

Moving Ahead on the Global Megacrisis: Useful and Not So Useful Responses

William Halal
George Washington University
USA

I am deeply grateful for the thoughtful responses to this symposium on our Global Megacrisis study, and also to Jose Ramos and Michael Marien for providing fine analyses of these 13 responses.

In the interest of moving ahead on this crucial line of research, I hope to integrate the useful comments into an improved version of our trend analysis to define the problem more accurately. Some responses were not very useful, and I would like to address them briefly, as I think they tell us more about the obstacles to be overcome.

Improving the Trend Analysis

The Trend Analysis in Box 2 is central to this line of study because the trends tentatively assembled in this simple framework define the problem. There are probably other ways the problem could be defined, but Mike Marien and I think a trend analysis offers a sound and basic approach to assess the forces driving this planetary challenge and the forces that work to resolve it. A number of respondents made important points that we plan to add to this analysis:

Peak Oil Marcus Barber, Jim Dator, and others think Peak Oil should be added as a driving trend, and I agree. Yes, new discoveries are being made of oil and gas reserves, and better drilling and extraction methods (such as the Canadian Tar Sands) will increase supplies. But these new sources are limited, and they are often far more costly and environmentally damaging. The major large sources (like Saudi Arabia) are being depleted, while newfound reserves pale in comparison to the 3- to 4-fold increase in energy demand caused by globalization. More compelling is the fact that carbon fuels per se cause climate change, and have to be curtailed out of necessity.

Social Movements Many mentioned the promise of the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and other social movements. Although we did mention these social forces in Box 2, the next version will be more specific and assign greater importance to these and other social movements that are likely to be forthcoming.

Post-Collapse Scenarios Dator and others think the problem is so severe that a global collapse is coming, but a rebound will follow to create a better world. This seems unlikely if the Decline

to Disaster scenario were to occur because civilization would no longer exist in major parts of the globe, but it's plausible under the Muddling Down scenario. This idea raises interesting possibilities for considering a variety of "post-collapse" scenarios.

Enoughness Marcus Barber suggests that today's ethic of rampant acquisition and consumption may finally reach a saturation point, which would lessen the forces driving the Megacrisis. This does not seem likely in the developing world where billions now live in poverty. But trends toward Voluntary Simplicity have been rising in the developed world, and this could in time lead to more realistic living standards globally. We plan to add this trend to the positive side of the ledger.

Accelerating Progress Ronald Havelock makes an important contribution by noting that progress is accelerating in many ways (IT, education, etc.). We did note that "The Technology Revolution Introduces New Powers," but we will amplify this point and note the rate of improvement is accelerating.

Long-Term Evolutionary Trend Vahid Motlagh makes a great point in noting that humanity has always struggled through a "cycle of seasons" that produces great crises and that they are always surmounted.

New World Order Sesh Velamoor, Vahid Motlagh, Ryota Ono, Rakesh Kapoor, Marcus Barber, Oliver Markley, Richard Slaughter, Anita Kelleher, Ronald Havelock, Kuo-Hua Chen, Jose Ramos, and others all express the need for various new paradigms, better education systems, global wisdom, understanding complexity, global governance, solving the meta-crisis of thought, collaboration, and other facets of what could more broadly be thought of as a "new world order." This roughly compares to what I called the historic move beyond knowledge to consciousness. These more subjective issues can be thought of as forming another category I will call "strategies." Hopefully, our next version of this study will also evaluate a range of specific strategies that could be undertaken to resolve the Megacrisis.

Our study of the Megacrisis is a work in progress, so please advise us of any other driving trends, obstacles, strategies, and other ideas. We plan to hold a major discussion of this line of research at the 2012 World Future Society conference in Toronto, and we are also planning to post an improved survey on www.TechCast.org.

Not So Useful Responses

Some responses were critical of various aspects of our study, which is fair enough, and even welcomed in the spirit of heeding constructive criticism. Given the enormous stakes involved – the future of civilization – I think the more egregious comments should be noted as they tell us something important about the way we address issues today.

For instance, several responses considered our study to be wrong-headed for various reasons – the future cannot be predicted, optimism is irresponsible, pessimism is discouraging, these are self-fulfilling prophecies, this is fatalism, mystical thinking,

doubtful, technology is not a panacea, etc. There is certainly an element of truth in much of this, but I feel dismay at what appears to be a tendency to find fault.

I am especially concerned about how hard it is to have one's views understood accurately. Many dismissed the important role of the Tech Revolution out of hand – insisting that technology is not enough, social and political changes are more crucial, or words to that effect, all of which misses the point. The fact is that technology is now moving civilization to a higher stage of development precisely in order to solve the next great challenge – today's Megacrisis. I quote:

Information technology causes a transition to an advanced stage of civilization powered by more advanced capabilities, interrelated global systems, adaptive social institutions, mounting knowledge and intelligence, and global consciousness.

Yes, there are probably lots of ways to improve this study, but it is an initial attempt to frame and investigate a huge problem that has been largely unaddressed in a serious way. I can't hope to respond in detail to all this criticism, and instead I focused here on using the good points to improve our trend analysis and thereby frame the Megacrisis more fully and carefully.

But this abundant and often gratuitous criticism serves to highlight the causes of the problem – our collective tendency to criticize, disagree, and engage in conflict. The problem is severe among academics and intellectuals who have been taught that good science should attempt to disprove a thesis. My analysis of the Megacrisis leads me to the conclusion that only productive collaboration will get us out of this mess, and excessive criticism serves to confuse and discourage. In this sense, one outcome of this symposium exemplifies the problem rather than solutions.

If the world is to make this historic transformation in reasonably good shape, I suspect we will have to learn how to collaborate in a serious way. This doesn't require groupthink or suppressing criticism. But it does require us to be discriminate in our views, to be constructive rather than destructive, think carefully, support others, and above all – attempt to collaborate. As scholars and futurists, one of our biggest challenges today is to give up the normal tradition of combative dialogue for a new form of collaborative scholarship able to help resolve the Megacrisis.

Correspondence

William Halal
Professor Emeritus, George Washington University
President, TechCast LLC www.TechCast.org
Email: halal@gwu.edu

