Chapter 16

NATURAL RESOURCES, FOOD, THE ENVIRONMENT

We have seen in Chapter 4 and elsewhere how the grossly irresponsible money system continues to savage both global resources and the environment for short-term gain, without any consideration for the future. During just 30 years, from 1950 to 1980, annual world paper consumption increased fivefold to 230m tons, involving over one third of the total timber harvest. Paper production consumes huge amounts of energy - in the US for instance, it uses 10% of all energy used in industry.

The great majority of paper disappears into astonishing quantities of 'newsprint' produced by rival elites, who may be competitors yet who are all devotees of capitalism. Thus the millions of daily acres of newspapers which are not wasted on unnecessary advertisements are covered with almost exclusively negative news often slanted against the best interests of mankind.

Conservation of resources

Those fortunate enough to be involved with the introduction of Alternative World will face a tremendous responsibility in deciding how best to use all the world's manifold resources.

In sharp contrast to today's careless approach, they would need to consider the welfare of many generations to follow them. In the context of greater longevity, looking ahead four to five centuries would only imply five to six lifetimes. The first world forum of representatives would need to institute a detailed global survey, resulting in an 'inventory' of all known, and likely potential resources world-wide. Detailed proposals for the long term use of every type of resource could then be drawn up by the planners. In the interests of democracy, and so that the widest understanding of the issues could be gained, those proposals would then be circulated throughout all the various representative councils world-wide, for amendments and approval.

Global resources fall into two distinct categories: renewable and non-renewable, which call for different types of decisions.

Renewables, relating primarily to the earth's surface, include: topsoil, food crops, forests, flora and fauna, and water. In very approximate, round figures, half the world's surface above sea level is currently unused, being mountainous, frozen, desert, or excessively saline. The other half is, currently, divided roughly equally between forest and potential food-producing areas, the latter, where used, being subdivided approximately as to one part crop land to two parts pasture or grazing land. It can be taken for granted that the planners would recommend retaining the vast majority of forest areas, and reinstating, as soon as possible, those that had been destroyed, particularly in areas of climatic significance. Taking account of greatly reduced, but truly essential needs for timber, they would also designate appropriate areas for harvesting and re-planting.

The optimal purposes of all remaining usable land would then need to be agreed. It is known that the existing global total of land used for food production could be increased by at least 50%. Further, huge areas of both arable and grazing land have become degraded for various reasons resulting from private ownership and market forces. Freed from financial inhibitions, all necessary steps could be taken to restore such areas to good condition. Having expanded farming land to the utmost, the balance between arable and grazing land would then call for agreement. Current heavy consumption of meat, almost entirely by the better-off in the First World, is vastly in excess of protein requirements. The huge amounts of grain presently fattening live-

stock would be better used for human consumption.

Anal gas emissions from the world's 6bn cattle worsen global warming through nearly 60m tons per annum of methane; together with sheep and goats they have degraded over 70% of global grazing lands.

Since obtaining proteins through animal consumption is an inefficient process, an informed global discussion would need to be instituted in order to decide, first, whether it was sensible for the world to produce any meat at all. If, having taken account of nutritional, ecological and other considerations it was agreed to produce nominal amounts, a modest weekly meat ration for each world citizen could be agreed. An appropriate balance between grazing and arable land could then be struck, which could differ significantly from that obtaining at present, and thus increase dramatically the potential for wheat, rice and other food crops.

Alternative World would take fullest advantage of its common ownership by all humanity, to devote loving care to the restoration of the earth's surface to full health in all respects. In particular, the highest priority would be given globally to preventing further topsoil erosion - the insidious devastation let loose by market forces which now threatens future food supplies. Great emphasis would also be placed on the world-wide preservation of flora and fauna, which would be facilitated by the absence of financial temptations.

Problems with both quantity and quality of water supplies have become all too evident in many parts of the world. These very difficult problems would become considerably more tractable following the abolition of both money and nation states.

Reasoned negotiations could arrive at fair distribution arrangements where regions shared common sources. Alternative World would promote water conservation through flood control and elimination of waste, and by fair distribution, including curbing excessive use by some industries. Research would develop new possibilities for water supply, such as long distance 'grid' distribution, and by furthering deep tube well technology. If, eventually, a viable transfer method evolved, the annual 100m tons of fresh water in Antartic icebergs would suffice to produce 2bn tons of grain.

