THIRD ESSAY CONTEST
Fifth Summit of the Americas

OEA/Ser.E
III-CE/VCA-6/09
3 March 2009
Original: English

SECURING OUR CITIZEN'S FUTURE BY PROMOTING HUMAN PROSPERITY, ENERGY SECURITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY (WHILE STRENGTHENING DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE AND THE SUMMIT'S PROCESS)

(Reenu Toodesh - Trinidad & Tobago)

Securing Our Citizen's Future by Promoting Human Prosperity, Energy Security and Environmental Sustainability (while strengthening democratic governance and the Summit's process)

Reenu Toodesh

Abstract

The world faces two threats – one more imminent than the other – yet the longer-term threat global warming may provide the cure for the former, global recession. Ironically, the latter may begin healing as well. In that irony may lie answers to the OAS's Agenda of human prosperity, environmental sustainability and energy security. The repercussions of the last year have firmly convinced many leading world nations of this truth.

What is emerging is that solutions to global warming in tangible economic and innovative programs must be accelerated by research and infusion of new clean technologies and is not only possible, but is already happening.

What might be needed are new developmental blueprints as these attack directly the sources of carbon emission for the societies we rebuild, a modification of what should become the older fossil-fuel-driven economic/industrial model to one of engineered sustainability.

1.

When the members of the thirty-four member states of the democratic Americas (OAS) come into Port of Spain in April for The Fifth Summit of the Americas its agenda will be almost prophetic in stating the real current issues in the world. It will find that the world, as it was a year ago, even six months, might have been in a previous phase. In the Americas and the wider world - human prosperity, environmental sustainability, and energy security - have never been more burning issues. They begin to take on new meaning as if the 21st Century only now wants to usher itself in. It is common knowledge now that the global economy that was riding on an unprecedented wave of prosperity over the last decade has suddenly contracted. And no one has any notion of what rock bottom can mean.

The economic cracks that have opened in America and Europe remind us of our dependency, mostly at varying stages of development, aiming at metropolitan industrial models, less by choice than by a huge combination of factors – our history, our education, the way the world economy is tied to global markets, and whatever our level of development, its production engine is tied to energy availability and consumption. It is why addressing global warming, indisputable and largely accepted as scientifically sound in analysis, is so difficult a challenge

The irony now is the world might have to be brought to its economic knees in order to get common sense to invest in a future of less carbon. The fact is we all don't have oil or natural gas. The fluctuation of oil prices over the last year and rising food prices globally and tied to inflation (with the corn versus ethanol debate raging) shows why we can't build or develop or plan with any consistency if fossil fuel is the one basket with all our eggs in it. We can't depend on it, as we can on solar, thermal, wind, water that we have in abundance. But for many states without oil, without development, this is what amounts to living in a state of vacuum. In the mean time we live on tourism.

It gives birth to the phenomenon of oil hegemonies, and all alliances come at a price. In the last fifteen or so years the world has seen two or more oil wars, which usually take place where the oil is, though directed from elsewhere, and the cause of growing dispute, doubt and mistrust. It is also an accepted phenomenon of the age - terrorism. The world knows where the oil and gas is, and can

be found, with fresh squabbles now in distant places, as in the Arctic, with unresolved claims by Canada, Denmark, United States, and Norway. (Walker and King 2008)

In any event the most conservative estimates of global economic revival have started counting in short and medium-term and long-term, forecasting in effect a not so short recovery period. Suddenly we are conceiving that if we collectively as global partners assess the gains and opportunities to be derived over the longer term from institutionalizing sustainable development, we may begin to fight two dragons at our collective throats – the dragons of economic slump and potential ecological nightmares – one in the short and medium term and the latter in the longer term, as a start to avert those disasters.

2.

