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ADDIS ABABA – What does the future hold for the global economy? Will living standards rise worldwide, as today’s poor countries leapfrog technologies to catch up with richer countries? Or will prosperity slip through our fingers as greed and corruption lead us to deplete vital resources and degrade the natural environment on which human well-being depends? Humanity faces no greater challenge than to ensure a world of prosperity rather than a world that lies in ruins.

Illustration by Paul Lachine

Like a novel with two possible endings, ours is a story yet to be written in this new century. There is nothing inevitable about the spread – or the collapse – of prosperity. More than we know (or perhaps care to admit), the future is a matter of human choice, not mere prediction.

Despite the ongoing economic crisis in Europe and the United States, the developing world has sustained rapid economic growth. While the International Monetary Fund forecasts that the advanced economies will grow by just 1.5% in 2013, developing-country growth is projected to reach 5.6%. Asia’s developing economies, now the world’s pacesetters, are expected to grow by 7.2%, with output in Sub-Saharan Africa set to rise by a healthy 5.7%.

What is happening is both powerful and clear. Technologies that were once found only in rich countries now belong to the entire world. Mobile phone coverage in Sub-Saharan Africa,
for example, has gone from nearly zero subscribers 20 years ago to around 700 million today. And those phones are helping to bring banking, health care, education, business, government services, and entertainment to the poor. Within a few years, the vast majority of the world will have access to wireless broadband.

Yet there is another truth as well. Last year was the hottest ever recorded in the US. Droughts afflicted around 60% of US counties, including the breadbasket states of the Midwest and the Great Plains. In October, an extraordinary “superstorm” smashed into the Atlantic coastline around New Jersey, causing losses of around $60 billion. Climate problems – floods, droughts, heat waves, extreme storms, massive forest fires, and more – also ravaged many other parts of the world in 2012, including China, Australia, Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, and Africa’s Sahel region.

These environmental disasters are occurring with rising frequency, as they are partly caused by human actions, such as deforestation, coastal erosion, massive pollution, and, of course, the greenhouse-gas emissions that are changing the world’s climate and acidifying the oceans. What is new is that scourges like climate change – until recently described as a future threat – are now clear and present dangers. Scientists have even given a name to our era, the Anthropocene, in which humanity (“anthropos” in Greek) is having a large-scale impact on the planet’s ecosystems.

Herein lies our great challenge – the one that will determine whether we follow the path of prosperity or ruin. The rapidly growing developing countries cannot simply follow the economic-growth path that today’s rich countries traveled. If they try, the world economy will push the planet beyond safe operating conditions. Temperatures will rise, storms will intensify, the oceans will become more acidic, and species will go extinct in vast numbers as their habitats are destroyed.

The simple fact is that humanity faces a stark choice. If the world economy’s current growth patterns continue, we face ecological disaster. If the world economy embraces a new growth pattern – one that harnesses advanced technologies like smart phones, broadband, precision agriculture, and solar power – we can spread prosperity while saving the planet.

I call today’s growth pattern the business-as-usual option; the smart-technology growth pattern, by contrast, represents the sustainable-development option. Business as usual can work for a while, but it will end in tears, while the sustainable-development path can lead to long-term prosperity.

So, what will it take to write the happy ending? First, we must recognize that we, as a global society, have a choice to make. Business as usual is comfortable. We think we understand it. Yet it is not good enough: on our current trajectory, short-term prosperity is coming at the cost of too many future crises.

Second, we must recognize the powerful new tools and technologies that we have at hand. Using advanced information technologies – computers, satellite mapping, image processing, expert systems, and more – we now have the means to grow more food with less environmental damage; improve public health for rich and poor alike; distribute more electricity with lower greenhouse-gas emissions; and make our cities more livable and healthier, even as urbanization raises their populations by billions in the coming decades.

