

# ***Social Justice and the Human Right to Material Equivalence in Standard of Living***

(Long version)

A common, or shared, standard of living for all people is basic to social justice. Without material equivalence in a living standard social justice is at best limited, at worst a farce.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century preoccupation with growth, both economic and in populations, will be increasingly unadaptive for humans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There will be major social, economic and political upheavals in coming decades and, while they will be disruptive and destructive, they will also present humans with opportunities to re-organise their social, economic and political affairs. It can only be hoped that such re-organisation will result in a fairer, more just and equitable distribution of resources that will encompass a socially and environmentally sustainable world.

What are the circumstances that cannot be avoided and that will almost certainly lead to the upheavals referred to above? Let us consider just three. They are inter-related and will form part of a global situation by mid-century:

- Oil depletion
- Global warming
- Overpopulation

The end of oil availability for most current purposes (agriculture, transport, plastics etc) will force humans to find more sustainable ways to access and employ energy. But not before economic and civil disorder create multiple problems. Choices between continuing growth patterns or more frugal and realistically sustainable ways of living will produce major political ructions. Nuclear energy proponents will be confronted by renewable energy proponents. Societies will fracture as it becomes clear that there are limited options in the time left. Why is there limited time?

Global warming, now unavoidable, will be like a slowly closing oven door. Social failure to prop the door open will doom humanity to, first, severe deprivations and discomforts; then, to threats of extinction. Greenhouse gas emissions will reflect increases in planetary population, plus the persistent human resistance to adapt to simpler living.

As the six and half billion humans who now overpopulate the planet increase to ten billion in just a few short years, millions will suffer and the environmental and ecological balance will tip to the catastrophic.

Out of the predicted social, economic and political chaos may come a realisation that humans simply must re-order their values and priorities. Among these realisations surely will be the fact that the planet cannot sustain such huge numbers of one species. Concomitant with this will be the understanding that fewer people will need to employ more sustainable energy sources. And, in order to minimise social discord, aggression and exploitation of others, it will be necessary to effect real social justice, beginning with the human right to a materially equivalent standard of living for all.

The following pages outline the human right to a materially equivalent standard of living (material equivalence, for short) as a necessity for a socially just global community.

## Equality and Human Rights

As a matter of scientific fact, contrary to the *US Declaration of Independence* and the *United Nations Declaration of Human Rights*<sup>1</sup>, humans are not born equal. Humans vary in the genetic advantages and disadvantages they are born with.<sup>2</sup> These genetic differences interact with the wide variety of experience that humans are exposed to. One result of such variations and interactions is that individuals are anything but equal, for example, in their creativity, their capacity to cope with life, their resilience to recover from adversity, their capacity to relate happily with others, their capacity to earn a living or to acquire wealth or to carry out a variety of productive tasks and so on. Added to these differences are circumstantial effects (often referred to as ‘luck’ or ‘being in the right place at the right time’) that may fortuitously present individuals with opportunities, not available to others, to improve their material level; not to mention, of course, advantages conferred by virtue of parental wealth and social standing.

So it is that, as a general rule, those born with genetic advantages (for example, greater intelligence; more stable nervous systems; greater capacity for persistent effort and concentration; higher social dominance; greater capacity for energetic motivation; and so on) can better take advantage of what the environment (experiential, social, educational) has to offer in order to optimise their material circumstances. Put simply, generally those who become wealthier than others, do so because of genetic and experiential advantages. While this is a natural state of affairs, it is not necessarily a socially desirable state for the 21st century and beyond.

Differences in the material standards of life (wealth) have been in the past, and are in the 21st century, a major source of social discord: sometimes openly acknowledged; often only vaguely sensed; frequently denied or disputed; and nearly always discounted by those who are threatened by its recognition and revelation. People in the last-named group, for example, will discount such ideas by reference to such phrases as ‘the politics of envy’ or by labelling as *passé* the concept of ‘class struggle’ or by railing against ‘terrorists’, as if such assertions dissolve the problems by denial of their existence or by giving them an odious label.

