Global Challenges and their Impact on Human Rights
Break the Gridlock or Risk an Unstable Future

Based on 'Now for the Long Term'. Report of the Oxford Martin Commission for Future Generations, published by Oxford Martin School, Oxford University.

Executive Summary

On 16 October, the Oxford Martin Commission[1] of Oxford University presented a 65-page report on the future of world affairs, urging "a radical shake-up in politics and business to deliver progress on climate change, reduce economic inequality, improve corporate practices and address the chronic burden of disease". The proposal backs the idea that there is a serious and urgent need to reform the widespread short-termism in politics, at a time of public distrust in government and visible changes in the global equilibrium of power.

The authors note that people's scepticism and general sense of urgency originates from the frustration of seeing an "increasing gap between knowledge and action in many critical challenges". The lack of a common vision of society, an ineffective global governance, a tendency to uphold a business-as-usual mentality and a growing sense of resignation are serious impediments to necessary action. Thus, the report recommends working with new coalitions, re-invigorated institutions and renewed methods. Some of the challenges described - as well as proposals put forward - have a direct relevance for Europe.

The Report - Possible Futures

Megatrends

Demography shows that the world **population** is ageing, especially in Europe[2], living standards are rising and the middle class stratum is growing, which is adding pressure on natural resources and public services. The population is also increasingly mobile and the number of migrants has soared – although their share of the world's population is declining. Urbanisation has increased spectacularly. While the population is better educated, jobs are becoming more unstable. This creates a profound feeling of frustration. Poverty has shrunk but the contrast between the extremes remains stark. This is especially true for the large numbers of unemployed youth, the elderly and women, who all suffer most from exclusion. In the **geopolitical** landscape we have seen a shift of power to emerging economies. The global trade in goods and services has radically changed and tariffs have declined sharply. There are also more "seats at the table" as states have multiplied fourfold since 1945. Armed conflict between great nations has become increasingly unlikely today, especially in Europe. The **sustainability** of water, food and energy consumption seems much more complicated: tensions have increased resource insecurity and the impact of human activities on the environment continues to grow. The population's **health** deserves equal attention: the problem of infectious diseases, which have mainly been eliminated, has been replaced by that of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such

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[1] Chaired by Mr Pascal Lamy, former Director General of the World Trade Organization, the Commission comprises Ms Michelle Bachelet, Mr Lionel Barber, Professor Roland Berger, Professor Ian Goldin, Ms Arianna Huffington, Dr Mo Ibrahim, Mr Luiz Felipe Lampreia, Minister Liu He, Professor Kishore Mahbubani, Minister Trevor Manuel, Ms Julia Marton-Lefèvre, Minister Nandan Nilekani, Lord Patten, Baron Piot, Lord Rees, Professor Amartya Sen, Lord Stern and Mr Jean-Claude Trichet.

[2] Where half of the population will be aged over 50 at the end of the decade.

as diabetes, cancer, heart and lung disease and strokes. Six billion people own mobile phones – compared to only 4.5 billion who have access to proper sanitation – which demonstrates the unbalanced **technological expansion** we are witnessing. Technology shows its positive side by enhancing educational opportunities, health outcomes, promoting free speech and democracy, and facilitated access to the markets. However, controversial developments allowing the development of artificial life, genetic screening and invasions upon privacy raise profound questions. Big data, open sourcing and heightened transparency generate expectations and distrust in government in equal measure.

Challenges

Although globalisation and automation are radically changing the means of industrial production, not all changes are positive for **society**. Generating jobs remains a big challenge. As many as 30 million jobs have been lost worldwide since the beginning of the financial crisis and 621 million young people are "idle" – not in school, training or employment. Solutions here would imply to "shift tax and regulatory burdens away from labour in order to facilitate an inclusive, productive and flexible workforce fit for this century[3]". Yet, flexibility in employment may increase insecurity.

Resource consumption is rising rapidly. The paradox is that many countries subsidise fossil fuel consumption. Much of the food produced – between 30 and 50% - is never consumed. Although climate change is prone to many discussions and criticism, partly based on the lack of solid knowledge about a very complex climate system – the warming of the oceans and the increase in the emission of greenhouse gases are worrying facts for everyone. A global agreement on reduction of carbon emissions is extremely complex. Concerted action by cities, countries and corporations is crucial. Enhancing transparency; reducing consumption in developed countries; introducing a global carbon price and reforming the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change are measures to be considered.

Health is another area where fresh action is needed. Wide global inequalities persist in access to sanitation, vaccines and health care. The dependency ratio due to ageing and a longer life expectancy is increasing sharply and will continue to do so. Chronic disease and increasing levels of mental illness will further impact on public finances. It is unclear whether education campaigns will make a great impact on NCDs. Yet, the food industry, whose responsibility in tackling NCDs is so important, has an enormous lobbying potential. Countries, especially those in the developing world have a diminished power in dealing with the pharmaceutical industry. Enhanced co-operation, measurable targets and further commitment of the private partners to tiered prices based on national income would help.

