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The Last Hope for Our Lifeboat

Contribution to GTI Forum [An Earth Constitution: Has the Time Come?](#)

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Glen Martin's passionate [call](#) for an Earth Constitution appeals to our common humanity without denying our diversity. Every parliamentary democracy faced the problem of difference versus solidarity and sustained itself more or less through successive compromises in diverse cultural and geopolitical contexts. The two central questions implied by Martin are whether a democratic system of governance could be successfully upscaled to the global level and to what extent the attempt could be morally justified.

Critics of the Earth Constitution concept point to a fundamental contradiction between the observable "pluriverse" of cultures, ecologies, economies, polities, and worldviews, and the attempt to govern it with one universal set of laws and rules. Thus, they question the feasibility of upscaling. While a village can be governed quite democratically, not all opinions can be taken into account in a larger community, let alone an entire country, lest its government be paralyzed. Majorities rule, and minorities become disempowered. As the number of the governed and their opinions increases, the discrimination of minority views becomes more severe. The challenge is exacerbated when acute contextual challenges demand quick decisions and flexibility in governmental policy. Governments have addressed that by temporarily assuming emergency powers. But for a world government administering over a gigantic population in ecological overshoot amidst a tipping planetary climate, governing by emergency decree would have to be the norm, not the exception. The threat of paralysis, rendered huge by the pluriverse and particularly dangerous under the global emergency, would necessitate severe curtailments of democracy. All that renders upscaling government to planetary size problematic.

Another potential problem encountered by democracies of any size are the dangers of immoral consensus (e.g., not allowing women the vote) or imprudent consensus (e.g., neglecting a pandemic). At national levels, such unfortunate consensus gives rise to ecocidal renegades, or to populist autocrats, or simply allows grossly unsustainable practices to persist on the basis of vociferous popular support. An international community committed to a just Great Transition can ill afford such outliers, but efforts to bring them into line under a world government would come at considerable cost to world peace and democracy.

These caveats allow a qualified answer to the question of whether a Great Transition could be accomplished at all without advocacy for world government. On the one hand, a type of “Eco-communalism” might be possible without a centralized world government, especially after a severe population reduction. But the likelihood of conflict and local failure in such a world would still be high. On the other hand, any “New Paradigm” type of Great Transition appears unachievable without commitment toward global cooperation and coordination. We cannot address the present state of extreme inequity in means and vulnerability, its worsening trend, and the diversity of ambitions and aspirations without some central adjudication. Considering the context of mass extinction, ecocide, climate disruption, and chaotic decline, decisive political action towards some kind of world government seems preferable to further hesitation, and essential for a Great Transition—but what kind of government?

Even a slightly democratic world government would still be preferable to the comparably anarchic situation and despicable injustice that prevail in international relations today. While the total plurality of opinions could never be translated into a fully representative plurality of policies, a government could provide avenues for the peaceful resolution of conflicts, based on logical reason, empirical wisdom and pragmatic intelligence. That consideration may have led to the prominence of academics as decision makers in Martin’s model. Under such an enlightened government, self-destructive progress traps like capitalist “sustainable development” would be less probable. A government with considerable executive power seems necessary for a “New Paradigm” type of Great Transition at this critical juncture. It would hardly live up to the democratic ideals of Martin’s Earth Constitution. But does that prospect render advocacy for such a government morally unjustifiable, given the alternatives?

According to Garrett Hardin's "Lifeboat Ethics," the range of morally justifiable policies shifts under conditions that threaten the survival of all.¹ Kenneth Boulding's "Spaceship Earth," in order to function reliably, requires sound captaining even at the best of times, and not leaving decision-making to bickering tribes; but when the spaceship has morphed into a lifeboat, the requirements on governance become even more stringent. A world facing the imminent prospect of ecological collapse survives by new moralities that differ from the conventions of humanitarianism and individual rights to which some of the world's affluent cultures have become accustomed.

How would that morality be different? To what extent can we justify re-prioritizing, relinquishing, restoring values in the face of collapse under the agenda of Deep Adaptation?² The best viable compromise in this moral quagmire still includes the widest possible plurality of opinions that does not jeopardize executive flexibility to the extent that would doom the planet. Allowing a Bolsonaro or Trump to assume command of the lifeboat, just because it was his turn in a democratically equitable rotation, would risk sinking the boat. At issue is an adequate consensus on how far an effective Earth Constitution can deviate from the cherished basic democratic principles in Martin's blueprint, within a realistic estimate of the remaining time frame. If the consensus deviates too far into morally dubious territory, the survival of the human species becomes no more valuable than any one of the dozens of species we casually exterminate every day. We would forego our most precious human attributes. If it does not deviate far enough, we risk further paralysis and suffering. Guidance might be provided by a skeletal platform consisting of human rights (the grantable ones), sustainable and equitable human security, separation of powers, and the rights of all life forms, accompanied by widespread popular acceptance of this platform.³

This summary of an ethical platform for an effective Earth Constitution suggests that the time has passed for a liberal democratic constitution as proposed by Martin. However, the need for an effective Earth Constitution and world government is greater than ever. The summary raises additional questions about Lifeboat ethics. Should an effective Earth Constitution governing the Lifeboat permit that people be thrown overboard who are caught trying to throw people overboard, as some cultures are comfortable practicing? Can a global executive "serve and protect" within the boundaries of the Constitution while preventing transgressions that are currently tolerated, or even committed, by much of humanity?

As for “moving forward,” what would need to happen in order for global government in this form to become possible? Obviously, the proponents of an Earth Constitution would need to acquire much greater influence. Its major opponents (“great powers,” autocracies, multinationals, powerful organizations who benefit from the status quo) would need to change their priorities or lose much of their influence. How might that be possible? Are those organizations even capable of changing their “minds”? How much time do we have left in the face of overshoot to change the minds of billions? Extensive collapse is likely to eventuate sooner and might be more effective in destabilizing traditional power structures. That prospect accentuates the moral ambivalence of this post: In spite of all the potential benefits of a world government, should we really wish for these requirements to become fulfilled?

Endnotes

1. Garrett Hardin, “Living on a Lifeboat,” 1988, in James White, *Contemporary Moral Problem* (Minneapolis: West Publishing, 1997), 143–156.
2. Jem Bendell, *Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy*, IFLAS Occasional Paper 2, July 27, 2020, Institute of Leadership & Sustainability (IFLAS), University of Cumbria, UK, www.lifeworth.com/deepadaptation.pdf.
3. Alexander Lautensach, “Sustainable Health For All? The Tension Between Human Security and the Right to Health Care,” *Journal of Human Security* 11, no. 1 (2015): 5-18, www.librelloph.com/journalofhumansecurity/article/view/johs-11.1.5; Ted Mosquin and Stan Rowe, “A Manifesto for Earth,” *Biodiversity* 5, no. 1 (2004): 3-9. www.ecospherics.net/pages/EarthManifesto.pdf.

About the Author



Alexander Lautensach is an adjunct professor and teacher trainer at the University of Northern British Columbia. His current research focuses on human ecology, cross-cultural education, and environmental ethics. He is the author of *Environmental Ethics for the Future: Rethinking Education to Achieve Sustainability* and *Survival How? Education, Crisis, Diachronicity and the Transition to a Sustainable Future*, as well as associate editor of the *Journal of Human Security*. He holds a PhD from the University of Otago.

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