It is understandable that those materially advantaged by their superior ability to live better (the ‘haves’) are reluctant to acknowledge a human right to material equivalence that might put them on a material level with the less advantaged (the ‘have nots’). On the face of it, it is not as understandable that the less advantaged should acquiesce in the social system that provides ‘goodies’ to some while denying those ‘goodies’ to themselves --- or at least withholding the full quantity or quality of ‘goodies’ enjoyed by the advantaged. While many people are morally outraged by poverty, they are frequently not able to experience the same degree of righteous indignation at the opposite end of the material spectrum: the multimillion dollar corporate executives, the speculators, the top-flight sports heroes, the music or performance ‘stars’, and many others who experience wealth and material living standards barely dreamed of by the vast multitudes on the planet.

On the above argument then, it is asserted that no person is justified in living better than others by virtue of their superior genetic make up, their exceptional talent, their contribution to society, their more advantaged experiences, or their more fortuitous circumstances. Similarly, no person

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<sup>1</sup> It is probable that the use of ‘equal’ in these contexts was meant to convey such ideas as ‘equal in the eyes of God’ or, in more secular language, ‘equal in dignity’ or ‘equal before the law’.

<sup>2</sup> Among persons of European ancestry, for psychological features that can be measured, heritabilities range from about 25 per cent to 80 per cent. Or, to put it more concretely, for such features as intelligence (IQ), extroversion, neurotic tendencies, musical talent, creativity, types of interests, religiousness, authoritarianism and happiness, from one-fourth to four-fifths of the variation from person to person is associated with genetic differences between those persons. See *Science* 250, 1990, 223-228.

should live less comfortably than others by virtue of their less fortunate genetic inheritance, their less advantaged social or educational experiences, their less fortuitous circumstances, their lesser ability to make a valuable contribution to humanity and so on.

Because humans are not equal in their ability to attain wealth, an ethical case can be made for each human having the right to a living standard equivalent to the living standard of all other humans. This is called 'the human right to material equivalence in standard of living'.

### **The Human Right to Material Equivalence in Standard of Living**

It is asserted that there is a human right to equivalence in standard of living (material equivalence) for all humans. 'Material equivalence' is defined as '*a more-or-less equal amount of material wealth (the sum total of an individual's assets and income) resulting in a similar standard of living for all*'. That is, no individual should live at a higher or lower living standard than any other individual. This does not mean that everyone's material circumstances should be identical, but merely that the varied and idiosyncratic material circumstances of each person should be equivalent in material value to those of all others. So, for example, while one person may prefer a modest home plus sufficient disposable assets to enable access to various benefits (e.g. better food, warmer clothing, pursuit of cultural interests etc) another may decide on a more comfortable home and fewer other advantages. Within the framework of material equivalence the expressions of individual preferences are infinite. For those whose cultural traditions or personal preferences lead them to 'opt out' of such a system, suitable arrangements could be made, such as holding their material 'share' in escrow until it may be wanted by them.

Everyone understands that the rights outlined in the United Nations *Declaration of Human Rights* are ideals or goals to which we are encouraged to aspire. It is in this context that the present argument of a human right of material equivalence is put forward. It is proposed as a goal towards which the governments and peoples of the world can strive, with the understanding that in all likelihood it will take many decades to approach or, possibly, many centuries to achieve. As with many of the existing rights in the UN *Declaration* there will be governments, cultures and individuals who will not subscribe to the concept and who, either by neglect or obstruction, will work against the fulfilment of the right. This in no way invalidates it in principle.

### **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**

A human right of material equivalence is compatible with almost all of the United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948). Those parts of the *Declaration* that appear to have a direct bearing on material equivalence occur in Articles 17, 23 and 25. Article 17 states that '*Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others*' and '*No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property*'. Material equivalence would not interfere with this article provided, of course, that the property owned was equivalent to the private wealth of every other person. Four couples who decide to live cooperatively (say, on a farm) might pool their equivalent wealth and in this way may appear to live better than one individual who owns one eighth the value of the property of the cooperative. The second part of Article 17 is more difficult, since in order to bring about a situation of material equivalence it will be necessary to gradually deprive the very wealthy of property. Such actions would not be arbitrary, however. They would be planned quite deliberately and executed as painlessly as possible over substantial periods of time, in line with public policy based on a consensus about material equivalence and how it should be brought about.

