

Editorial

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Abstract: Around the world an increasing shortage of good governance seems to have taken hold. It manifests in the increasing shortfalls on the Sustainable Development Goals and in the worsening polycrisis of the Anthropocene. The UN Secretary-General urged the international community for more infusion of scientifically authoritative models into governance, as well as more collaboration and inclusion of scientists. That goal is not easily achieved in this age of rising kakistocracies.

Dear Reader,

For years people in my circle of acquaintances have been discussing how the average Hollywood disaster movie misses the point when it comes to human security. One popular category presents a post-apocalyptic world of chaos and anarchy as a backdrop for human drama. It portrays the loss of human security as a *fait accompli*, from which the narrative develops a more or less hope-inspiring trajectory towards some sort of recovery. Another, slightly more popular category leads the viewer down a roller coaster ride through a deepening crisis, only to have the impending cataclysm or ultimate tragedy prevented at the last opportunity through some hero's intervention.

In my view, neither category allows the viewer to develop her own understanding of the pervasive factors that stabilize those aspects of their human security that many viewers have come to appreciate, and are to varying extents even taking for granted. These factors form the basic platform on which human security rests (or doesn't). They include the mechanistic components of the four pillars or seven dimensions in conventional human security models. They also include human agency and empowerment—personal qualities that can be acquired through education—such as

the analytical skills to critically evaluate information about the world, or the ability to assess observations and propositions in the light of basic scientific principles. Beyond the individual sphere, that platform is also formed by qualities of the collective that support human security, such as cultural conventions about free speech, self expression, democratic principles and the limits of moral relativism. One collective quality that has acquired particular poignancy in today's world is the extent to which a society values scientific literacy, scientific inquiry and objective discourse on scientific topics. To argue that Hollywood has not paid adequate attention to those factors affecting individual and collective agency would hardly understate its failing.

Yet, every once in a while, a film makes a talented effort in this direction. “Don't look up” is such a film. It builds on the basic tenet that “every disaster movie starts with the government ignoring a scientist” [1], embarking on a tightrope walk balancing comedy against tragedy and drama that dishes out no small amount of social and political critique. Without letting this editorial morph further into a film critique, I draw the reader's attention to the popular impact this film has had, which seems to have exceeded the impact of any statement or report delivered on the critical state of the world so far (January 2022). It has captured the attention of

people who would not normally worry about such problems as climate change or ecological overshoot, nor about the marginalisation of science by media and politicians in the context of the global polycrisis. It has inspired widespread debate and critical introspection on the subject of *Homo sapiens* endangering their own collective human security.

Most proximal to the film's narrative is the question to what extent the political system and cultural conventions as they presently exist in the United States of America are rendering the collapse of the country's social order all but inevitable. The likelihood of a dictatorial regime emerging within the decade was convincingly argued by Thomas Homer-Dixon in a 2022 Article [2]. The potential global ripple effects of such a profound change in a superpower are difficult to envision—especially if one takes into account that a goodly number of countries and societies suffer from similarly detrimental problems of governance, vision and insight.

Around the world an increasing shortage of good governance seems to have taken hold [3,4]. It manifests, for example, in a general obsession with extending the status quo in the face of ever-increasing obstacles and a rapidly changing world. That obsession is fueled by values and ideals that have been subsumed under the Conventional Economic Paradigm (CEP) [5] and has recently found expression in the widespread calls for some ill-defined “return to normal” from the pandemic.

The CEP and its associated ideology engender an almost pathological deference to the demands of industry and commerce over considerations of social justice, social welfare, or sustainable human security—let alone ecological integrity. It has resulted in one stalemate after another on climate change mitigation, in hopelessly inadequate countermeasures to the CoViD-19 pandemic, and in near-complete blindness to the reality of global ecological overshoot [6]. It prevents the kind of diachronic, scientifically informed vision of the future that would prevent such short sighted and self-destructive policies as the further accumulation of nuclear waste or nuclear accidents [7]. Without that shortage of good governance, the continued inaction of influential countries in the face of the global climate emergency would be difficult to explain.

A state being governed by people who are either incompetent or unwilling to make the appropriate decisions in the face of political challenges is referred to as a kakistocracy [8]. Literally meaning “government by the worst”, it occupies the extreme end of the scale of quality of governance, where government failure represents the norm rather than the exception and becomes both reason and consequence of a steady decline [8]. It includes failures of vision or of long-term responsibility that allow for slow, systemic declines as the destruction of the Amazon biome, the drying out of the Aral Sea, the mass extinction of species [9] and global climate change. It also includes the persistent failure to effectively counteract the pervasive violence against women and girls, and the ongoing trafficking and exploitation of slave labour. Some of these examples represent the

failure of global governance in the limited form that today's world would allow [10], as illustrated in Davos, in COP conferences etc. Others are primarily failures of national governance, arising from extreme power inequity, undemocratic electoral systems, poor education, exaggerated capitalism, and unsupportive cultural traditions in varying combinations [4].

The rise of kakistocracies marks a crisis of governance that comes at a highly inconvenient time in human history. On the one hand, the Anthropocene polycrisis demands our full attention and insightful, far-sighted decisions by our leaders. (Keep that in mind when you watch the film!) On the other hand, many aspects of the polycrisis would not present as urgently and menacingly, had there been more competent leadership in place during the past half century. Explanations for this shortfall range from intense pressuring by corporate groups and special interest lobbies [11], a quantum increase in complexity of the challenges due to unprecedented numbers of people and their demands and shrinking natural resources, to a kind of generic simple-mindedness of our species that only shows itself at this critical time because of the unprecedented scale. Collectively, we do seem to suffer from widespread difficulties with critically assessing our own values and changing them according to new realities.