In Trinidad and Tobago we have chosen the route of using proceeds from exploitation of our oil and gas resources to build an industrial base, a manufacturing base, expanding equity in education, while grappling with infrastructural and social needs. The vision has been that of an industrialized, skilled and educated workforce led by an energy-based economy. It is standard fare that when revenue is high we invest, as much as others have seen us as a good place for investment to make what the world needs that cheap finite energy can produce – methanol, urea, iron and steel, natural gas for export, and intend to soon, plastic and alumina – some say at far too great an environmental cost. When energy revenue is down, we watch unemployment figures go up, social welfare reduced, incremental increase in taxes, and struggles with spending allocations.

We grapple with the dilemma then, that is at the heart of development in developing countries – the anxiety to go about in the shortest time-frame to satisfy the complex needs of reducing poverty, increasing educational equity, creating economic independence and providing adequate health care to vastly impoverished, isolated communities – issues at the heart of the OAS: and oil and gas, if you have it, is not to be spared. (The past 150 years of increasing industrialization is largely the reason the temperature has risen so much - how much more we have used and are using fossil fuels, which gives off carbon dioxide). (Walker and King 2008).

The story is being replayed in the development of the emerging giants – China, India, Brazil, Russia. Another question surfaces – is it fair for the developing world to say your time of excess

fossil-fuel burning might be gone, in speaking to the developed world, but ours is only now beginning, justified by history and the nature of poverty and inequity in our societies, and therefore the greater burden of carbon reduction is yours? (Kyoto Protocol 1992).

Will our low-lying islands be spared by tsunamis, coastal erosion, flooding, ice caps melting, drowning of coastal cities, excess heat, excess rain, holes in the ozone layer, and the like because of our history?

It is the peculiar dilemma of the 21st Century – and of members of the OAS to rethink holistically, developmental strategies in the context of sustainability – in the context of reducing, slowing the bigger disaster, the consequences of global warming. Here are some important facts about global warming that contribute to the problems and the many issues facing the world today.

1. The primary greenhouse gas responsible for global warming is carbon dioxide.
2. Since 1990, yearly emissions of carbon dioxide have gone up by about 6 billion metric tons worldwide, more than a 20% increase.
3. Carbon dioxide takes 100 years to disperse in the atmosphere - even if emissions are stopped today, we will still feel the effects for years to come.
4. During the 20th century, the average surface temperature of the world has increased by 1.2 to 1.4°F.
5. The eight warmest years on record have all occurred since 1998, with the warmest year being 2005.
6. The Arctic Climate Impact Assessment concluded that in the past 50 years, the average temperatures of Alaska, eastern Russia and western Canada have increased as much 7°F -almost twice the global average.
7. Glaciers worldwide lost an average of about 5 feet of ice in 2006, compared to just 1 foot of ice lost in 2005. Melting glaciers are a major factor in sea-level rise around the world
8. Sea levels have risen between 4-8 inches worldwide during the last century, and experts predict they could rise as much 2 feet in the next 100 years.
9. The World Health Organization blames 150,000 deaths per year on the effects of global warming including extreme weather, drought, heat waves, decreased food production and the increased spread of diseases like malaria.

10. At least 279 species of plants and animals are already responding to global warming, migrating north to escape rising temperatures.

11. Coral reefs are highly sensitive to small changes in water temperature. Scientists say if current CO2 emission trends continue, the world's coral reefs could be virtually destroyed by 2050. (http://www.dosomething.org/tipsandtools/11-facts-about-global-warming)

3.

When the wagon of the OAS rolls into Port of Spain it will notice fewer tourists, airline distress, loss of jobs, slowed growth rate forecasted for most economies. It will notice that financial bail-outs continue.

