

**“IT WAS THE BEST OF TIMES, IT WAS THE WORST OF TIMES”
RESPONDING TO GLOBAL POPULATION MOVEMENTS**

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” Those famous words were the opening lines of Charles Dickens’ ‘A Tale of Two Cities’ - But there were more words that followed that almost poetic opening.

His opening continued: “it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way...”

“It was the spring of hope, It was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us.” Though the theme of the book was the time of the French Revolution, Charles Dickens wrote those words in 1859, a period of societal uncertainty, of great change, of new ideas being voiced and old ones being challenged. For example, it was the aftermath of the Dred Scott decision which triggered the American Civil War, and the publication of Charles Darwin’s ‘The origin of species’ which would spark a science-faith contention.

Charles Dickens could not have known it, but how those same words speak to us today - the very formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs] can be considered a metaphor for those words. For the SDGs acknowledge aspects of despair in our world yet seek to offer hope. Consider any one of them - for example SDG 3 - *Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages*; or SDG 5 - *Stop all forms of discrimination against women and girls everywhere and remove all violence and exploitation against them in public and private life*.

So here we are today, at this UNGA81-SDG conference considering how we might turn the despair implicit in the reason for each SDG into hopeful futures. That the best of times might come forth from the worst.

Recently, I have been reading a book - *Goliath’s Curse: The history and future of societal collapse* by Luke Kemp.¹ In an early part in the book Kemp notes that Winston Churchill had written an essay *Shall we commit suicide* - a work inspired (if that is the right word) by the catastrophic situations of the First World War and its aftermath. In that essay, Kemp wrote that human society was in the unprecedented situation of being able to ‘unfailingly accomplish its own extinction’.² The fact that society did not extinguish itself at the time should, however, not be considered a failure of the perceptive wisdom of Churchill at the time. We should not mock his words as hyperbole in the category of the sentiments of a famous Australian poem by Jack O’Brien - *Said Hanrahan*.

¹ Kemp L, *Goliath’s Curse: The History and Future of Societal Collapse*, Penguin, London, 2025

² Op.cit., p9.

"It's lookin' crook," said Daniel Croke;
"Bedad, it's cruke, me lad,
For never since the banks went broke
Has seasons been so bad."
"It's dry, all right," said young O'Neil,
With which astute remark
He squatted down upon his heel
And chewed a piece of bark.
And so around the chorus ran
"It's keepin' dry, no doubt."
"We'll all be rooned," said Hanrahan,
"Before the year is out.

For WWI followed by the 1920s and 1930s were the worst of times but they were not immunised against hope. Much was indeed 'rooned' but not all was destroyed - though battered, the world did not end.

As we face our current challenges, Kemp reminds us that the failure of earlier Hanrahan-type doomsaying doesn't mean that current concerns are 'invalid. It (simply) means we need a reliable way to put the current threats we face into perspective.'³

Kemp goes on to proffer thoughts as to how putting such 'current threats into perspective' might be done. He writes:

History can help us understand the origins of risk we are facing today ... (that) we need to reverse the root causes of global risk, not just build new technologies to cope with the symptoms.'⁴

It is this theme of understanding risk and reversing causes, not just coping with their symptoms that stands as the key challenge for all of us both individually, and collectively - not only as citizens of our respective nations but also as members of vital civil society organisations to which all of us here belong - organisations that exist because they want the worst of times to become the best of times.

Yesterday, in the first Roundtable the topic was *Common ground to common good* - that session was particularly focussed on the role of faith communities working together. However, the title reminded me of an archaic word in English of which I am very fond - *commonweal* ... it's not actually the same as the modern word *commonwealth* for the 'weal' of commonweal was different from the 'wealth' of commonwealth. The former was rich with the idea of well-being in a broad sense, whereas the latter grew largely to focus on economic and political goals alone.

³ Idem.

⁴ Idem.

I understand, Dalia⁵, that in Lithuanian it would be like the difference between *bendroji gerove* and *bendruomenė*.

Time does not permit me to analyse progress or otherwise on each of the 17 SDGs; so, let me tackle the problem in a different way. I want to raise the issue of global population movement and its relevance to the question of individual and community well-being. First, let me identify some issues relevant to this being the worst of times. We live in a world where increasingly walls, both figurative and literal, are getting higher and higher to stem the increasing global movement of peoples. Yesterday, I was struck by Nikos Chrysogelos⁶ statement that:

We have to work behind borders ... but the solution must be collaboration;
therefore, we must build bridges not walls.

Countries have a right to work behind borders, to manage the movement of people into their sovereignties - I do not dispute that right. But here is the real issue - as each national entity faces increasing movement of people seeking entry, they fall back on what seems to be their only solution - build higher walls to stop it.

Yet, a high wall is, in Luke Kemp's words, a type of technological response rather than an understanding of the causes. So let me give some information about current trends in the global movement of peoples and I don't want to start with movement across borders but largely within. For decades now, technological innovation and environmental impacts such as soil depletion, loss of vital water sources or climate change have separately forced literally billions of people to give up living in rural areas and seek their chances in urban areas. In 2009, UN Habitat estimated that three million people a week were giving up living in the countryside and moving to cities - that's 150 million people a year.⁷ Where do they move? Overwhelmingly, they stay within their own country and move to urban slums which are in the increasing number of megalopolises - almost all in countries of the south. One in four city dwellers around the world now lives in slums - 1.2 billion, 300 million more than 20 years ago. Megalopolises are cities with populations of over ten million each. Their number has grown from three in 1950 to thirty-three now with the prediction that there will be a doubling to 67 within the next 24 years.⁸

How promising is all that for the idea of commonweal - common good, or wellbeing - for people either individually or collectively? It seems that the very definition of the worst of times is about to get worse. Considering the SDGs - at least nine of the seventeen seem

⁵ HE Dalia Asanavičiūtė-Gružauskienė, the other keynote speaker at the conference that day.

