises domestic and foreign policy, although there is still little indication that politicians are willing to consider such changes. Nevertheless, in order to inspire public support for transformative change it is worthwhile to discuss a broad outline of the new economic arrangements that should be urgently established in the years ahead.

These critical reforms cannot occur until nations move beyond the self-interest and aggressive competition that characterises domestic and foreign policy, which will require challenging the dominant economic model that most governments are heavily invested in maintaining. Nevertheless, in order to inspire public support for transformative change it is worthwhile to discuss a broad outline of the new economic arrangements that should be urgently established in the years ahead.

Perhaps the most essential step towards implementing any systemic form of sharing is for governments to recognise that natural resources form part of our shared global commons and should therefore be managed in a way that benefits all nations. At present, it's almost impossible to underestimate how far away we are from such a recognition. For example, we know that developing countries are still underrepresented in the management and decision-making procedures of the world economy, and the richest countries remain unwilling to change a globalised system of trade and finance that is structured in their favour. And there still doesn't exist a central international body that is fully empowered to oversee coordinated action from all countries on the entire range of global development issues, let alone to discuss the cooperative management of the global commons. But however far-fetched it may seem within the current framework, sooner or later humanity is going to have to take collective responsibility for stewarding the planet's finite resources in a sustainable manner.

A precedent for sharing natural resources is already well established with the existing principle in international law known as the 'common heritage of humankind', which is an important feature in a number of international treaties that have taken shape under the auspices of the United Nations. This principle enables certain cultural and natural resources to be protected from exploitation, from both the state and private sector, by holding them in trust for future generations. And there are many options outlined by progressive thinkers for how a similar kind of trusteeship over the world's natural resources could be organised on a global level. Essentially, a global commons trust could set a cap on a particular resource to ensure it is used sustainably and protected for future generations. Businesses could then rent a proportion of the resource from the trust rather than own it, and the rent paid for the resource could be used to fund a range of social or environmental needs.

Harmonising consumption patterns

Regardless of how such a trust is organised, it stands to reason that if resources are managed in the interest of all nations it could be possible to harmonise the world's hugely unequal consumption patterns, even though achieving such a balance is obviously a tremendous challenge in a world driven by consumerism. The basic premise of this adjustment would clearly necessitate the world's over-consuming countries to significantly reduce their resource use, while less developed countries increase theirs until a convergence in global per capita consumption is eventually reached. This broad concept is similar to the 'contraction and convergence' framework, which is already widely discussed in relation to tackling climate change, as originally proposed by Audrey Meyer of the Global Commons Institute.

There's also been a lot of work done by various NGOs on the concepts of 'Environmental Space' and 'Fair Shares', which provides a practical tool for calculating the amount of any particular resource that can be consumed by a country without threatening the continued availability of that resource, assuming that everyone in the world is entitled to an equal share. Of course, any ground-breaking international framework for rebalancing unsustainable consumption patterns would be impossible without also implementing more democratic, inclusive and effective forms of global governance. And the United Nations, although in need of significant reform and democratisation, would clearly have an important role to play in this process.

At the national level the real challenge is reducing consumption levels in industrialised nations, and again lots of proposals already exist for how to achieve this. Among the many reforms needed, it is clear that resource management would need to be at the forefront of policymaking, and consumption-led economic growth can no longer be the goal of government policy. Much also needs to be done to dismantle the culture of consumerism through restricting advertising, implementing better trading standards, ending planned obsolescence and other measures; and investment patterns must shift to building and sustaining a low-carbon infrastructure, alongside a vast array of energy and resource efficiency measures.

Barriers to progress

This is merely a snapshot of the immense changes that would be needed if any process of global economic sharing was implemented as a solution to the world's environmental and developmental crises. Needless to say, all of these reforms remain entirely off the radar for most policymakers given the unwillingness of governments to even accept the principle that everyone should be given a fair share of the world's resources. The dominant trend is still towards the centralisation of state and market power, and the shifting of real power away from ordinary people and communities towards largely undemocratic global institutions and multinational corporations. As each critical year passes by, we are paying witness to the further concentration and control of private interests over land, resources, and all aspects of peoples' lives.

What's also clear is that non-governmental organisations and campaigning groups are not sufficiently united or strong enough to challenge these immense forces of profit, power and control. There's a sizable literature that discusses the limitations of large civil society organisations to effect transformative structural change, as most of the mainstream CSOs work within the same business-as-usual political context as governments and the private sector, or else they focus on single issues and short-term wins, or remain constrained by a narrow policy-oriented approach.

If it is therefore clear that governments, private institutions and civil society organisations acting alone are not capable of steering the world onto a just and sustainable course, perhaps the question is: can we imagine a new movement of ordinary people that can fill the vacuum in global leadership? And is the growing power of the people's voice capable of being organised into some kind of implacable countervailing force that no government or vested interest can withstand?

This is a question that is being asked by a number of campaigners and intellectuals who are now talking about the need for a global citizen's movement. And the dramatic series of popular protests since late 2010 have provided concrete evidence of the potential power of a united 'people's voice' to effect wholesale, systemic change. The world has witnessed millions of people in diverse countries declaring their needs and highlighting issues of social and economic inequality, greed, financial corruption and the undue influence of corporations on government.

A global call for sharing?

What's interesting to note is that these various protests movements are all calling for greater economic sharing in one way or another, and what connects them is their revulsion against an economic system that has caused such huge inequalities in wealth and income. For example, many of the Arab uprisings may have mobilised to oust repressive dictatorships, but they also reflected a worldwide reaction to enormous and growing socio-economic divisions. There are also massive calls now for an end to austerity measures, or for more progressive taxation, as in the UK and US-Uncut actions; or calls for an end to greed and inequality, as in the Occupy protests; or calls for the sharing and conservation of natural resources, as in the Idle No More demonstrations in Canada.

The question that remains is whether the need for sharing and redistribution can be recognised at the international level where the unequal distribution of wealth and power

manifests in huge discrepancies in living standards between the richest and poorest people. So far, the priorities of the new wave of protesters still tend to be national in their focus, or else they remain concerned with social justice and inequality within the context of the rich, industrialised nations. But is it possible to envisage a collective demand for a fairer sharing of the world's resources that unifies citizens of rich and poor nations on a common platform, one that recognises the need for global as well as national forms of redistribution as a pathway to ending poverty and extreme inequality?

This leads to a conclusion that may seem radical, despite its obviousness and simplicity. Perhaps a necessary process of economic restructuring and world rehabilitation can only begin with a united people's voice that speaks on behalf of the poorest and most disenfranchised, and gives the highest priority to the elimination of extreme deprivation and needless poverty-related deaths. If this is a prospect that we can take seriously, then we need to ask if it's possible to envisage a vast swathe of the world population, in the rich world as well as the poor, rising up in peaceful protest to demand a more equal distribution of the food, raw materials and energy sources of the planet. If so, and if the case for global sharing captures the public imagination as quickly as the calls for distributive justice within individual countries, then perhaps an end to global poverty and injustice can finally become a realistic possibility.