

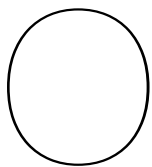
WHY WE NEED A  
**GLOBAL  
GUARDIAN**



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*If we are to overcome the climate crisis, the world needs to be able to coordinate and regulate its response on a global scale.*

**Jonathan Firbank** speaks with **Dr Roberto Debono** about his doctoral thesis, which proposes a solution: a global guardian.



ur world is a single natural space. When ice melts at its poles, ocean currents slow at its equator.

People in the greatest cities breathe oxygen from the vastest jungles while producing CO<sub>2</sub> that cooks remote wilderness. While Mount Everest collects litter, the Mariana Trench captures carbon. The climate crisis is global, but the institutions contending with it are national. It impacts and is impacted differently by each country. Some nations have built economies wholly dependent on oil. Others are ravaged by climate changes they barely contribute to and lack the capacity to resist without outside help. Some are democratic, some authoritarian. Expecting nearly 200 nations to naturally align in the face of the climate crisis is naive. Their only common

ground, with a couple of exceptions, is dedication to infinite economic growth in a world with finite bioregenerative capacity. This itself drives climate change.

Dr Roberto Debono is a medical doctor whose investigation of this problem has led him to political philosophy, in which he is pursuing a Ph.D. at UM. He believes the solution is a global guardian, a global organisation with limited but significant regulatory authority to keep our planet habitable. He defines a global guardian as a 'constitutionally limited, legitimate, coercive, global authority.' Constitutionally limited means that it would have a legal mandate and defined limits to its power. Next, it has to 'enjoy legitimacy among the world's peoples or states, with democratic governance built in. Coercive is an ugly word, but it simply means that this

institution would have the legitimate capacity to enforce global agreements with the force of law,' Debono says.

## **OUR CAPACITY FOR COOPERATION**

Many are likely to dismiss the notion of global cooperation around the idea of a supranational coercive organisation. Some are sceptical about our capacity for cooperation, others are fearful of globalisation. But it's been done before. The great crises of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were the World Wars. In their aftermath, two supranational organisations were established. 'The EU is a good preconfiguration of a supranational organisation with significant regulatory authority. Another pertinent example is the UN which was supported despite the knowledge that some of its founding member states would relinquish' ▶



**Dr Roberto Debono**  
*Photo by James Moffett*

some of their geopolitical influence with the coming into being of the institution. Today, the UN is a global organisation which enjoys near-universal membership,' says Debono. These institutions ensure peace and make a repeat of humanity's most bloody period unthinkable. Decades later, we faced another existential crisis: the damaged ozone layer. The UN successfully implemented the Montreal Protocol in response; its first universally ratified treaty. As Debono observes, it is 'hailed as a global, multilateral agreement which has been a global success.' The UN's World Health Organisation eradicated smallpox and informed the radical global response to COVID-19. For some reason, however, the UN lacks the moral authority or the institutional capability to bring states together to effectively and urgently address the climate crisis. In contrast, the EU is leading ambitiously with its climate goals and coordinating these efforts with law within its bloc. The EU and UN could be precursors to a body that has the power to overcome the climate crisis.

Global guardianship would have to also offer a favourable cost/benefit outcome, and liberal nations would also have to collaborate with non-democratic states, most of which are nonetheless 'decent peoples.'

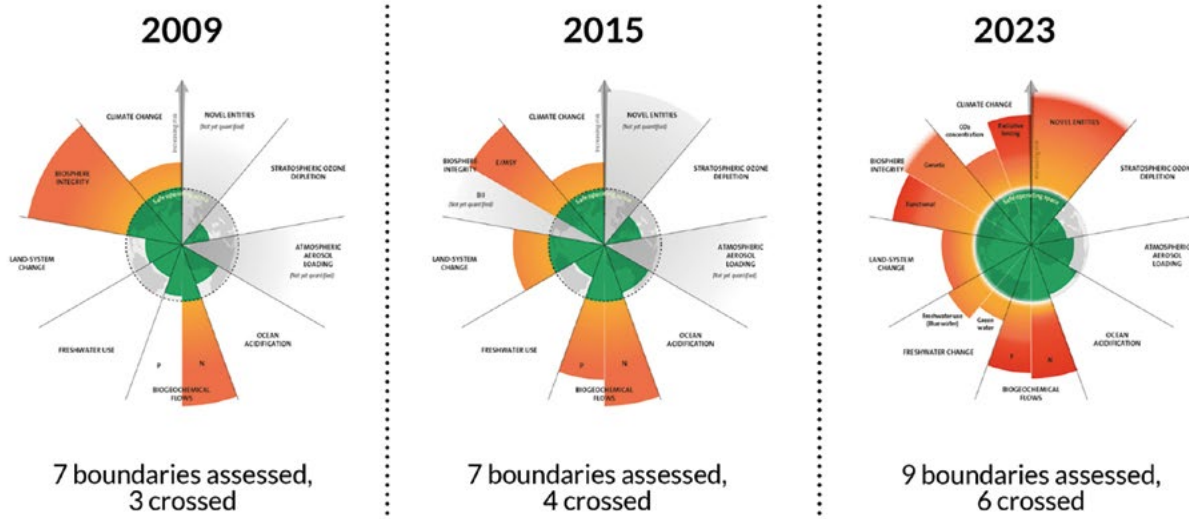
'It is pragmatic to conceive of a state-based global democracy which is modelled on the "one-state, one-vote" principle which you find in the UN. To reduce the global democratic deficit, there would also be a strong role for civil society organisations and international NGOs. Through the deliberations of their constitutive, more localised associations, the voice of such organisations would inform the global guardian's binding decisions.' Debono identifies this as an example of deliberative democracy, in which consultation, dialogue, and deliberation complement the institutional voting process that would support the guardian's legitimacy.