Article 23 of the *Declaration* states that '*everyone, without discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work*'. From a material equivalence point of view this is an unsatisfactory statement. It begs the question of what is to be regarded as 'equal work'. The position taken here is that all work that is performed by individuals exercising their respective abilities, skills,

capacities and efforts is ‘equal’; they all have the right to equal pay. Article 23 goes on to assert that ‘*everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ...*’. But it was no doubt assumed by the framers of the *Declaration*, and by most of its readers, that ‘just and favourable remuneration’ will vary, depending on the perceived social value, or market value, of the work—criteria that are rejected by the standards of material equivalence. There may be circumstances in which some individuals earn more than others (see below) but these would be minor and temporary variations on a relatively flat range of income for all.

The first part of Article 25 is the closest the UN *Declaration* gets to material equivalence, stating ‘*Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control*’. The goal here is the avoidance of poverty, but it is certainly not aimed at any levelling end point. For that reason it falls short of meeting the standards of material equivalence.

## **Democracy and Freedom**

Discussions of the concept of democracy almost invariably get couched in terms of ‘equality’ and ‘freedom’. But these terms are usually not defined or explained; they are hollow terms that sound nice but signify very little. What does a politician or social commentator mean when using the word ‘equal’? And is ‘freedom’ only meant to cover freedom to act along lines approved by the politician or commentator?

In discussing the human right to material equivalence it is best to explicitly avoid the use of the term ‘equal’ which is an emotive but largely meaningless word. As pointed out above, people are not equal (in the sense of ‘similar or equivalent in human potential’) but they are entitled to a similar or equivalent standard of living. They are also entitled to freedom from the indignity of a standard of living that is not the equivalent of everyone’s standard. In a truly democratic world, among all the other features that contribute to democracy, equivalence of material standard of living would be fundamental and a prerequisite for a democratic relationship among people. They would have freedom from the oppression of power and influence that accompanies great differences in wealth. They would be free from the variations in advantage bestowed by great differences in material circumstances.

## **The Phenomenon of Corruption**

Most humans act as if they are morally blind to the idea that we all have a right to material equivalence. Yet the idea that all people are entitled to an equivalent standard of living is, in the words of the *United States Declaration of Independence*, ‘self evident’. So there is an ethical principle applying to all, but widespread failure to recognise it. For this reason the term ‘corruption’ may be applied, where corruption means ‘*to have been so co-opted by the human history of embedded material inequality that one cannot rationally contemplate the possibility of material equivalence for all humans*’. However, a distinction can be made between those who are aware of the ethical correctness of the human right of material equivalence but who—like the author—are unable or unwilling to do much about it; they may be said to be victims of socially-inculcated ‘conscious corruption’. Those who are unaware of, or are opposed to, the ethical correctness of the human right of material equivalence may be said to be victims of socially-inculcated ‘unconscious corruption’.

The reduction, or even the elimination, of poverty is not good enough. Gross unjustifiable differences in wealth and standard of living must go, as must much of the social stratification that accompanies these inequities. Social evolution on this planet—if we are to survive with some dignity—must move positively on many fronts: ecologically, economically, culturally and

ethically. Material equivalence in standard of living for all, through a permanent and thoroughgoing redistribution of wealth, is part of that necessary evolution.

While evolutionary changes, in the social sphere no less than in nature, can span decades and centuries, they can also progress in fits and starts in response to opportunities which may be benign and peaceful or calamitous and disruptive. In either case there is a need to examine core values and to plan for long-term goals.

It is to be hoped that during the 21st century there will be a universal recognition of the ethical value of the human right of material equivalence. The situation that might eventually prevail would be that an abrogation of material equivalence by any individual or group would be regarded in the same way that the West currently regards slavery, rape and child molestation. That is, a person or group living better than the rest of the community would be condemned as 'antisocial' (or a product of 'unconscious corruption') and subject correctional social pressure.

In practice, at least in the course of social evolution towards the goal of material equivalence, it would need to be recognised that individuals and groups are acting in much the same way as what the West today condemns as 'the exploitation of child labour'. That is, that people are living in a way that is socially undesirable but difficult to eliminate under the prevailing circumstances; but such socially undesirable conditions require constant public education, vigilance and action.

Conscious corruption—being the unwillingness to publicly acknowledge and advocate for change to a situation that one knows is not just—is a minimal condition in a human if the unjust situation is to change. Insofar as one acknowledges the ethical correctness of the human right of material equivalence and advocates for the appropriate changes in society, one is somewhat less prone to corruption than otherwise.

