
Is It Moral Concern or Self-Interest We Should Count on To Help Save the Planet?

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1: Is It Moral Concern or Self-Interest We Should Count on To Help Save the Planet?

From: Martin Wolf

For more than three decades now, you've been tackling big policy challenges as an adviser to many—the United Nations and countless governments around the world, among others—and in your writings. But never before have you taken on a topic of the scope of *Common Wealth*. I'm delighted to be able to discuss the book with you over the next couple of days.

Yet, first of all, I want to congratulate you on its scope. It concerns nothing less than the future of the

world. It is also a call to arms. In this epoch, for the first time in the history of our planet, one species, ours, is in charge of the planet. We have already learned the need for cooperation within national borders. Now, you argue, «the recognition that we share responsibilities and fates across the social divide will need to be extended internationally so that the world as a whole takes care to ensure sustainable development in all regions.»

In particular, you stress the need to secure four high-priority global goals: first, «sustainable systems of energy, land and resources use that avert the most dangerous trends of climate change, species extinction, and destruction of ecosystems»; second, «stabilization of the world's population at eight billion or below by 2050 through a voluntary reduction of fertility rates»; third, «the end of extreme poverty by 2025 and improved economic security within the rich countries as well»; and, finally, «a new approach to global problem solving based on co-operation among nations and the dynamism and creativity of the nongovernmental sector.»

Throughout, you concentrate much of your fire on the Bush administration in particular and U.S. politics in general. You condemn: its mistaken view that the United States is the world's «sole superpower»; its blind trust in the efficacy of military force; its misplaced reliance on unilateral action; its contempt for multilateral institutions; its excessive belief in the unaided magic of the market; and its opposition to progress on climate change and birth control. You emerge as a European or, more precisely, a Scandinavian social democrat. In the European context, these views would be mainstream. In the United States, they are anything but that. In making the argument for urgent action, you

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point to the six trends that are shaping this century: economic convergence, or the rapid growth of developing countries; rapid population growth, despite broadly shared declines in fertility, with the poorest countries set to experience the most rapid increases; the rise of Asia; urbanization; a looming environmental disaster, as humanity appropriates for its use an ever-rising share of global resources; and the tumbling of at least 1 billion people into a «self-reinforcing poverty trap.»

Yet what is perhaps most important about the book is its optimism. You argue that «the difference between the dangerous and unsustainable global trajectory we are on now and a sustainable trajectory that addresses the challenges of environment, population, and poverty is a modest 2 to 3 per cent of [global] annual income.» Like the prophet Jeremiah, you warn of terrible things to come, should your call for repentance be ignored. But you insist that we can fix these problems by forgoing less than one year's global economic growth. «These estimates are necessarily uncertain,» you acknowledge, «... but, as in so many cases in the past, the ultimate costs of action are likely to prove far smaller than we fear today, since we are more clever than we know once we've mobilized our efforts.» The attraction of a book that offers cheap solutions for costly perils is evident.

The book is clearly and passionately argued, focused on challenges of the highest importance, infused with moral purpose, intelligent and well-informed. I agree with much of it. But agreement is boring. So I'd like to focus on five big questions it raised in my mind. I'll start with two, both about your intended audience, and then tomorrow, I'll be eager to turn to three more—about your optimism, about the prospects of collective action, and about global economic growth.

First, to whom is the book addressed? You talk of «we.» But the «we» seem to be citizens of high-

income countries and Americans, above all. The reason for this focus seems evident: These are the people with the resources—economic and technological—needed to tackle the challenges you address. And Americans signally fail to understand either the challenges or their role in meeting them.

Second, and far more important, why should this «we» care about the challenges you address? Demonstrably, the citizens of rich countries care little for the plight of the world's poorest. Yet two of your three big challenges—population and mass poverty—concern precisely the latter group of people. Developed countries devote less than 1 percent of their public spending to this cause. It is possible to argue that mass poverty is the breeding ground of terrorism. But the connection is far from compelling. Even in the case of climate change, the argument that this is a vast danger to the world's richest countries, including the United States, while far stronger than for poverty, is not overwhelming. So are you making a moral argument for action or an argument from self-interest?