It will note that America has signaled change, as much for itself as for the world, with approval for 'tax credits and related financial incentives for renewable energy and energy efficiency — elements to revive the economy…tax breaks to benefit the wind and solar energy industries, encourage energy-efficiency improvements to existing homes and help service stations recoup their costs for installing alternative energy pumps…' (Doggett 2009)

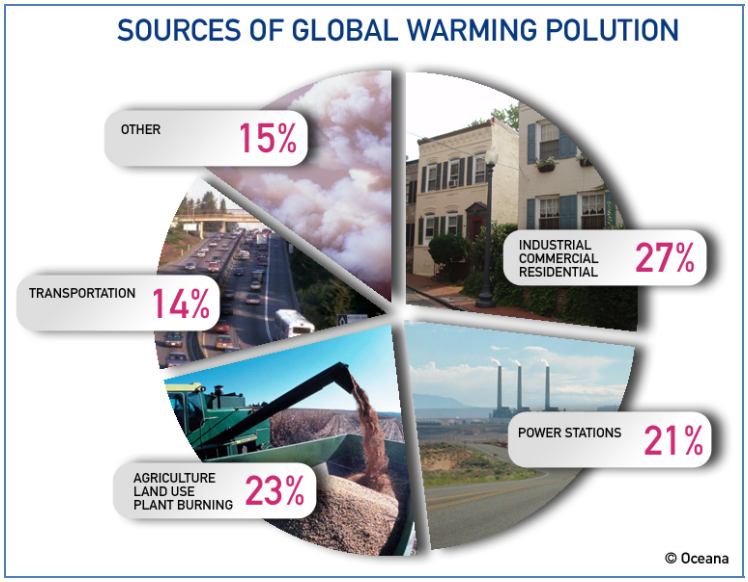
It would note tax credits 'for buying solar water heating property, small wind energy property and geothermal pumps, funding for facilities that generate electricity from wind, biomass, geothermal, small irrigation, hydropower, landfill gas, ocean currents and trash burning facilities, and incentives for retrofitting houses…'. (Doggett 2009)

It will have heard the call by the Secretary General of the United Nations in November last warning 'we're on the threshold of a global transformation – the age of green economics.' (said Ban Ki-moon, the UN General Secretary, recently to Newsweek). It would be aware that the International Energy Agency (IEA) has declared 'in no uncertain terms that a global revolution is needed in ways that energy is supplied and used' and 'calling for a transformation in the way the world drives its cars, its factories, and indeed the global economy.' (Dickey and McNicoll 2008)

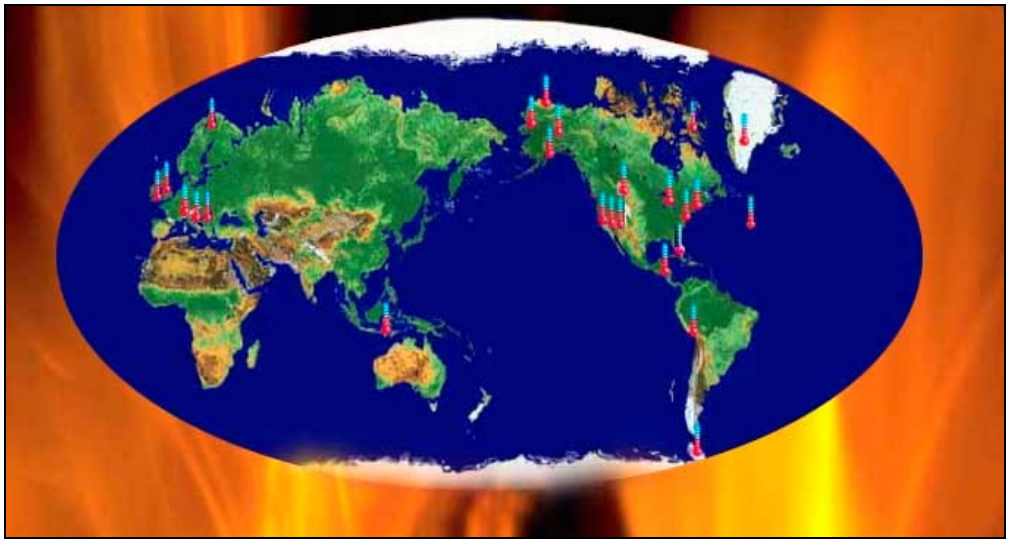
This 'New Green Deal' is being seen as a new economic driver, a 'new hot growth' industry, a potential disaster retriever, as the new engine of economic revival and growth for an impressive list of developed countries – America, Britain, Germany, France, Japan, Sweden, Norway, Denmark,

Netherlands – many of whom have already done remarkable work in research and development of new technologies and products.

