

Ecological security: a ‘more imaginative’ response involving youth

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The Netherlands Pugwash Group, together with International Student/Young Pugwash (ISYP), has initiated a Pugwash Study Group on New Challenges to Human Security [1]. In calling their first Pugwash Workshop and ISYP pre-workshop, which were subsequently held in Wageningen, The Netherlands from 16-18 June 2006, the organisers identified the theme of ‘environmental security’ as one of the foci of that workshop [2]. They observed both that a long-term approach to human security necessitates the inclusion of environmental concerns in present policy making, but also that there is a clear reluctance to do so.

The Wageningen Call continued: ‘We would like to venture that a more imaginative response is needed’. The organisers went on to provide four reasons: (a) environmental (really ecological) tensions are likely to rise due to further environmental degradation and the lack of remedial public action, (b) sub-national problems may soon affect national levels, (c) our desire to show responsibility towards future generations, and (d) shared environmental (ecological) resources and problems may help bridging divides in society and thus become a vehicle for peace.

The Wageningen Call also asked for a pragmatic approach to, and framing of, the issues, that works towards practical solutions – ‘resolutique’ instead of only ‘problematique’ and ‘knowledge for action’ rather than only ‘knowledge for understanding’. In response to the call, I participated in both ISYP and Pugwash workshops. In the ISYP Workshop I presented my views on this issue, which are briefly outlined in this comment.

While I concur with the need for the ‘resolutique’ and action, I also believe that the former is effective only when the nature of the problem has been grasped. If we first make the effort to understand the ‘problematique’, our ‘knowledge for action’ may lead us to find solutions that had yet to be considered. So, I begin with a review of my understanding of the ‘problematique’ and then proceed to an attempt at an imaginative ‘resolutique’. I will describe the approach that I am currently developing with Our Task, Inc. [3].

The 'problematique' the 'resolutique' is to resolve

The Wageningen Call offers some helpful commentary on the nature of the 'problematique' as it relates to ecological security.

1. Environmental issues tend to have a long 'incubation' period before they become a threat to human security.
2. Even if appropriate remedial measures are taken, the time for recovery is long and exceeds the time scale of most decision makers.
3. If species are lost or ecosystems are destroyed, recovery within human time scale is impossible.
4. Environmental (ecological) degradation and natural resource scarcity contribute to migration and conflicts and deprive future generations of unique resources of which we cannot know the value.
5. These losses may impose severe constraints on future societies.
6. While a long-term approach to present policy making for ecological security is self-evident, the short-term timeframes of politicians, economic considerations, and a discourse of 'national interest' tend to push the ecological agenda down the ladder of policy priority.
7. All the above characteristics contribute to the lack of urgency for environmental (ecological) issues at the present juncture and to the overall trend where they are losing prevalence in policy and public discourses.
8. However serious the costs may be to future generations, these do not form a constituency to which decision-makers feel responsible or which can hold them accountable.

To this assessment I would add that (a) humans continue to see themselves as being separate and distinct from an 'environment' rather than as being an integral part of an 'ecology' consisting of the whole community of life on Earth; (b) that humans have no sense of identity as a species and no framework for inter-species ethics, and (c) that the dominant human sense of proper relationship with Earth is that of 'use', and (d) that human numbers and expectations continue to grow.

A 'resolutique' for the 'problematique'

The particular issue at hand is that, until recently, it has seemed to us humans that Earth was so enormous that we could never change it in any significant way. But, as Peter Vitousek et al. wrote, 'In a very real sense, the world is now in our hands' [4].

A fundamentally challenging issue is that we have not designed our decision-making systems appropriately to manage the planet that 'is now in our hands'. The current system is based on the concept of sovereignty of nation-states, meaning that states have a monopoly on the use of power and no power on Earth can compel a nation-state to do something it does not wish to do [5]. Such a system does not recognise the reality of a borderless, integrated planet. Nor does it address the long time constants associated with global ecological developments. Nor does it represent the interests of the other-than-human beings or even the

interests of future generations of human beings. And what little global decision-making capacity we have is not supported by an overarching authority or by any ability to enforce global decisions.

Even more difficult is the fact that while our religious and spiritual traditions have evolved elaborate systems of human-human ethics, they have relatively little to offer by way of interspecies ethics. For the most part, we human beings do not think of ourselves as a ‘species’ and we have no widely accepted ethical or moral guidelines mediating our relations with other-than-human beings. Such a code is in need.

To the degree that humans have an agreed upon ‘resolutique’ for the ‘problematique’ it consists of the Millennium Declaration, the Millennium Development Goals, and the Millennium Project Report. The Millennium Development Goals and the action plan for their implementation (the Millennium Project Report) are constructive steps for they can lead to some important accomplishments if the industrialised countries actually contribute the funds and change their policies as recommended in the Millennium Project Report. That said, however, the Declaration, the Development Goals, and the Project Report are not a ‘resolutique’ for the simple reason that they do not address the ‘problematique’. A central aspect of the ‘problematique’ is that the human species must find an appropriate niche in the ecology of the whole community of life. The whole community of life is primary; humans are secondary. In the MDGs, humans are primary and the ecology of the whole community of life is only an afterthought.

