

Transl. from Voorhoeve, Joris. "Inleiding: *Negen Plagen Tegelijk: Hoe Overleven We de Toekomst?*" Amsterdam: Contact, 2011, 11-21. Print. Transl. by Marije Fresacher, 2012

1.

Introduction:

The Nine Challenges of Our Age

– Perturbing Trends 2011-2050

Want of foresight, unwillingness to act when action would be simple and effective, lack of clear thinking, confusion of counsel until the emergency comes, until self-preservation strikes its jarring gong – these are the features which constitute the endless repetition of history.

Winston S. Churchill (1874-1965)¹

Delving into the future resembles driving in dense fog. Although it is hard to discern what lies ahead, we must move onwards; time marches on. It is impossible to alight. There are two options: to be watchful, listen carefully, think fast and change course accordingly, or simply drive on at random. In order to prevent accidents, choices and modifications must be made – to the left, the centre or the right. We hope to reach the next destination, but might end up skidding into a ditch or a tree instead.

Those who drive in mist may believe they can rely on past experience and thus have an image of sorts of the road ahead. However, the shrouded path to the future has not been travelled previously and will look quite different from what lies behind us.

This book, wherein nine long-term trends are explored and combined, does not make very cheerful reading. Usually, questions such as the climate crisis, the rapid growth of the world's population, increasing hunger in poor countries, the finite nature of fossil fuels, competition for metals and minerals, the high frequency of civil wars and the proliferation of arms are issues considered separately. In consequence, an overview of interactions and correlations between them is often lacking, even though this is actually most important, since only

¹ British politician and wartime leader against Nazism. From: address to the House of Commons on 2 May 1935. quoted in:

Voorhoeve, Joris. *Labiele Vrede*. Amsterdam: Balans, 1995, p. 269;

<http://www.winstonchurchill.org/learn/speeches/speeches-of-winston-churchill/90-air-parity-lost>.

when we understand what is liable to occur as a result of these interactions can we devise appropriate solutions to the issues at hand.

Central to this book is the idea that negative developments reinforce one another and that therefore the implications may be more severe than commonly thought. Population growth for example exacerbates hunger, poverty and global warming, rendering many poorly governed countries to become even less stable than they already are. This results in a greater risk of political violence, and, for many states, an increased vulnerability to pandemics. While poorly governed countries encounter well-nigh insoluble problems, also free, democratic states have to contend with far more demanding ordeals than ever before.

It is imperative to face that the twenty-first century may reveal potentially disastrous interactions that will seriously affect hundreds of millions of people. Confidence in and reliance on progress through science and technology seems to be ubiquitous yet, but is that attitude justifiable? On the contrary, it is imprudent to consider ourselves well off on account of technological mirages. We should limit foreseeable suffering with practical solutions which are at our disposal at present. Sound policy begins with a realistic analysis of what is likely to occur if effective action is not taken.

In politics, there appears to be much wishful thinking. “Problems will not be that serious, unpleasant measures can be deferred; perhaps we will be saved by new developments, let us count on technological progress to create new solutions”, it is easily thought. But how well-grounded and responsible is such optimism? In effect, optimism and pessimism are preconceptions – perceiving things through rose-coloured or dark glasses. What is needed is a pair of clear, clinical glasses.

This book seeks to avoid both optimism and pessimism. Rather, it aims to clinically and dispassionately assess reality, whether it presents much or little cause for felicity, and to suggest solutions where possible.

1. The world’s population will increase steadily from the current 6.9 billion to 9.2 billion in 2050, and to an approximate 10 billion in the second half of this century. While the population rate of most developed nations will remain unchanged or decline, it is the population of the poorest and worst-governed countries which will expand rapidly. Today, half of the global population is under 25 years of age. Can the world, which already consumes far more than is good for nature and the environment, absorb an additional 40 per cent of the current global population?

2. The number of extremely poor suffering from hunger is growing. In the 2000 Millennium Declaration, all government leaders solemnly pledged to reduce the amount of starving people by half within fifteen years; howbeit, their numbers have now risen to nearly one billion, which is one out of seven humans. This situation may become even worse. Consequences of famine are acutely high child mortality rates and great political volatility which will also affect the wealthy countries.