In the field of **geopolitics** the report presents a positive picture in terms of a decreased number of armed conflicts, especially in Europe, while it highlights the emergence of new adversaries against whom isolated states are ineffective. It stresses that power is more diffused than ever. Cybercrime – costing an estimated 200 billion euro per year – is relatively unconstrained by jurisdiction boundaries and uncontrolled by the state. This should be tackled through international law, a harmonisation of national legislation and by filling the gap in the emerging legal architecture. The state itself is increasingly accused of targeted cyber espionage and massive surveillance. In order to be able to implement further cross-boundary co-operation on crucial challenges, international organisations (IOs) must adapt. Their reform is well overdue. Most of them "operate under 20th century geopolitical arrangements". Today "there are almost four times as many countries, along with new networks and NGOs, at many decision-making tables". Measures such as the inclusion of new members on the boards – e.g. in the UN Security Council; changes on voting rights; and using

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[3] See Conclusions for possible implications on social rights.

merits instead of political or geographical considerations in choosing leaders are indeed strategic choices.

New indexes are constantly improving assessment of **governance and corruption**[4]. However, although these measurements have become a crucial issue for policy-makers, data quality is indispensable. Indicators can obscure the subtleties of different sectors' governance and disregard innovative proposals. In the private sector, corporate governance must reconsider its long-standing practices such as shifting profits for the purpose of tax avoidance and undervaluing the ecological impact of industry and services.

Responsible Futures

In order to design alternative solutions, examining former success is an appealing source of learning. Every troubled period in the past has brought about successful ideas. The current **financial crisis** can also propel initiatives from the margins to the mainstream, helping to accelerate reforms. **Shared interest** and **leadership** have equally played an important role in reaching inclusive agreements. **Consensus** upon well-defined goals as well as inclusive **partnerships** between government, business, academia and civil society have been crucial.

However, failure is also a lesson-provider. The so-called **tragedy of the commons** for example, is a good reason to radically modify direction: individuals, communities and nations acting together in a rational way, are capable of creating immediate private profit and, at the same time, disastrous results for the global community in the long term[5]. The inability of the decision-makers to look ahead to the **long-term** and for the **generations to come**, the **lack of political will** to tackle, for example, the sustainability of pensions, and long-standing **vested interests** are all results of indecisiveness.

Yet, some **shaping factors** affecting global governance should also be considered. The IOs have contributed to successfully rebuild Europe, prevent global war, and, until 2008, avoid financial crisis. However, they face today far more interconnected, complex and interdependent challenges. They "suffer from legitimacy, authority and effectiveness deficits"; in their midst, the role of certain countries and their governance structures do not reflect anymore the current world order. More precisely – claims the report – "the pace of reform has been painfully slow, and in many cases has been actively resisted or stymied by vested interest". At the same time, however, reforming global governance needs a shift of additional power and resources into these institutions. Traditional powers have been reluctant to cede power to the IOs. Some entrenched positions and the rapid increase of parties have resulted in fewer possibilities of achieving consensus. Complexity in contemporary diplomacy, likewise, comes from the involvement of numerous government departments forcing "a compromise […] which can reduce scope for critical negotiation and often results in watered-down agreements".

Some issues related to a changing perception of **time** are also to be considered: electoral cycles, media pressure, company reporting timetables and just-in-time systems have massively encouraged a short-term vision that pervades political life as well as corporations. New technologies and tensions between immediate demands and long-term solutions have contributed to it in all democracies. Evidence-based regulation is left aside as no time is available to create it. Solutions can be found in initiatives such as lengthening electoral and tenure periods; avoiding ministerial

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[4] Principally the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGIs) developed by the World Bank – measuring voice, accountability, political stability, absence of violence and terror, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption – and the well-known international Perception Corruption Index (CPI), developed by Transparency International.

[5] The impact on the fish stocks of a largely subsidised industry and the absence of realistic responses to the causes of the financial crisis illustrate this point. Regarding the financial crisis the report is explicit: "given that the multilateral financial system is arguably the most developed and best equipped within the global governance system to manage [financial] vulnerabilities, its failure provides a particularly troubling lesson about global governance".

reshuffles; keeping a strong, independent civil service, and creating bespoken institutions to preserve the rights of future generations.

In order to move forward, **political engagement** and **public trust** are key factors. Yet, both are currently declining, especially among young people, and healthy scepticism is fast becoming a rather corrosive cynicism. Mistrust cuts political participation and diminishes the likelihood of governments taking difficult but necessary decisions. However, some encouragement is to be found in the so-called "single-issue" campaigning[6] which is having a relative success. A decline in newspaper reading and the emergence of so many social media results in people "increasingly seeking out the news that fits in with their existing opinions", making exposure to different ideas unlikely.

The growing **complexity** of the issues at stake today can be illustrated by the limited comprehension of the scale, urgency and connectivity of the problems our planet is facing. Climate change, cyberspace, global migration, pandemics, demographic challenges, economy cycles and resource availability are all examples of new intricate problems to which regions, nations and the global community lack the capacity, knowledge, resources and institutional frameworks to respond. **Uncertainty** remains important in the best scientifically equipped society in human history, increasing simultaneously the ambition regarding knowledge. Yet, governments, and especially the electorate, increasingly clamour for certainty.