For humans who recognise their moral subscription to conscious corruption, what would be an appropriate emotional response to the wide differences in material standards that prevail in the early years of the 21st century? For those at the poverty end of the material spectrum an appropriate emotional response might be righteous indignation; for those at the affluent end, a sense of guilt or a feeling of discomfort mixed with resignation at the unjust situation.

Most people, it has to be admitted, appear to be victims of unconscious corruption, for reasons that need to be investigated but which may be guessed. First, it needs to be made clear that unconscious corruption does not imply dishonesty or a lack of integrity. Those who object to the idea of a human right of material equivalence express their opposition, disagreement, scepticism and objections quite sincerely. This was also true of most slave owners a couple of centuries ago when the abolition of slavery was being debated. Even Thomas Jefferson, who spoke so eloquently of equality, owned slaves and saw no great contradiction in his stance. Which is just to illustrate that people tend to see as 'natural' a state of affairs that few question. So, it is not a matter of calling Jefferson and his contemporary slave owners 'corrupt' in the usual sense; they simply were ignorant of the future change in values and perceptions. In that sense we may characterise them, as with our own contemporaries, as 'victims of unconscious corruption'.

Then, of course, there will be those who, again sincerely, think that forms of superiority do, indeed, justify a superior standard of living by comparison with those whom they view as inferior. It is perceived by them as 'natural', 'normal', even 'desirable'. Greed—undoubtedly a major motivator for many humans—is not necessarily what drives their views. In many cases they have internalised a prevailing social ideology. So, for example, some will oppose what is suggested here by supporting the idea of individual freedom and the right of the individual to self-determination. Where such concepts then lead to the 'right' of the intelligent, the educated, or perhaps just the privileged to live better than others, one can sense a 'conspiracy' of the advantaged to justify their situation as being superior to the disadvantaged. Another argument might be that some measure of inequality in material income or wealth distribution is required

to lead to people being happy or satisfied with their lot. No doubt this is true for those who are better off; but it fails to give the same weight for happiness or satisfaction to those who are on the losing side of the social equation.

## **Social stratification and material equivalence**

It is probable that social stratification will continue to exist, although differences based on social rank might be minimised, and 'rankism' (the use of social rank as a means of humiliating others or aggrandising oneself) would be socially unacceptable, to the mental health of all concerned. Power differentials due to social stratification would no longer be based on wealth, but might be limited to the particular roles and tasks that individuals are called upon to fulfil. For example, in carrying out a complex surgical operation the leading surgeon needs to have overall authority in cooperation with other assisting surgeons, anaesthetists and nurses. But that power differential evaporates in other contexts outside the surgical suite or the hospital.

Social inequality, some sociologists argue, evolves in all societies to ensure that important positions are conscientiously filled by persons most qualified to carry out the duties required by the position. Persons who, by virtue of talent and/or training, are best suited to the positions must be recruited, so the argument goes, by bestowing on them prestige, high salary, ample leisure and so on. The degree to which these rewards are bestowed depend on the scarcity of natural talent and the costliness of training. If the skills required are scarce due to rarity of talent or costliness of training, and if the position to be filled is functionally important to society, high rewards will be needed to attract the most skilled applicants. The rewards most used in the West are financial (salaries, bonuses, fringe benefits), power (although usually accruing to the specific role to be filled) and social prestige.

How are these ideas compatible with material equivalence? It is mainly in the area of financial rewards that material equivalence is not compatible. The matter of talent identification is not so difficult: industrial psychology tests and similar techniques can generally identify a pool of potential candidates (although the subsequent interviewing for selection is highly questionable). Many will argue that those who have endured years of difficult study, or have persevered in the accumulation of valuable experience, should be rewarded with greater incomes. This point of view is so pervasive that it is generally taken for granted. However, it needs to be pointed out that, under a system based on material equivalence, students can live at an equivalent standard of living while they are studying. For example, many professionals are required to study throughout their working lives. Because they have superior brains and other advantageous qualities (due to their genetic inheritance and its interaction with their environments) they can cope with lifelong study more happily and productively than can people who lack those advantages. Their greater ability to study, and to do the kind of work based upon it, does not entitle them to live better or worse than the people they serve.