3. Serious diseases and scourges, also new kinds, endanger the health and happiness of hundreds of millions of people. Old afflictions like malaria and tuberculosis, as well as the newer HIV / AIDS and rare but dangerous new illnesses demand vigilance. Improved health policies can prevent a large proportion of possibly disastrous effects. A strengthening of the World Health Organization is required. Does a wave of terrible surprises, such as old or new fast-spreading pathogens, await the world?

4. Annually, at least 500,000 people perish through violence by means of 'small arms': handguns, small anti-personnel mines, anti-tank weaponry, mortars and the like. There is also the threat of mass destruction by nuclear arms, poison gas or biological weapons. Is there an intensification of the risk of (civil) wars and terrorism?

5. Many are concerned about climate change and the deterioration of nature. Are existing perils magnified by the irreversible environmental damage which accelerates climate change, and in what way would that affect the other trends? Global warming, caused by the over-expenditure of fossil energy per individual, can turn into a crisis spiral. Hundreds of millions of those who inhabit river deltas and low islands will need to adapt, migrate, or they will drown. Other regions shall be affected by increasingly severe droughts. There, communities will see their cattle waste away, their food crops shrivel up. Mutual conflicts will become more frequent and aggravated, resulting in a sharp upsurge in the number of refugees. Natural disasters shall occur at a larger scale.

6. The national and global economy is led by the interests of powerful and clever people. Still, will the masses on the losing end of the wealth-gap remain silent for much longer? Worldwide, there are hundreds of millions of unemployed, poorly educated and trained young men who do not have any gainful or useful engagement, while on the other hand they do have easy access to weapons. Shall they allow themselves to be mobilized for violence and old or new forms of political extremism which turns against the prosperous world? Or alternatively, will they migrate to the West, which in turn may be inclined to guard its borders ever more heavily?

7. Although new sources of energy, electric vehicles and compact fluorescent bulbs are prevalent subjects in today's discourse, these do not bring about a significant reduction of the undiminishing augmentation of oil, gas and coal intake as yet. Fossil fuels are becoming scarce and expensive. Governments flourish promises of large-scale measures and eventual new energy resources, which in the meantime are of little to no consequence. While only a significant reduction in the consumption of fossil energy per individual in rich and rapidly growing countries can truly improve the situation, a question that arises here is whether people are willing to make such sacrifices.

8. Over two thirds of the world's states are not a democracy; in a number of countries dictatorial mock-democracies are developing. Many poorer countries and states that export oil, gas, precious metals and other commodities are badly run by leaders who grossly enrich themselves at the expense of their peoples. Many despots expel, persecute and murder groups which oppose them or are non-sympathetic to them. Poorly governed countries are hotbeds of crime in the global legal order. Be that as it may, also democracies show administrative inability to meet present day conditions: necessary policy decisions are postponed on account of weak leadership and fear of many voters' consumerism (the drive to continually consume more).

9. International organizations such as the United Nations and the European Union have proven incapable of achieving reforms which may establish them as a powerful administrative layer above governments. Is the world, due to weak governance, missing out on chances to take timely measures for reversing dangerous trends? Or are there opportunities to significantly strengthen, for instance, the European Union?

The interactions between population growth rate, consumption, energy, food, hunger, diseases and scourges, climate, political instability, civil wars and poor governance are illustrated in Figure 1.1.