Cultural issues continue to bias decisions. Although some have touted the "end of ideology" and a greater homogeneity, evidence and research suggest that cultural commitments and cognitive factors influence the way we process information. A well-known cognitive precedence of difference over sameness has important and perhaps misunderstood consequences in a diverse society. Our **identities** are challenged: being exposed to a multiplicity of audiences and other cultures, we often react by over-defending our local values and practices.

Practical Futures

Amid the report's proposals, some recurring themes can be highlighted, such as the multi-stakeholder's aspect of the plan to create a **C20-C30-C40 Coalition**[7] to counteract climate change; and a network to fight **NCDs**. In both cases the role of cities will be increasingly important.

The development of **independent institutions**, accountable to governments but rather isolated from the short-term pressures and capable of conducting systematic reviews of long-term issues, is perhaps the central proposal to tackle political short-termism.

Several practical suggestions seek to improve the social impact of the private sector, such as the request to establish a **voluntary taxation and regulatory exchange** to address tax avoidance; the introduction of recommendations issued by the Group 30 on **long-term finance**. Some focus on global trade, the economy and poverty, such as the proposed **removal of subsidies** on hydrocarbons and agriculture, in order to redirect the savings to pro-poor transfers.

A proposal is made to **end discrimination against future generations** by revising discounting methods and adjusting them to take account of the uncertainties, risks and ethical implications for the long term. This, together with an initiative to **invest in younger generations** through conditional cash transfer programmes are the proposals concerning youth.

Finally the report proposes to set up **worldstat**, a specialist agency charged with undertaking quality control on global statistics, and the creation of a **long-term impact index** on the basis of the index measuring successes in governance and anti-corruption efforts.

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[6] Carried out by organisations such as Avaaz, MoveOn or Change.org.
[7] I.e. 20 states, 30 companies and 40 states.

Conclusions

Two general conclusions drawn from the present report could shape the long-term strategy for the CoE. The first is that the above analysis is yet another warning for the decision-makers of the Organisation's need to consider the size of its ever-expanding human rights range of activities in an environment progressively conditioned by resource scarcity, public mistrust, serious doubts about the sustainability of certain public policies and general economic stagnation. The second highlights the low impact that new standard-setting in the field of any of the global challenges described may have – e.g. in cyberspace – if the exercise is restricted to inter-governmental co-operation inside Europe.

Some of the report's bids are strategically relevant for resource reallocation. This is the case of the creation of **CyberEx** – a new early warning platform, aimed at promoting a better understanding of common cyber threats and rules. This is also the case in the proposed reform of global governance and the **IOs**. The report proposes effectiveness improvements through the establishment of sunset clauses for publicly funded international institutions to ensure regular reviews of accomplishments and mandates. The proposal to optimise new forms of **political participation**, **transparency** and **accountability** through 'open government' and 'open data', although very general, may well be integrated in the IOs' reform.

The report's labour market analysis and the measures proposed in order to **reduce unemployment** may have an equally important consequence on social rights' protection. If the report's assumptions are rolled-out, the script would be as follows: convergent diagnostics confirm that globalisation is changing the workforce and putting European social rights under great pressure. Off-shoring has introduced strong competition between workers beyond national boundaries. Some consider that the labour market in the emerging economies should be governed under the same standards as in Europe. Yet, if this had been the case, no off-shoring would have taken place in the first instance. Overseas working conditions may improve in the future but, until this is the case, maintaining the pre-globalisation level of labour protection drags European workers massively out of the labour market. Will this widespread analysis have an impact on the international recognition and legitimacy of the **European Social Charter?** Will the CoE's instruments and mechanisms protecting social rights be considered increasingly interdependent with economic parameters?

Some other specific points may be similarly relevant for the Organisation. Everything indicates that dependent populations will be a growing concern for human rights protection. Questions of redistribution within populations and of intergenerational solidarity – in a context of a shrinking welfare state – will have to be integrated in any reflection on the future challenges of the CoE. In the same way, it can be anticipated that the technology engaged by governments to tackle security issues will increasingly overstep people's right to privacy. In the field of biotechnology, for example, uninterrupted technical progress is already affecting the traditional procreative practices, the concept of physical integrity and, here too, the private nature of health data. Issues about the "commons" will also have to be gradually incorporated into future standard-setting and will be increasingly present in the case-law of the ECtHR.

Although it seems to overestimate the actual impact of public policies and the availability of political will – aligning itself with a slightly candid, over-regulatory variety of policy-making – the report courageously presents important points on the difficulties faced while trying to understand and predict any outcome in complex environments such as public opinion, climate change or markets. The report includes a novel approach, much welcomed, on the limits of some technocratic tools – such as in the unselective use of performance indicators – or the role of uncertainty in modern problem-solving and early warning.

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