Perhaps the most poignant indication that our policies at many levels do not meet the stringent requirements imposed on us by the Anthropocene is the failure of the international community to carry out the self-imposed tasks under the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A recent editorial in the journal *Nature* [12] suggested that the SDG plan to end poverty and to promote a healthier planet seems “all but derailed”, mostly because of delays in effective responses to the scientific findings in the UN's own Global Sustainable Development Report. Specifically,

- Climate change mitigation will result in 2.4°C warming by 2100, rather than the envisioned 1.5°C, because of dithering and disunity in successive COP meetings.
- An ambitious two-part UN summit on biological diversity, due to conclude in May 2022, centred on a widely supported target to protect 30% of the world's land and sea areas by 2030—whereas not even the previous ‘Aichi target’ of 17% is in reach [9]. Funding is the major sticking point, and ecosystem degradation is still only assessed in monetary terms.
- One in ten people is undernourished and one in four is overweight. The number of people going hungry is rising fast. An IPCC-like system of scientific advisors to governments was initiated in 2021, recommending seven priorities, including sustainability in the face of rising demand. It faces an uphill battle against the dominant inertia, parochialism and conservatism that have led to the present crisis in food security.
- The CoViD-19 pandemic created additional global constraints on funding, food supplies, and on education. It heightened the levels of violence against women, and caused a legacy of long term disability

and infectious diseases. The UN Secretary-General's report, *Our Common Agenda* [13] urged to reinvigorate multilateralism and allow for more infusion of scientifically authoritative models into governance, as well as more collaboration and inclusion of scientists.

Interesting about this commentary from *Nature* is that it suggests that the internal contradictions between individual SDGs are still not widely recognised, even though the article calls for a greater focus on the underlying science. According to several analyses, the SDGs that require additional natural resources are in conflict with those SDGs that aim at resource conservation [14]. I have not come across any scientifically founded attempts to reconcile that conflict and the underlying conundrum of global ecological overshoot (a concept that the UN have always had trouble recognising). On the positive side, the SDGs represent the first and only attempt by the international community to address the Anthropocene polycrisis and to coordinate global remedial action in pursuit of sustainable human security. In many respects, the SDGs still represent the only game in town and deserve support.

All this begs the questions to what extent human security could be saved from the fallouts of inadequate governance, and what could be done. Current trends and various critical tipping points are likely to lead humanity into troublesome times [15,16]. Numerous attempts are underway at local, urban and regional levels to design and implement sustainable solutions that improve on the shortcomings of the SDGs and of failing national governments. Two areas of particular significance, in my view, are the sustainable cities movement [17] and the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN). Ecovillages are intentional communities that are committed to sustainable and regenerative living, aiming to design and implement their own pathways in international solidarity [18].

Grassroots and community initiatives are evidently successful in developing new forms of local governance that can to some extent compensate for failings at higher levels. But many aspects of the polycrisis demand holistic and overarching approaches and coordination that only super-regional governing can provide, though not necessarily in the form of a conventional sovereign state. The righteous anger expressed by activists like Greta Thunberg against failing governments and myopic societies calls for new platforms that can accommodate democratic decision-making

and coordinated, collective agency that follows scientifically authenticated and morally justified regimes. This is sorely needed; the fact that most cultures have not yet even learned how to use plastics sustainably and safely speaks volumes in that regard. Only with such new platforms in place can governance deliver policies that are informed by what qualifies as 'progress' in the Anthropocene.

That new understanding of 'progress' includes the principles of Deep Adaptation, described by its progenitor, Dr. Jem Bendell at the University of Cumbria (UK) as an ethos to make the Anthropocene "less worse"—a framework for policy, and a movement to become more openhearted and openminded about our future in the Anthropocene [19]. Deep Adaptation aims at *resilience* amidst limited collapse, relinquishment of beliefs and norms that no longer help, *restoration* of traditions that may be of help, and *reconciliation* with all life in the biosphere.

Failing governments are unable to support those aims of Deep Adaptation. Not only does their failure partly stem from a lack of open hearts and open minds, their failure is contingent on their inability to act on the prospect of limited collapse, the "involuntary systems change" [20] or ecological equilibration that will inevitably emanate from the biosphere, once our overshoot passes its tipping point [6]. It is the prospect of seemingly inevitable collapse that fuels the anger of the activists, along with the premonition of retired politicians belatedly admitting that "we did not know what we were doing". In the light of that prospect, Deep Adaptation pursued by enlightened regional and local governments, and by civil society, offers a modicum of hope that humanity might yet succeed in avoiding the worst.

One way in which readers might approach the concept of Deep Adaptation and become amenable to its potential benefits is to explore its connections with human security. How might its pillars and specific sectors benefit particularly from resilience, relinquishment, restoration and reconciliation? How could that be accomplished, and who would need to be actively involved? Engaging with such constructive considerations might be a way for citizens around the world—as well as ignored scientists—to improve their governance from the ground up.

Best wishes for a safer 2022,
Sabina W. Lautensach
Editor-in-Chief

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