The world's non-renewable resources, mostly below ground, can be subdivided into fuels (Chapter 17) and minerals with industrial applications. At present consumption rates, known global fuel reserves have been estimated to be sufficient for the following periods: coal 200 years, gas 50 years, oil 30 years. The more important minerals include: bauxite, copper, diamonds, iron ore, lead, nickel, tin and zinc; considerable reserves of many of these are also known to exist upon or beneath sea-beds. The resource-use planners would need to list the current global consumption of each of these, and other less well-known minerals. Next, global totals of all the current consumptions by all forms of weaponry manufacture could be deducted, leaving projected net, 'peaceful' consumption figures. Following that, global lists of all the other current applications of each resource would be prepared. These would highlight forms of resource use which would be saved by eliminating wanton waste on all forms of luxury developments. Next would follow a schedule of applications not necessarily considered luxuries, but which the planners proposed should be either eliminated, or greatly curtailed, in the interests of conservation.

This schedule would include those prodigious current wasters of mineral resources: cars, lorries and motorways. Alternative World would explain to that small proportion of global society now owning cars, that they are an aberration which the world should never have had in such numbers, and must largely abandon (see Chapter 18). Emphasis would be placed instead on excellent public transport, including especially railways for both passengers and goods, and the provision of hire cars for occasional use by those earning the necessary points (see Chapter 11).

Finally, a master plan would be prepared which would set out the reasonable annual outputs of every worthwhile form of production, ranging from basic heavy industrial machinery or ships, to lightweight household equipment. Against this would be shown the consumption of all the different resources involved, together with the resulting likely exhaustion dates for each, which might range from 50 to 500 years ahead. This plan would then be circulated for discussion by councils of representatives world-wide, so that binding, democratic decisions could be taken governing the future use of all global resources. Alternative World would encourage citizen representatives to arrive at such decisions in a spirit of unprecedented self-denial, in the interests of many generations yet unborn. Even the unlikelihood of a resource having an exceptionally long-lasting expectancy would not justify using it up more than strictly necessary. Also, the predicted likelihoods of technological developments leading to substitutes should be looked upon as a bonus for future citizens rather than an excuse for extra consumption.

World food supplies

It is in the fundamentally important field of feeding humanity that Alternative World would be able to achieve dramatic improvements more quickly than in any other. This is because, as we have seen in Chapter 6, total calorie and protein productions already exceed the world's total basic human requirements. Once the inhuman capitalist priority of profits before life had been eliminated, it would be possible to mount an immediate global emergency programme of distributing food to all suffering the criminal tragedies of malnutrition and starvation. This would be a short-term measure only, until it became possible to transform world agriculture and food distribution on to a sound, balanced footing. Farming in most of today's Third World is skewed deliberately by agribusiness towards export-oriented mono-crops, and in the First World it is often inhibited by the stop-go uncertainties of the market system.

Alternative World would introduce as quickly as possible an integrated global plan for all food production, processing and distribution, based on maximum diversification of crops and, so far as possible, self-sufficiency within regions. In common with all plans, the human element would be crucially important, and the fact that all workers in agriculture and ancillary industries would be joint owners of the land would be fundamental to success. The only near equivalents to full societal ownership have been the rare examples of land reform, which resulted in dramatic improvements in output. For example, reforms in China in the 1950s had almost doubled agricultural yields by 1975, to a level 60% higher than India's. By 1987, China was able to feed a population 50% larger than India's, 20% better, and with 30% less cultivated land.[9] Although ideologically hostile to the concept, the World Bank itself has estimated that land reform could increase agricultural output by, for instance, 10% in Pakistan, 20% in Malaysia or Colombia, and 80% in North East Brazil.

In common with other industries, the most efficient machinery and equipment would be made available for circulation within groups of farms, to minimise wastage. Alternative World would create agricultural colleges to train 'agro-technicians' and disperse them globally, so that farm managers and workers could themselves receive up-to-date training and guidance in all aspects of agricultural techniques. Farms would be organised to be within reasonable distances from small towns, which could provide cultural and recreational amenities, besides having some light industry. The latter would facilitate interchanging from time to time between farming and factory work.

Besides expanding total farming areas, improved methods of cultivation would always be the aim. Measures would be taken to recycle sewage and return phosphates to the soil; to adopt improved breeds of plants; to rationalise the economical use of fertilisers; to organise improved forms of handling, storing and distributing foodstuffs to min-

imise waste; and to eliminate pests. Eliminating the tsetse fly in Africa, for example, would reclaim an area for farming approaching the size of the US.

Further, since only about 10% of existing Third World farm land is irrigated properly, Alternative World would give priority to creating new irrigation systems, sometimes assisted by reviving old ones. For this purpose, mechanical plant would be widely used, unless prevented, for example, by exceptional terrain. In these circumstances, large numbers of manual workers would be mobilised to excavate canals and tunnels, build dams, and upgrade river banks against flooding. Other measures to amplify efficient food production would include increasing wheat production, which requires only half as much water as rice, and integrating fish breeding with irrigation systems. Ecologically balanced steps would also be taken to extend ocean fishing, since the sun's energy produces more living matter in the seas than on land.