Under a free education regime (that is, where education is provided at no financial cost to students or their families) the rewards of engaging in education or training come from (a) the enjoyment of the experience itself, (b) self-development, and (d) the milieu in which it takes place (company of others; stimulation of interaction; cultural enrichment). It is difficult to make a convincing case for a student making a 'sacrifice' under such conditions. So the argument that a trained person should be recompensed with a higher salary for the sacrifices made under training are not substantial. Under a material equivalence arrangement the student would be at the same standard of living as everyone else, making the 'sacrifice' argument even less valid.

By all means it is desirable to get the most suitable people into the positions that need to be filled. To this end there should be equal opportunity for recruitment and training of all potentially talented persons. Alternative motivations to work in those positions need to be encouraged: intrinsic work satisfaction, social duty and even 'joy in work' might be

institutionalised so that self-interest and social-interest coincide. That is, 'service to society' might be institutionalised as a widespread motivation for occupying an appropriate position and fulfilling it conscientiously.

Similar objections may be raised concerning those who perform difficult or obnoxious work by comparison with those who are engaged in agreeable work. It has to be admitted that this is a stronger case for a differential in material status. The solution might be a system of bonuses that are limited to the conditions of work and the time for which the tasks are performed. Such a system of bonuses would need to be based on agreed criteria and subject to rigorous regulation, so that additional remuneration could be made to those taking on dangerous, onerous or particularly difficult tasks for which alternatives (robots or other machines) could not be substituted. But such bonuses should be on an hourly basis for tasks performed, not built into a salary.

What about those who are prepared to work hard versus those who desire not to work at all? This is certainly a harder call to make. First it would require that some humane but effective system exist to gauge whether the desire not to work is based on health, mental health or other problems. At the other end of the spectrum (the hard workers) there might also be some way of determining whether the effort being made is due to an underlying emotional problem (such as compulsive competitiveness, or obsessive greed and so on) or is motivated by a wholly healthy and altruistic need to be productive. In other words, it is suggested that there are optimum conditions for physically and emotionally healthy work to occur, being neither extremely work-oriented nor extremely work-averse. Under these conditions it may be that, while maintaining equivalent material conditions for both workers and non-workers, the latter would only be disadvantaged when suitable work is available but the non-worker chooses to forego it. In these circumstances a reduction in income might follow, according to understood and agreed rules.

How about those who are engaged in artistic or creative pursuits? Generally these would be people who are active in an area of human endeavour that they find emotionally or intellectually rewarding. They should be encouraged and their efforts acknowledged appropriately. In the world that is envisaged under a material equivalence arrangement there would be greater scope for people to pursue their creative and artistic desires, particularly for those whose poverty precludes such activities now.

For many critics the market presents a thorny problem for the human right of material equivalence. What should be the situation for investors, for land speculators and for risk takers? The suggestion here is that if these activities are socially constructive and benefit the community as a whole in the long term, they should be allowed to exist under the best possible regulation consistent with those constructive ends. People engaged in those market activities would not be any different from the rest of the population in terms of material equivalence. Individuals or companies and corporations that generated socially-useful wealth that did not disadvantage others would simply channel the excess wealth (that is, over and above that generated for their personal income and for re-investment in the work that has generated the wealth) into a social fund that would be used for all.

## **Practical considerations**

A global social system practicing material equivalence assumes certain prerequisites. There would need to be universal relative affluence; not the affluence that characterises today's wealthy elites, but a level of comfort that frees people from anxious preoccupation with survival, health threats and security; affluence that guarantees basic needs and enables people to pursue cultural and personal interests for a fulfilling life.

While a social system that incorporates material equivalence would do so as a matter of public policy, it would not intrude upon the private sphere of spirituality, relationships, religion and so

on. Just how this would be worked out under differing social milieu is a matter for each society to resolve. Keeping the private and public spheres separate is generally not seen as a problem for the West, but may be a difficulty for Islamic and some other societies. The great variety of human endeavour and qualities might be promoted more effectively in the relative absence of today's obsessions with competition, wealth and power.

Another assumption is that there would be full, non-stressed employment, although the nature and organisation of work might be substantially different from present practice.