Third, we should set bold goals for the years ahead – to spread prosperity and improve public health while saving the planet. Fifty years ago, US President John F. Kennedy said that we should to go to the moon not because it was easy, but because it was hard – it tested the best in us. In our generation, sustainable development will be our test, encouraging us to use our creativity and human values to establish a path of sustainable well-being on our crowded and endangered planet.
I am proud and honored that United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has asked me to help mobilize the world’s expertise as we seek to achieve that goal. The greatest talents in our societies – in universities, businesses, NGOs, and especially among the world’s young people – are ready to take on our greatest challenges, and are joining the UN’s new Sustainable Development Solutions Network. In the months and years ahead, these leaders will share their visions of a prosperous and sustainable global society.

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1. Commented

**Erik de Ruijter @/eriktheruijter** 19 February 2013

Nice paragraph. Indeed, it is not about prediction. But is it about choices? You only make a real choice when you forfeit the benefits of the alternatives [that you did not choose]. I think this is a dangerous thing to do given the fierce debate every suggested way forward still creates. Therefore, I believe it is about understanding and keeping our options open. This way we can see, evaluate and adapt - our core competence a a human species.

- Expand all
2. **Femi Awoyinfa** 12 February 2013

Timely article by Mr. Sachs. My recommendation would be for the UN and other relevant players to mobilize real efforts to address these stark realities in the ASALs. The situation in Northern Kenya and other arid regions need urgent support. Unfortunately many international organizations are reluctant to invest in these areas where there is little potential for quick successes. There are existing technologies that can make a real difference in the lives of the world’s poor and vulnerable. which are yet to be deployed. We should therefore be ready to get our hands dirty especially in hard to reach communities. This is technology justice.

3. **Arne N. Gjorgov, MD, PhD** 11 February 2013

To Prof. Jeffrey D. Sachs

Skopje, February 11, 2013

Re: “Writing the Future,” Project Syndicate, Jan 24, 2013, Comments

Mass condomization of female sexuality could hardly be considered ‘sustainable development option’ and a matter of political choice (rather than imperative), because of the documented (indirect) causal relationship with the unabetted, ever rising and excess breast cancer epidemic in the developed worlds, spreading globally. The policy of condomized control of women’s sexuality in the name of ‘improved public health for real and poor (countries) alike’ could continue only by using blatant methods of false information, and will transfer the mistakes, miseries and death to women and girls from the advanced, industrialized, rich world to the developing and poor world. In conclusion: no ‘sustainable well-being on our crowded…planet’ could be done with condoms. These arguments are at last getting some prominent exposure. I wish Prof. Sachs and the team the very best of luck in developing practical solutions to the increasingly urgent problems we face.

4. **Derrick Wilkinson** @dgwilkinson 6 February 2013

I have been saying this and writing about it for over 10 years now and seen as somewhat eccentric. Good to see these arguments are at last getting some prominent exposure. I wish Prof. Sachs and the team the very best of luck in developing practical solutions to the increasingly urgent problems we face.

5. **John Brian Shannon** @JBSCanada 5 February 2013

Impressive article and congratulations on United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon asking you to help mobilize the world’s expertise to help solve these problems. Technology, of course, must be part of the solution. Better governance, must be universal.

6. **Gunnar Rundgren** 3 February 2013

The UNSDSN is an idea whose time has come and the fact that it has been initiated, gives me great hope.
What do we mean by prosperity? Is it the obsessive generation of desires and the compulsive search for their satisfaction, or is it the commitment to the principles of social justice? The answer, I believe, is clear. We must choose the latter. For unless we ensure a world of prosperity rather than a world that lies in ruins, nothing else counts.

Professor Jeffrey Sachs is one of a handful of human individuals who have the courage to look at the issues that threaten the future of the human species and who have the ability to bring to bear the world’s expertise collectively to bring the power of new technologies to bear on our problems. He is one of the very few who see the challenge not as a failure of our brains but as a failure of our economic system. He believes that we can solve our world’s problems with the right economic incentives and the right governance strategies. I agree. But I also believe that we need to design our economic system with concepts like carbon taxes, raw materials taxes, etc. to evolve solutions to the sustainability problems. This method can capture both large scale sustainability (avoiding carbon emissions) and accumulations of small scale actions to avoiding carbon taxes (ride sharing, home energy management, etc.).