### **TYPES OF JUSTICE**

This nuance is conceptually essential for a global guardian. As has been mentioned, every state has a unique relationship with climate change. To paint a crude caricature: let's imagine that an unnuanced global guardian voted to ban petrol engines, a flat rule for the whole world. Developing nations lack the resources to make the transition. Conversely, imagine if an unnuanced global guardian voted for developed countries, who contribute most to climate change, to immediately roll back industry until they matched

developing nations. They would be unwilling to abruptly reverse the course of history. In both cases, global guardian membership would lose its appeal. A deliberative approach which seeks a just solution based on universally agreed ethical principles and which would allow a degree of compromise between states is required for global guardianship.

Additionally, Debono believes a global guardian would need to define and conceptualise distributive justice before contending with corrective justice. This distinction was expressed by Aristotle: 'Distributive justice is about what you and I are entitled to. It is about what states are entitled to, and this includes entitlements of access to the global commons.' In many countries, this might also entail the right to vote or to medical treatment. On the other hand, Debono explains: 'If I take something that is yours, that is a case for corrective justice. I must give it back. But how am I to determine what I need to give back if we have not determined what each of us is entitled to in the first place?' An example of corrective justice is the UN Convention on Climate Change's Loss and Damage fund, which seeks to provide aid to countries that are vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. 'The Fund seeks to address a historical



The evolution of the planetary boundaries framework. Licenced under CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 (Credit: Azote for Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm University. Based on Richardson et al. 2023, Steffen et al. 2015, and Rockström et al. 2009). Source: [www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries.html](http://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries.html)

injustice regarding the unjust impact that developing countries are suffering from the developed world's long-established industrialisation. This is a case of corrective justice, but why aren't we talking about distributive justice? Compensating a historical injustice doesn't address unjust global structures that perpetuate distributive injustice regarding fair access to the global commons by developed and developing nations alike. It may indeed serve to mask it.'

Aristotle used mathematical analogies for his concepts of justice. Corrective justice can be visualised as additive; if something is wrongly taken away, it is just to add it back. But distributive justice is visualised as making equal fractions of a finite amount, then fairly distributing them. The world's bioregenerative capacity is the ultimate finite resource. In essence, we must 'divide' the planet's limited capacity for resilience and recovery, and distribute it fairly. The alternative is catastrophe. Distributive justice is essential for universal membership. More equitable distribution would be welcome by developing states. On the other hand, although developed nations are the ones who stand the most to lose, the past shows that, when it really mattered, they were willing to

make sacrifices for the sake of the common good. 'The UN was believed necessary by the imperial powers to secure international peace and security. But, the UN charter catalysed independence and self-determination among the colonies. Imperial powers stood to lose but still agreed to it, as they believed in something greater.' If colonialism, and all the wealth it concentrated, can be put aside for the global good, then so can similarly lucrative violations of planetary limits.

### BREACHING THE WORLD'S LIMIT

'The ecological crisis has been identified as a crisis of limits [i.e., "planetary boundaries"] for the past 50 years. Without a doubt, we breached the earth's bioregenerative capacity around 1970.' This reality clashes with the nearly universal desire for indefinite economic growth. Our economies simply can't grow forever. Either we limit our economic growth so that we stop breaching the bioregenerative capacity of earth and possibly recover. Or the earth limits our economic growth by losing the ability to sustain human life. We've known this for as long as we've been violating the planet's limits. Debono draws attention to the Club of Rome's 1972 publication, *The Limits to Growth*,

which modelled infinite growth impacting a finite environment. Ultimately, we will need to curtail or even reverse economic growth. This does not mean that we have an impossible task ahead. 'We don't need economic growth to innovate, to apply technology, or to reorganise ourselves in ways that can improve lives tremendously. But we do need to have some form of steady-state economy which respects the bioregenerative limits of Earth.'

While the concept of 'degrowth' has been gaining traction for the past 20 years, the idea behind needing a 'steady-state economy' has been around since the late twentieth century on the grounds of ecological and social wellbeing. For now, it is a signifier for an academic and social movement that recognises our natural space's incompatibility with our economics. But ultimately, it must become a policy, a law. As with all laws, some will break, subvert, or rail against it to better suit their agendas. Thus, it would have to be upheld by an organisation, a global guardian, that is set up in recognition of our reality and has the legal and legitimate power to protect it. The language is lofty, the idea utopian. But the truth is, we can do it. We've done it before. [T](#)