A more general objection to the present proposal is that it is unrealistic and fails to spell out the practicalities of how it could possibly be implemented. This objection is frankly acknowledged. However, the principle should be established first. There is no point in working out detailed solutions if there is no consensus that there is a problem to be resolved. If the proposal for a human right of material equivalence is universally dismissed as an error, an undesirable state of affairs, or the idiosyncratic fantasy of a fevered brain and nothing more, then there is little point in anyone speculating as to how such a right might be pursued. If, on the other hand, these ideas were deemed to have merit, despite the difficulties for bringing them about, then people might suggest ways and means for their attainment over time.

The proposal being made here is an ethical or moral goal that, if implemented world wide, would involve a major social evolutionary shift. If a broad consensus were reached as to the desirability of implementation, the strategies to reach the goal would be a matter for discussion, planning and gradual adjustments over long periods of time. At any point along the temporal evolution towards the goal the situation reached would be but an approximation of the desired final end point. It would proceed differently in different times and places, depending on the circumstances peculiar to each place and time, and depending on the strategies judged best able to move towards the goal. Some broad and general strategies are suggested below.

Material wealth (meaning both assets and income) is currently widely disparate. One can imagine a pyramid in which the base and lower half of the pyramid is made up of those people living in poverty or near poverty. The very top apex of the pyramid would then represent the extremely wealthy. While the improvement of the many will take time, if only because it is so large a group and so intractable a problem, the reduction at the 'extreme wealth' part of the pyramid should be accomplished much more rapidly. The downward pressure on the pyramid should be matched with the upward pressure on its base. But the reduction of extreme wealth, while it would be fiercely resisted by those individuals and corporations involved, should be the first focus of the evolutionary change. Practically it would need to proceed both within nation states and, more gradually perhaps, between them.

Jared Diamond, in discussing possible reasons why societies fail to survive, points out that groups with interests that clash will often reason rationally from their own point of view, despite the harm that it may do to society in the long term. *'That is, some people may reason correctly that they can advance their own interests by behavior harmful to other people. Scientists term such behavior "rational" precisely because it employs correct reasoning, even though it may be morally reprehensible. The perpetrators know that they will often get away with their bad behavior, especially if there is no law against it or if the law isn't effectively enforced. They feel safe because the perpetrators are typically concentrated (few in number) and highly motivated by the prospect of reaping big, certain, and immediate profits, while the losers are spread over large numbers of individuals. That gives the losers little motivation to go to the hassle of fighting back, because each loser loses only a little and would receive only small, uncertain, distant profits even from undoing the minority's grab.'*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jared Diamond (2005) *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive* (Allen Lane, Penguin Group, Australia), p. 427.



So it is that *'income and wealth disparity is rationalized as a necessity for capital formation. The New York Times reports that from 1980 to 2002, the total income earned by the top 0.1% of earners in the United States more than doubled, while the share earned by everyone else in the top 10% rose far less and the share of the bottom 90% declined.'*<sup>4</sup>

Ongoing adjustments, both downwards and upwards until equivalence is approximated among a global mosaic of societies, could take decades if not centuries. This assumes continued adherence to the goal as a desirable world community outcome, plus a continued determination to work towards it. It also assumes a stable world order, a condition that is by no means guaranteed. It is quite possible that unexpected opportunities to progress in a more equitable direction may be presented by major global upheavals of social dislocation. Such upheavals may be associated with economic collapse due to energy scarcity accompanied by pervasive ecological damage, political and social chaos or repression, wars to capture resources, and the violent struggles to protest and rectify these distortions. There are those who predict that the current spiralling of both population and consumption, along with gross maldistribution of resources and unavailability of energy for agriculture (i.e. oil depletion), will result in a sudden depopulation due to starvation and disease. Lui (2005), for example, points out that *'the UN Millennium Development Goals (UNMDG) commit the international community to halving world poverty by 2015, a decade from now. With current trends, that goal is likely to be achievable only through the death of half of the poor by starvation, disease and local conflicts. The UN Development Program warns that 3 million children will die in sub-Saharan Africa alone by 2015 if the world continues on its current path ...'*<sup>5</sup>

Reduction of the world population to, say, half of its present level might facilitate or complement the achievement of a human right of material equivalence. One hopes that such an outcome would not follow from the scenario suggested above, but would result from a rational social policy and would take decades, perhaps a century or two, to achieve and stabilise. Certainly a much smaller global population would enhance the chances of redressing the present imbalance between human consumption, standards of living, and the ability of the planet's ecology to sustain remaining species, including the human species.