Indeed, we humans are the conscious part of Earth that has learned the thirteen-thousand-million year history of how the community of life on Earth came to be. We, as a species, have learned that collectively we control not only our own fate but also that of the whole community of life. But until we comprehend who we really are, all of our discourses will be a problem in themselves, and we will be ineffective in framing either problems or solutions. One need go no further than the word ‘environment’ for an example of a difficult discourse related to human identity. We use the word ‘environment’ to say that there is us – human beings – and there is our ‘environment’ – everything else. Part of the ‘resolutique’ must be to strike the word ‘environment’ from our dictionaries and edit all of our writings to replace this word with ‘ecology’ and the knowledge that we are one species integral with the whole community of life. Our principle challenge now is to find our niche in the ecology and discipline ourselves to live within the limits of our niche.

A similarly problematic part of our discourse is the concept of ‘sustainable development’. The Brundtland Commission’s definition [6] was problematic because it entailed an anthropocentric perspective. Over time, the term has come to mean making the minimum possible change to avoid killing the current human population while allowing population and material through-put to continue to grow. This is not an adequate or sustainable human goal. And there are many other words needing clarification, among them ‘progress’, ‘earth’ (versus ‘Earth’), and ‘profit’. In my opinion, we will not get beyond our problematic discourses until we are clear about who we are and the assumptions and paradigms behind the words we use.

By shifting the focus of our discourse to culture we can begin to clarify the terms of the discourse and the magnitude of the task ahead. We can begin thinking about the nature of culture and how it develops. We can think about the agents of cultural change and how they might be brought to an understanding of the ‘problematique’ and to collaborate in defining and achieving the ‘resolutique’.

In my view the 'resolutique' can be nothing less than a global culture unified by a species-wide goal of a mutually enhancing relationship between humans and Earth [7]. Anything short of this is not the 'resolutique' but only problematic discourse.

Roles for scientists

Scientists and academics have special roles to play in achieving a mutually enhancing relationship between humans and Earth. They can

- Help us to perceive the large, integrated picture of the human condition, not just individual specialties.
- Help us to remember the continuing menace of nuclear weapons and nuclear knowledge.
- Help us recognise the menace of other technologies of mass impact.
- Help us develop the systems-oriented, interdisciplinary tools that are needed in the perpetual task of managing Earth.

Roles for academics

Of all the culture-shaping establishments, none has a more important role to play than the university. The university has a significant influence on the world view of all human professionals – lawyers, scientists, physicians, etc. Here are a few suggestions:

- Green the physical plant, the curriculum, and the research of each campus. Many campuses do not set an example of sustainable living, and many universities have been for decades a place to go to learn how to destroy Earth, not save it.
- Develop a required course for all entering students on the history of the universe and the role of the human in the universe.
- Include system dynamics in the curriculum [8]. This way of thinking is essential to developing the policy tools needed for managing the complex, non-linear, feedback systems of social and ecological systems [9].
- Develop partner relations with universities in developing countries.

The role of Pugwash and ISYP

Pugwash has already made enormous contributions in helping humans to live with nuclear knowledge. If it were not for the quiet work of Pugwash, it is possible that by now humans could have used nuclear weapons to destroy their cultures and much of life on Earth. Now, new global threats have come along. Especially significant is the accelerating human assault on Earth.

Pugwash has embraced the discussion on new global threats. The Wageningen Call, for example, covers two issues of conflict in an era of terror and environmental security. Pugwash can usefully work on these two issues more or less independently, as other groups are, but it seems to me that a unique contribution that Pugwash could make is to give attention to the interrelated nature of these two sets of issues. A driving factor for the desperation that contributes to terror is the growing awareness that 'development' has failed the world's poorest. No matter how hard they work, neither they nor their children can aspire to live as

people do in the West. Peak oil, climate change, patenting of life forms, extinctions, land degradation, toxics – the poor know that ‘We are too late to live like you do.’ We are missing something of fundamental importance if we think that the issues of terrorism and ecology are separate. Pugwash could make a huge contribution by drawing attention to their systematic interrelatedness.

International Student/Young Pugwash (ISYP) has committed itself to raise awareness and stimulate debate among ISYP members about the socio-economic, environmental, political, and policy determinants of complex political emergencies. I would say, ‘Right on!’ My only suggestion is to try to extend your awareness raising activities beyond ISYP members.

Notes

1. See Georg Frerks, *New security challenges: broadening the Pugwash agenda?* ISYP Journal on Science and World Affairs 2 (2) (2006) 51-58 (this issue).
2. Workshop Announcement ‘New Challenges to Human Security: Empowering Alternative Discourses – A Pugwash Study Group initiated by Pugwash Netherlands and International Student/Young Pugwash (ISYP)’, published on 24 March 2006. (http://www.pugwash.nl/Documents/New_Challenges_Workshop.pdf).
3. Our Task is an international non-profit network of individuals and organisations. ‘Our’ is everyone; all are invited and responsible. ‘Task’ is a mutually enhancing relationship between humans and Earth. The program of Our Task assumes that (i) a number of large institutions or establishments – what we call ‘culture-shaping’ institutions – guide and shape the evolution of human culture; (ii) a number of small organisations – what we call ‘change agents’ – are assisting the culture-shaping institutions to recognise and accomplish constructive cultural change; and (iii) a thoughtful contribution to a vision for the future of Earth could be provided by our students – the next generation – if they were encouraged and supported in the effort. For more information about the activities of the network, see <http://www.ourtask.org>.
4. P. M. Vitousek et. al., *Human domination of Earth’s ecosystems*, *Science* 277 (25 July 1997) p. 495.
5. While we have the Breton Woods international institutions, they are based on and defend the concept of national sovereignty.
6. World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, Oxford University Press, Oxford. 1987.
7. See Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, Bell Tower, New York, 1999.
8. For information and assistance, see <http://www.albany.edu/cpr/sds>.
9. For an example, see <http://www.millennium-institute.org>.