Although we can obtain some of the former with the present crony subsidy solar energy system at great taxpayer cost, but that will not bring about the significant sum of the more significant individual decisions. We will need to design the economic system with concepts that evolve solutions to the sustainability problems. But in 2050 our population is expected to be 10 billion. If 10% of the population refuses to lower their consumption level, we will be worse off than we are now. The complexity of the problem is far too high. A better way to achieve those goals is to use indirect driving forces like economics (profits) and allow billions of decisions by individuals to evolve a sustainable solution. Not to mention a great portion of the Earth’s resources will have been used, burned or otherwise consumed by 2050.
Venu Madhav 27 January 2013

Very nice article Dr. Sachs, what I like most is not only is this edifying but importantly setting the potential model of the 'emerging economy' and its effect on the planet. What happens when we do not moderate our lifestyles that are to be seen in some of the areas of the planet, areas that are called by some the 'developed world'?

One of the things that I felt needs to be reiterated which although sounds a clichë is of utmost importance. We need the potential model of the 'emerging economy' and its effect on the planet, areas that are called by some the 'developed world'.

Nirmalan Gopalan 28 January 2013

Much more than a one liner is required here. Most people cannot see this and even less can see what can be done in response. We have to take the trouble to reinvent our perceptions clearly and at length. No one else can do it.
Writing the Future by Jeffrey D. Sachs - Project Syndicate

3/26/13

We are ALWAYS at the crossroads.

Frank O'Callaghan 24 January 2013

Agree. We have to make decision everyday.

pingfan hong 24 January 2013

Commented

100%

Frank O'Callaghan 24 January 2013

We are ALWAYS at the crossroads.

1. Commented

100%

pingfan hong 24 January 2013

Agree. We have to make decision everyday.

2. Commented
Claude Simon 27 January 2013

What about traffic circle?

Zsolt Hermann 24 January 2013

I agree with the writer, we are at crossroads.
And I also agree that everything depends on our free, human choice. And it is true only humans can make such a choice no other living creature possesses this option.
But in order to have a choice we need at least two options.
Up to this point humanity evolved in an egoistic, self calculating way based on our human ego. This is not a sin, or a fault, this is how we are born, egoism, self benefit, self profit is built into our nature, this human ego differentiate us from other animals, while our biological, even psychological makeup is basically identical with them.
Thus the whole of human history has been driven by the incremental growth of our egoistic nature, thriving for more, wanting more, exploring, and consuming more.
So far we wanted to explore and know more in order to exploit it for ourselves regardless of the consequences.
All the initially benevolent human inventions, finds were transformed into either weapons or vehicles to gain more profit for a small minority.
And now this behavior, attitude is drawing to a close as the fully evolved global, interconnected and interdependent network cannot tolerate this cancer like attitude without a total system collapse.
While on the one hand the global crisis, more precisely system failure is a negative event, threatening with serious even catastrophic consequences, on the other hand it gives us for the first time a choice, how we want to evolve from now on.
We usually only evaluate, think and scrutinize when in distress, when hitting a wall. We have reached this wall.
Now finally we can deploy the unique human capability of self assessment, and the capability of changing our own nature adapting to the changing conditions around us.
Now we can start evaluating and assessing the surrounding and obligating vast natural system not in order to exploit it but to learn how we could adapt to it and continue life as partners with it opening up its potential much deeper than ever before because we live in total harmony with the laws governing the system instead of inventing our own sub-systems, laws that go against the natural system around us.
In truth the crisis is not a negative event but a chance to break through into a new level of existence.
But it depends on our choice if we are ready to change ourselves riding over our ego using its power for the right outcome or we choose to stay controlled by it.

Nirmalan Dhas 28 January 2013

Very nicely expressed...will we chose to change ourselves. Can we do it...and if so how...how do we work with the ego...control it...some say destroy it...I think we have to befriended and guide it...but to do that we have to convince it that we know what we are doing...it is afraid that if it lets go we will crash the planet...and it does not realize that its own actions are doing just that...if we change will we still be recognizably human?