There needs to be a full move to renewable energy sources, even if only supplemental to nuclear energy. Apart from avoiding the total depletion of remaining fossil fuels, and the possible avoidance of continued global warming, renewable energy available to a smaller population living in a less wasteful mode would have the potential for a truly sustainable future.

Increased integration of national and regional governances, along the lines of the current European Union, could be accompanied by increasingly agreed mutual goals, strategies and actions for improving the state of the planet and its living creatures, especially as the global economy gradually evolves from a market-and-growth economy to a post-market and post-growth worldwide 'steady state' economy.

The overall goal of a human right to material equivalence is aptly summed up in the words of Professor Amartya Sen: *'The inequalities ... concern disparities in affluence, and also gross asymmetries in political, social and economic power ... [T]here are critically important issues that need to be addressed in the mixed world of massive comfort and extreme misery in which we live ... There is a need to reduce the contrast between our universe of remarkable possibilities and the stubborn prevalence of relentless deprivation.'*<sup>6</sup>

The specific mechanisms by which the vision of material equivalence is to be brought about cannot be delved into here. It is a separate debate for which the present author is frankly ill

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<sup>4</sup> Henry C K Liu (6.16.05) *The coming trade war and global depression*. Asia Times, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Amartya Sen (2001) *Global doubts as global solutions*. Address in Melbourne Town Hall, May 15 2001.

qualified. And, in any case, it is premature because the groundswell of change to the values espoused above is not yet in evidence.

The nature and mechanism for taxation in the immediate future, for example, is a technical matter, although the values and general strategies underpinning it can be outlined. Apart from inheritance and associated taxes, the policies of taxation will reflect the social values and ideals outlined above. On the way to material equivalence it is likely that higher taxes of the wealthy will be favoured. The market would be *‘gradually displaced from being the central organising principle of the economy and society ... (and taxation would be) the means by which the economy can be rationally organized, and higher levels of equality and security can be provided to all citizens via government provision. The market distribution of income, goods and services (contains) significant inefficiencies and injustices. Market principles should be challenged by democratically agreed upon economic objectives ... designed to provide for a broad range of citizenship rights, enabling people to live outside the market mechanism to a considerable extent.’*<sup>7</sup> However, as material equivalence is approximated it may be that differential taxation, or perhaps taxations *per se*, becomes a moot point.

## Conclusion

While the human right of material equivalence is compatible with the human striving for betterment, the espousal and pursuit of other human rights, and such conditions as the sustainable balance between human populations and a viable planetary ecology, it has to be recognised that it will conflict with key features of current life. Among these is the market that dominates the world’s economic evolution at present. It may be that markets can exist alongside material equivalence, provided that market fluctuations and regulations avoid elevating individuals’ wealth and living standards beyond that of their fellow humans. To evolve in such a direction will be a challenge to future socio-political and economic strategists.

It also needs to be recognised that while a gradual evolution towards an agreed worldwide social goal of material equivalence is desirable, global circumstances may preclude a smooth or even progress towards the goal. For example, the almost certain social and economic upheavals attendant upon an imminent energy crisis—including the effects of oil depletion, global warming and related phenomena—could either retard or accelerate the evolution towards material equivalence. Other geo-political developments (e.g. the so-called ‘war on terror’; shifts in the global balances of power) may present opportunities for more rapid evolution towards material equivalence; but they could just as easily facilitate the mobilisation of military, police and judicial power to prevent it.

Despite objections concerning the realisation of the concept of the human right of material equivalence, the present priority is to establish whether any consensus is possible as to the concept’s desirability in principle. If that can be established, then the present author urges adoption of the idea enunciated by Gramsci: Pessimism of the intellect; optimism of the will. For the present purpose this may be understood thus: The social and economic systems in which we are enmeshed may resist, perhaps totally frustrate, our attempts to change them for the better. Nevertheless, we must persistently and forever strive to improve the situation—for all people equally, for all other living creatures, and for the planetary ecologies with which we do, and may in the future, interact.

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<sup>7</sup> This quote is an excerpt, illustrating the arguments put forward by those advocating for higher taxation, from Martin Leet (2005) *Taxation: Lower or higher?* (The Brisbane Institute, April 2005).