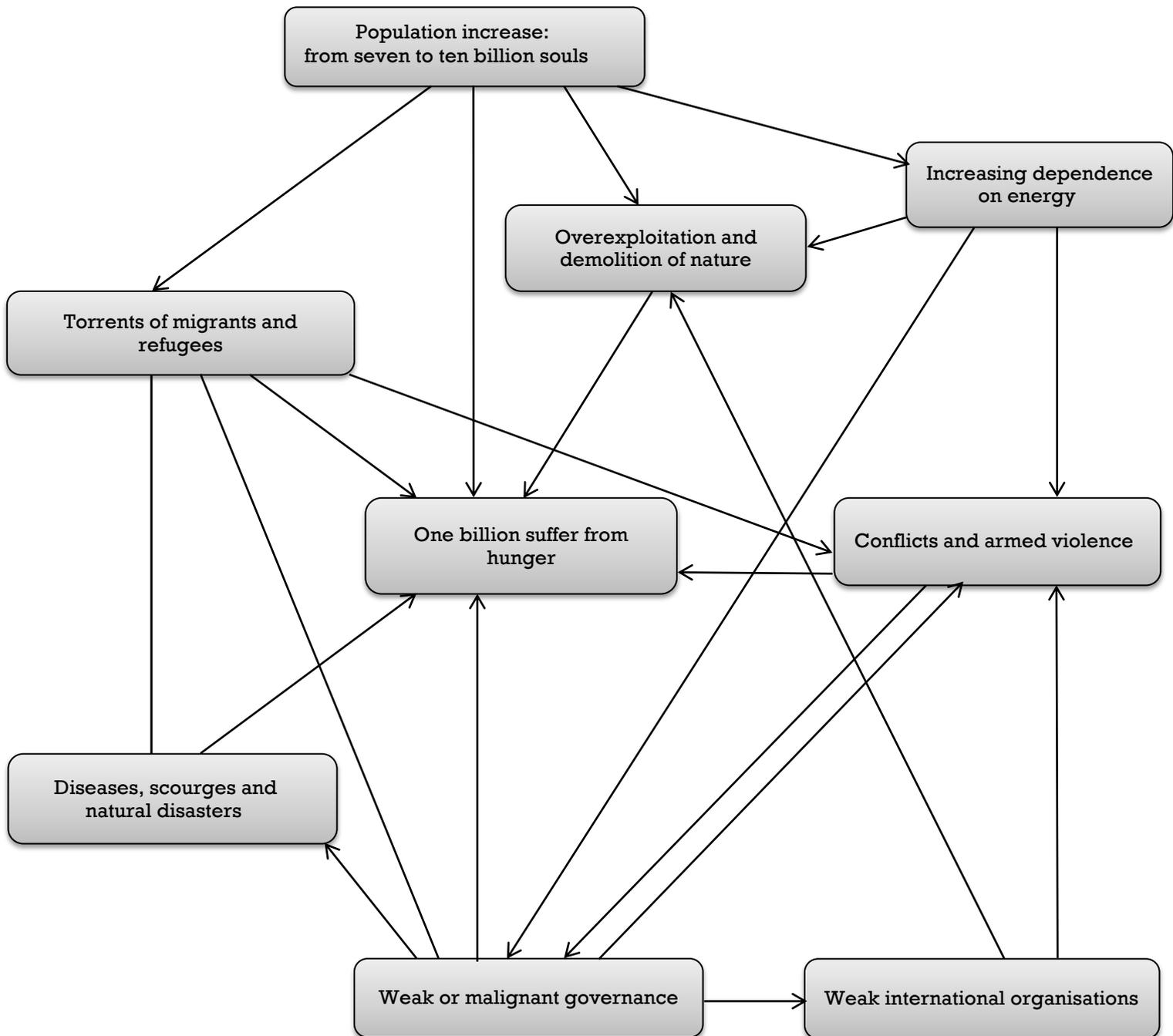
These interactions are analysed in chapters 3-11. The manner in which solutions in various fields may be mutually reinforcing will be explored in the concluding chapter (chapter 14).

An analysis of the above mentioned issues leads to the conclusion that most current policies offer little to remedy the situation and that the electorate and media are misled, owing to the fact that for some time, slack or erroneous measures create the illusion that issues are being tackled.

The electric car, for instance, does not emit any carbon dioxide on the roads, but it does cause the CO₂ emission from the power stations that generate the necessary additional electricity to grow dramatically. Another example is the cultivation of corn for biodiesel, which occupies valuable farmland but has a low net energy yield. Food aid, a third example, is urgent for those suffering from hunger, but it does not address the causes of famine and starvation. Rather, agriculture in poor countries should be improved, as should the earnings of the poorest so they will be able to buy their own food. In addition, as many newborns die of starvation and disease, the urgent reduction of births when these children do not and cannot receive adequate care thereafter can be achieved by the introduction of contraceptive measures.

