

## Different Paths for Different Countries:

### Strong States, Failed States, Dictatorships, and Ecologian Experiments

Erik Assadourian, Worldwatch Institute

Background: As we have only until about 2015 to stabilize the greenhouse gas emissions before climate change forces us to focus on reacting instead of acting, it is highly unlikely that we will be able to avoid major disruptions in climate and thus disruptions in our social, political, and economic development. The primary variable that will shape the future then is how countries respond to these changes. I envision three dominant paths countries will take.

#### **Path A: Strength in the Face of Adversity**

*Examples could include Scandinavia, Japan, and other homogenous countries with already strong state governments effectively prioritizing fair access to basic services that are seen as natural rights (fresh water, basic social services, etc.).*

In Path A countries, effective state governments—namely ones that put the well-being of their people first—will allow their populations to maintain a high quality of life (by providing access to basic social services, maintaining economic stability, and preserving the remaining natural capital within their borders). Some countries, like those in Scandinavia, may even experience a golden age as they 1) benefit overall from climate change (relatively speaking); 2) expand their wealth (e.g. through accessing new resources once hidden by a frozen sea); and 3) maintain low birth rates yet significant space to expand their populations. These conditions may enable those countries to choose among the brightest refugees and expatriates as these individuals flee from their own countries more gravely disrupted by climate change.

Focusing on well-being, Path A countries would implement a series of policies that have significant ecological and social benefits. For example, the government would engineer a cultural shift to a well-being society instead of a consumer society (through education, public service announcements, taxes on advertising, etc.). High taxes would be used to effectively distribute wealth, both minimizing poverty and limiting competitive and conspicuous consumption. If we're lucky, these countries will live within their ecological means, and (while protected from their unstable neighbors by strong borders) will look like Bob Costanza's vision of the future.

#### **Path B: Failure of the State or Seizure of It By Narrow Interests**

*Think of the many developing countries that are already stressed, fragile or failed today. Many countries in Africa come to mind, Central Asia too.*

Many countries, already barely surviving today, could easily become failed states or dictatorships. Here the elite will control most of the resources while the majority remain in a state of perpetual serfdom or gather in minimally serviced slums where organized crime groups rule. The brightest individuals here will either flee (see Path A), resist and be dealt with, or join the ruling class (if their moral codes are flexible enough). And yes, many countries have already been walking down this path for many years. But many more will join them in years to come as resources become scarce, foreign aid dries up, and they are racked by major ecological disruptions.

## **Path C: An Ecologian Movement To Fill the Political Vacuum and Rebuild**

*Think the United States, some African and Latin American countries.*

America has always considered itself an exceptional case and perhaps it'll prove to be. Yes, it could easily follow Path B, and if the world is lucky it will follow Path A (though with consumerism<sup>i</sup> so deeply rooted in the national culture and the government so fully “captured” by corporate interests, I see this as a long shot—even for a utopian exercise like this). But there is a third path available—one driven by a strong civil society sector.

Imagine if the progressive movement (including environmentalists, social reformers, and others) “deepens,”<sup>ii</sup> over the next few years, recognizing that the only way to create a sustainable world will be to address the root cause of social problems, namely consumerism rather than just reacting to the newest “crisis du jour,” whether it be rivers catching on fire, a springtime sans birdsong, ozone depletion, climate change, obesity, sprawl, or in coming years, the horrors of nanotechnology and GMOs spreading beyond the control of their masters.

What will this look like? I envision a comprehensive effort to build a long-term (meaning multi-hundred year long) movement, using the strategies that have worked since adherents of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam first figured out how to spread their philosophies across the globe. Specifically, these adherents established a common, awe-inspiring philosophy and then *organized* to spread this philosophy. They set up meeting houses, social service providers that help people in need while teach their way of living (models include: the Salvation Army, Catholic schools and Madrasas, and Jewish hospitals to name a few modern variations). Environmentalists could do the same (and the need will certainly be there as governments cut spending dramatically and services currently taken for granted shrink or disappear entirely),<sup>iii</sup> but this time the philosophy could be based on a belief that we are dependent on and part of a living Earth system and that means a redefinition of how we should live on this Earth.

This movement would be complemented by a parallel effort to build social enterprises (i.e. mission-driven businesses) that model ecological business practices (pressuring competitors to do the same), teach ecological values, *and* generate profit to support the ecological social service providers described above (such as YMCA or the Thai restaurant Cabbages and Condoms do). By thinking much beyond the short term political campaign and the silos of modern political organizing, the “ecologian movement” (i.e. the new, unified, progressive movement) will become a dominate player that reclaims political power and eventually pulls America into Path A. As this effort is established, it could spread beyond the U.S. and utilize the same basic strategies in other countries, helping to pull these countries from Path B to Path A as well.

---

<sup>i</sup> This is a catch-all term, but I would argue that it includes not just a philosophy of “consumption=success” but anthropocentrism, the obsession with economic growth, and a failure to recognize that humanity is utterly dependent on the Earth for its ability to survive and thrive.

<sup>ii</sup> See of course, Deep Ecology’s criticism of shallow environmentalism, and more recently “Toward a New Consciousness,” a Yale Forestry School paper that once again calls for a deeper environmental movement to form.

<sup>iii</sup> On October 25<sup>th</sup>, New York Times columnist Bob Herbert noted that already we may see increasing numbers of US hospitals close their doors as they can’t pay their bills because of a flood of uninsured individuals needing their services. Schools, poverty assistance programs, even infrastructure like public water and sewage systems might be affected.