⁶ Hon. Nick Chrysogelos, Deputy Mayor of Athens for Climate Governance and Social Economy, and a keynote speaker on the previous day.

⁷ Michael Collyer, *Three million people move to cities every week: so how can cities plan for migrants*, City Monitor Dec 3, 2015. Article cited: UN Habitat, *Global Report on Human Settlements 2009: Planning Sustainable Cities – Policy Directions*, Earthscan, Sterling VA, 2009,

⁸ UN Press Release, *Cities are home to 45% of the global population, with megacities continuing to grow*, UN Report finds, NY, 18 November 2025. www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2025/11/press-release-wup2025/

directly affected - 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10,11 - noting particularly SDG 11 - *Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable*.

The growing bubble of slum populations in megalopolises, overwhelmingly based in the south, has been leaking badly, as poverty stricken people increasingly refuse to do the wealthy world the courtesy of dying in their own circumstances - and so they cross borders, they board boats, they profit people smugglers, they do what is considered not right or proper in order to seek commonweal for themselves and their families.

In response, the walls of national sovereignty just get higher and higher; but there are two outcomes to such a solution. The first, is that they won't ultimately work - the flood of impoverished people seeking escape will not be stemmed; and, secondly, the community psyche of the wall-builders and their communities will be seriously damaged.

The Greek-Egyptian poet C P Cavafy wrote a poem *Waiting for the barbarians* in which he treated with the effects of othering on the body politic - fomenting the idea of an unacceptable 'them' in efforts to idealise the acceptable 'us' - a poisoning of the true spirit of community. His poem ends:⁹

Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
Those people were a kind of solution.

So, I have painted a picture of the worst of times - a winter of despair to quote Dickens - but where is the spring of hope? Where could be the best of times? Well, that is why we are here at this conference; that is why we are all players in civil society ... because we believe there can be the best of times - we believe in the spring of hope.

At our reception on Monday evening, Zeynep Selma Guney,¹⁰ talked about the importance of turning values into action. The SDGs are based on core values of decency but they will be worthless if there were to be no meaningful action to achieve them. In effect what Zeynep was telling us was that there can be no spring of hope, there can be no best of times, if we are not prepared to confront the worst of times by turning values into action.

But to do that, we must reframe our thinking from 'them and us' - we must start thinking about community globally, not just chauvinistically. And we must seek to build the promise of the best of times from the reality of the worst of times. Our poet at the reception, Ramya Ramana,¹¹ on Monday night, in her beautiful poem, had this powerful line which reminded us that our futures grow out of our circumstances - she wrote about:

Where dreams and confrontation exist in the same hymn.

⁹ Complete poem available at [Waiting for the Barbarians | The Poetry Foundation](#)

¹⁰ JWF Program Associate and Youth Representative and speaker at the Opening Reception on the first night.

¹¹ Youth Poet Laureate of NYC award.

In the aftermath of World War II, where confrontation had devastated the world, there was a yearning for dreams which might grow constructively from the confrontation which had raged across the world. Immediately after the war, global financial systems were in a perilous state and this could have led to devastating consequences similar to those which had been seen in the 1920s and 1930s. Not wanting history to repeat itself, major countries of the democratic world realised that only multilateral action could stave off disaster. And so was born the Bretton Woods agreement with the birth of the World Bank and the IMF. From the worst of times, they sought the best of times.

Surely, now is the time for another multilateral collaborative effort, this time to address the issue of the movement of peoples - to understanding the causes rather than, like King Canute, vainly merely trying to stop the ever-increasing flow. If only the commonwealth of the world could be used to improve the commonweal of its peoples - if there could only be agreement on programs for people to find hope where they currently live, rather than be forced to seek it elsewhere, then the rate of flow would become manageable for all. How might that look? Well, if the countries of the North were serious; if those countries who are so focussed on building higher walls would look to causes not just symptoms, they might consider investing in sustainable income generation in countries of the South, particularly addressing the creation of new jobs and programs to mitigate the effects of environmental change. Such activities would sit well within SDG 17 - *strengthening the means of implementation and revitalizing the global partnership for sustainable development*.

What would be especially important to recognise is that the required scale for such programs to have meaningful impact would be beyond any one or small group of nations to finance. I am suggesting a multilateral intervention of the magnitude of a Bretton Woods agreement for population management. Individually, nations would still protect their own borders; while collaboratively, they would enable large numbers of people to be freed from the snares of poverty in the nations where they were born rather than having to flee elsewhere to seek succour. SDGs 1, 2 & 3 would be achieved.

I have played with the words *commonweal* and *commonwealth*; in finishing let me play with two other similar sounding words - *egoism* and *egotism*. Egoism is a sense of self-awareness which includes the idea of self-preservation; egotism, on the other hand, is a concept of an inflated idea of self, of self-aggrandisement with an implicit suggestion that others are less worthy.

If we apply these concepts to national identity, we might say that the world can live with national egoism - situations where countries are self-aware of their national identities; where those entities seek to prosper themselves. What the world does not need is national egotism, where nations seek to achieve self-interest at the expense of others. That would bring the worst of times; the world needs, the world demands, the best of times. The call to action is ours, in civil society, to make it so.

Thank you