Figure 1.1:

Today's challenges' interrelated and interactive amplification



Inefficient and spurious solutions to serious problems are not always probed critically by the media. Entertainment and ephemeral news score better than independent research journalism.

In order to actually avert the aggravation of negative global trends, entirely different, more vigorous policies are required. However, this demands a divergent way of thought, work, consumption and governance. Can it be accomplished? Or will hundreds of millions of people rush headlong into an abyss over the next decades?

The key lies in a simple political philosophy which is not founded on fallacious dogmas, but practical and result driven in nature. It must be acceptable to a variety of religions and cultures. Ultimately, what matters is everyday human happiness and limiting great deal of unnecessary suffering. Many rules and dogmas in which people firmly believe create very unfortunate effects and should be revised in order to change course in a timely fashion.

Nine Challenges At Once provides an overview of global developments and their interactions. I wrote it because the above mentioned issues are a matter of concern to me. It is not a scientific work. It summarizes and addresses these questions in short chapters, refers to various scientific studies and seeks to provide an overview of what is necessary and possible to bring about change. I have attempted to make a large number of international studies in specific areas accessible to a wider interested audience, as well as for topical tertiary education geared at global orientation. Those who examine these international trends will soon recognize the uncertainty of the future and become aware of the constraints of a preliminary study of the future. Moreover, such research is never complete.

I have imposed upon myself two constraints which thus truncate the contents and scope of the book. Firstly, the scourge of increasing international crime, although addressed in various issues, is not systematically explored as an independent challenge while it actually is the tenth plague. Small and large networks are engaged in trafficking drugs, weapons and human beings, in money laundering, terrorism and other serious transnational crimes. This is a vast issue in itself which has been explored and brought to awareness in a number of studies². The second limitation lies in the fact that the basic approach of this book hinges on currently existing, proven and economically applicable technology. If one optimistically assumes that the global energy problem can be solved at low cost, then issues such as hunger, poverty, food and freshwater shortage would be easily soluble. In the end, it is all about inexpensive energy. Nevertheless, such solutions have not yet become reality, in spite of highly promising projects. For the past 45 years I have been reading that we are on the threshold of a major breakthrough in nuclear fusion. However, so far we have not moved beyond that same threshold... Although energy is abundant in the universe, deploying it on earth in such a way that the indicated long-term trends are easily soluble is as yet

² Further reading:

Leggett, T. *The Globalisation of Crime: A Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment*. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2010. Web access: http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta/TOCTA_Report_2010_low_res.pdf;
 Moíses, Naím. *Crimineel – maar winstgevend; drugs- en wapenhandel, mensensmokkel, witwaspraktijken, merkenpiraterij*. Amsterdam: Business Contact, 2006.

pie in the sky – so I have attempted to steer clear of technological arrogance and to remain dispassionate.

This book endeavours to discuss many fields and the interaction between them. As such, it does not dovetail into a conventional category: it is based on scientific reports, but it also contains the author's opinions, some of which are as yet insufficiently scientifically substantiated. That, however, does not make it fiction, although readers may at times wish to make quite different judgments. The book is policy-analytical and explanatory, but by no means educational. For that, it is not quite adequately detached, although I hope it is not unsuitable as an opinion making study that can complement the neutral, business-like part of higher professional education in International Development.

It was written in the hope that a diverse readership would find something of their liking in it. Accordingly, there is no specific target audience for this book. The motivation for writing it was none other than simply my own desire to contemplate many different topics in relation to one another, and where possible, to either arrive at clear conclusions, or to indicate what remains unclear and demands closer examination. Hence, criticism is greatly appreciated; it can be addressed to [j.voorhoeve @ sen-foundation.org](mailto:j.voorhoeve@sen-foundation.org). On this site one will also be able to access the seven supplements referred to in this book and consult its maps in colour.

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