

The world's will to tackle climate

change is irresistible Far from stymieing the environmental cause, the downturn in the world's economies highlights just how pressing it is

- Last year marked a watershed in awareness of environmental issues, and in particular the challenge of climate change. Among many breakthroughs, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released its fourth assessment report - laying out the science of global warming more clearly than ever - and the Nobel peace prize was co-awarded to the panel and Al Gore. Today, however, many nations are facing recessionary trends and high rates of inflation. Oil prices are at an all-time high, and look likely to rise even higher. A price touching \$140 per barrel is something no one could have predicted even six months ago, despite spiraling prices throughout 2007.

Food prices have also increased as a result of fundamental factors, including rapidly increasing demand for food grains against prolonged stagnation in supply. Increasing prices have hit some of the poorest countries most severely, particularly those that have low incomes and are largely dependent on imports for basic subsistence. According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation, annual food expenditure of the most vulnerable countries has more than doubled since 2000. In a number of these nations food now constitutes 70%-80% of family expenditure. It is not at all surprising that we've seen food riots and large-scale demonstrations.

In this context, there is growing worldwide concern that the economic slowdown could lead to a parallel slowdown in environmental progress, with governments less willing to advocate the hard steps essential for reducing greenhouse emissions. This is indeed a worry, but I see a ray of hope, as I believe that global society is seriously questioning whether today's problems can be solved through short-term measures, as has been the case with routine ups and downs in the economy during past cycles. Could this lead to a widespread realisation that today's problems are the result of fundamental flaws in past growth and development patterns? There are, in my view, two reasons to suggest that the answer could be yes.

First, the world has reached an unprecedented level of awareness of the science behind climate change, with the contents of the IPCC's fourth assessment disseminated extensively by the media worldwide. A growing number of people - and not just typical environmentalists - now believe that climate change is not a concern for the distant future but something we are witnessing here and now. The cyclone that caused massive devastation in Burma and the extensive floods in Iowa, for instance, are linked in the public perception to climate change. Public concerns in several parts of the world have been heightened to such an extent that extreme weather events are invariably attributed to climate change. Never before has human society been gripped by such a strong realisation of the need to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels - and even change our lifestyles - in order to reduce emissions of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases.

Second, this existing resolve is being strengthened considerably by increasing oil prices, which prompted even a conservative Republican like President Bush to state that America is "addicted to oil" and must switch to alternatives. Car manufacturers are already investing heavily in electric vehicles - which reduce oil dependency and emissions - and public transport systems are getting renewed attention. As some politicians in the UK and elsewhere have recently argued, with high oil prices the world can't afford not to go green.

The possibility of a shift to other forms of energy is something that is not lost on the major oil producers. So it's no surprise that Saudi Arabia has convened a summit of producers and consumers to see what needs to be done to stabilise oil prices. A continuing increase in prices

would accelerate a move towards renewables, which would not support the interests of producer nations.

Based on all this, and on my discussions with policymakers, I believe the world is beginning to look at the deep underlying causes of its current problems, and is preparing for radical change. Barack Obama's performance in the US presidential race is, I think, symptomatic of a widespread thirst for such a change.

What we have today is no routine downturn in the conventional economic cycle. It is, and is seen to be, the crossroads in human progress that compels a major turn in direction. I believe the current generation is ready for such a shift and is unlikely to be distracted for long by an economic downturn that emanates from serious systemic distortions in existing patterns of growth.

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