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World on the Edge

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WORLD ON THE EDGE

*How to Prevent Environmental
and Economic Collapse*

Lester R. Brown

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Preface

When I meet old friends and they ask, “How are you?” I often reply, “I’m fine; it’s the world I am worried about.” “Aren’t we all” is the common response. Most people have a rather vague sense of concern about the future, but some worry about specific threats such as climate change or population growth. Some are beyond questioning whether civilization will decline if we continue with business as usual, and instead they are asking when this will occur.

In early 2009, John Beddington, chief science advisor to the U.K. government, said the world was facing a “perfect storm” of food shortages, water scarcity, and costly oil by 2030. These developments, plus accelerating climate change and mass migration across national borders, would lead to major upheavals.¹

A week later, Jonathon Porritt, former chair of the U.K. Sustainable Development Commission, wrote in the *Guardian* that he agreed with Beddington’s analysis but that the timing was off. He thinks the crisis “will hit much closer to 2020 than 2030.” He calls it the “ultimate recession”—one from which there may be no recovery.²

These assessments by Beddington and Porritt raise two key questions. If we continue with business as usual, how much time do we have left before our global civilization unravels? And how do we save civilization?

World on the Edge is a response to these questions. As to how much time we have left with business as usual, no one knows for sure. We are handicapped by the difficulty of grasping the dynamics of exponential growth in a finite environment—namely, the earth. For me, thinking about this is aided by a riddle the French use to teach schoolchildren exponential growth. A lily pond has one leaf in it the first day, two the second day, four the third, and the number of leaves continues to double each day. If the pond fills on the thirtieth day, when is it half full? The twenty-ninth day. Unfortunately for our overcrowded planet, we may now be beyond the thirtieth day.

My sense is that the “perfect storm” or the “ultimate recession” could come at any time. It will likely be triggered by an unprecedented harvest shortfall, one caused by a combination of crop-withering heat waves and emerging water shortages as aquifers are depleted. Such a grain shortfall could drive food prices off the top of the chart, leading exporting countries to restrict or ban exports—as several countries did when prices rose in 2007–08 and as Russia did again in response to the heat wave of 2010. This in turn would undermine confidence in the market economy as a reliable source of grain. And in a world where each country would be narrowly focused on meeting its own needs, the confidence that is the foundation of the international economic and financial systems would begin to erode.

Now to the second question. What will it take to reverse the many environmental trends that are undermining the world economy? Restructuring the economy in time to avoid decline will take a massive mobilization at wartime speed. Here at the Earth Policy Institute and in this book, we call this massive restructuring Plan B. We are convinced that it, or something very similar to it, is our only hope.

As we think about the ecological deficits that are lead-

ing the world toward the edge, it becomes clear that the values generating ecological deficits are the same values that lead to growing fiscal deficits. We used to think it would be our children who would have to deal with the consequences of our deficits, but now it is clear that our generation will have to deal with them. Ecological and economic deficits are now shaping not only our future, but our present.

Beddington and Porritt deserve credit for publicly addressing the prospect of social collapse because it is not easy to talk about. This is partly because it is difficult to imagine something we have never experienced. We lack even the vocabulary. It is also difficult to talk about because we are addressing not just the future of humanity in an abstract sense, but the future of our families and our friends. No generation has faced a challenge with the complexity, scale, and urgency of the one that we face.

But there is hope. Without it this book would not exist. We think we can see both what needs to be done and how to do it.

There are two policy cornerstones underlying the Plan B transformation. One is to restructure taxes by lowering income taxes and raising the tax on carbon emissions to include the indirect costs of burning fossil fuels, such as climate change and air pollution, in fossil fuel prices. The amount of tax we pay would not change.

The second policy cornerstone is to redefine security for the twenty-first century. The threats to our future now are not armed aggression but rather climate change, population growth, water shortages, poverty, rising food prices, and failing states. Our challenge is not only to redefine security in conceptual terms, but also to reallocate fiscal priorities to shift resources toward achieving the Plan B goals. These include reforestation, soil conservation, fishery restoration, universal primary school education, and reproductive health care and

family planning services for women everywhere.

Although these goals are conceptually simple and easily understood, they will not be easily achieved. They will require an enormous effort from each of us. The vested interests of the fossil fuel and defense industries in maintaining the status quo are strong. But it is our future that is at stake. Yours and mine.

Lester R. Brown
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