What will be the components of this New Green Deal? And can the membership of the OAS bite the bullet? Can we forge new developmental models/hybrids from looking at the effects? Can we reorient our economic models? What breakthroughs have been made that we must be cognizant of? I have already mentioned tax and financial incentives, and a change in a way of thinking.



[http://www.oceana.org/climate/problem/pollution-sources/]



This is where temperatures have risen in the world.

[http://www.worldviewofglobalwarming.org/pages/warmingmap.html]

The trend to clean development mechanisms must spread through our corporations and businesses as we note increasingly climate-friendly company positions by corporations and influential business leaders (B.P – Beyond Petroleum, Fox, Google, General Motors, Chrysler, Ford etc.), as societal concerns increase, and as these impact upon industry decisions. This is also part of the global business response to shifting public opinion on the need to slow down climate change in an effort to stave off impending forecasts of likely disastrous consequences. Something our big players have to begin to do.

There are the breakthroughs in commercialized hybrid vehicles – more mileage, less gas, use of alternative fuels, affordable – in India, in Japan, in Brazil (we should be cautious not to become the scrap-yard of exhausted models). Low emission regulations for vehicles and factories with appropriate incentives/disincentives should be regulated and enforced. The growth of a low carbon society would require a new infrastructural infrastructure – in the things we make and use everyday- to facilitate low energy use and efficiencies utilizing new and innovative technologies.

There is also the case for ‘advancing the next generation of bio-fuels.’ (Dickey and McNicoll 2008). Brazil’s work in ethanol production has been revolutionary and inventive in this regard. On the

cards are nuclear-power plants (our region may need to advance further into hydro-energy), solar collection farms, wind turbines, ethanol production, research and development into electric or hydrogen powered cars, and sadly neglected in the Caribbean and larger Latin America, efficiencies in a hugely growing subsidiary industry – construction, often referred to as green construction.

But much remains to be done to institutionalize sustainability in all aspects of our planning and development within individual states. By 2012 when the Kyoto Protocol is to be revised the responsibility to reduce carbon emissions will be enormous. We may wish to look the region in its face and ask what are its assets, if it has the will to collaborate towards investigating and investing in new models of development that are looped to our twin predicament – recession and the need to stem the high tide of global warming, to reduce dependency on fossil fuels.

It must be a new blueprint, of institutionalized efforts at life-cycle carbon reduction through all aspects of (planning, implementation, dismantling) transportation, agriculture and land use, housing construction, industrial and commercial growth, energy use and generation. We must make the transformational leap in research and development coupled with adaptation of new and existing technologies to go ‘greener.’

References

Braasch, Gary (2005), "World View of Global Warming," http://www.worldviewofglobalwarming.org/pages/warmingmap.html

Dickey, Christopher and McNicoll Tracy (2008) "'A Green New Deal'- Some of the world's most powerful leaders argue that this crisis is a call to speed up the creation of a new energy economy. Why they're right". *Newsweek*, Nov 3rd, 2008.

Doggett,Tom (2009) "Lawmakers Okay Energy Tax Breaks In Obama Plan", *Reuters News Agency*, Jan 22nd 2009.

Oceana (2008), "Protecting the World's Oceans" http://www.oceana.org/climate/problem/pollution-sources/

Walker, Gabrielle and David King, (2008), *The Hot Topic*, Douglas and Mc Intyre.