Saving the environment

Throughout Part One of this book can be seen the many different seeds of potential for the destruction of mankind; in particular, armed conflicts could degenerate into nuclear holocaust. None of these appalling developments is necessarily inevitable, however, provided today's world leaders can to some extent control themselves. By contrast, mankind's doom resulting from environmental crises can already be said to be all but inevitable, because all the disastrous, often irreversible processes involved are already well under way. Relief from the horrors set out in Chapter 4 can be gained from the realisation that they could be reversed, and gradually rectified, by the elimination of the profit-seeking money system.

First World leaders today continue not just to tolerate, but actually to promote all-round environmental destruction, pleading that to do otherwise would be 'too expensive'. This in spite of an official estimate that it would cost no more than 3% of world GNP to rectify most of the problems. The much-vaunted 1992 global environment conference, attended by the world's most prestigious leaders, achieved little beyond various half-hearted promises, some already broken. Alternative World would ensure that every aspect of the environment was treated with the highest respect, guided by two main principles. First, malpractices of all kinds would be stopped immediately, and forbidden in future. Second, in so far as any manufacturing or other activities with potentially harmful side-effects were to be considered beneficial for society, then whatever resources were necessary to counter those side-effects would be brought to bear on the problem, financial constraint being a thing of the past. Above all, in common with natural resources generally, discussed above, it would be of critical importance for a mandatory world plan dealing with all environmental issues to be adopted.

A global ban on all tree-felling would take immediate effect, until balanced conservation and harvesting plans had been agreed. All necessary resources would be applied urgently to reduce serious flooding, and to conserve water for irrigation and domestic use. Construction work on all unfinished large dams would be halted, in most cases permanently, unless impartial studies showed completion to be in the best interests of society. Stopping felling and taming rivers would also assist reduction of soil erosion, but the eradication of this desperately serious blight would call for a global campaign.

Eradication of atmospheric pollution, involving global warming and damage to the ozone layer, would also receive the highest priority. Since coal is still plentiful and so valuable for electricity generation, its inevitable side-effect of CO_2 emission would have to be accepted, and countered by applying the most effective known flue gas 'scrubbers' world-wide.

Because of chlorine's severe effects, all forms of CFC sprays, which society could well live without, would be banned permanently; a harmless alternative for refrigerators

would be prescribed for use globally. In view of their prodigious emissions of carbon and nitrous oxides, space rockets and supersonic planes would be prohibited for ever. For the same reason, the use of ordinary planes, lorries and cars would all be reduced severely. These measures would result both in improved atmospheric conditions and in significant savings of non-renewable fuels.

Alternative World would adopt a highly critical stance in relation to industrial processes involving noxious fumes, effluents or other poisonous side-effects. If the products were of a luxury or otherwise unnecessary nature, they would be prohibited. If appropriate councils of representatives decided that some 'dirty' industries were essential to society, then every suitable resource would be brought to bear, preferably to substitute a pollutant-free technology, or to purify the effluents to the maximum possible extent. There would be a firm ruling that such toxic wastes as could not be avoided would have to be both rendered as harmless as possible, and then disposed of within the region of origin, and never exported elsewhere.

Apart from saving materials and energy, in order to minimise waste every type of packaging, bottling, canning and other forms of containerisation of all kinds of products would be reduced to the bare minimum. Citizens would be expected to take away most goods loose, and to bring their own containers to the supermarkets for refilling from hygienic bulk food dispensers, so that canning could be virtually dispensed with. Similarly, they would bring their own glass or plastic bottles for refilling with milk or other drinks, and would never take away a full bottle without replacing it with a similar empty one. As a result, recycling would become largely redundant. It is in any case an unsatisfactory solution which tends to promote the 'throw-away' approach, and, especially in the case of glass, can absorb almost as much energy as the original product.

Recycling would, however, be promoted for all metals which unavoidably became scrap, and for the significantly smaller quantities of newsprint and other paper which would be produced in Alternative World.

The most lethal of all waste-producers, nuclear generation, would be closed down, world-wide, as rapidly as possible.

However much its protagonists minimise the risks of accidents, when they do occur, the results are so horrendous that mankind can no longer tolerate them. There would then remain no option but to devote whatever resources proved necessary in order to dismantle all nuclear installations, and to render both them and all their terrible waste products totally safe indefinitely. Finally, Alternative World would call a halt to further despoliation of the planet through the indiscriminate spreading of towns and cities.