



SUMMONING A GLOBAL GUARDIAN TO HALT THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

Author: **Christian Keszthelyi**



Humanity faces an ecological crisis. It is urgent and complex. It has several characteristics and an in-built inertia, which makes it even tougher to address, as the effects may only dawn on us in the coming decades. There is no simple solution. But setting up a global guardian issuing binding agreements may help.

THINK goes on a thought experiment for a better future.

While the past half-century has witnessed numerous global efforts under the United Nations to address ecological issues, they often suffer from a fundamental limitation – they are generally non-binding, insufficiently ambitious, or binding only on consenting parties. The absence of effective binding agreements and a lack of urgency have hindered the world's collective response to this pressing matter. Dr Roberto Debono (a Ph.D. candidate from the Department of Philosophy) recognises this gap and proposes an innovative solution: the creation of a 'global guardian.' This concept forms the cornerstone of his research, which seeks to redefine the global political landscape and enhance our ability to combat the ecological crisis effectively.

The four key principles outlined by Debono for effective global governance are: sufficiency, subsidiarity, democracy, and solidarity. These four principles would help secure the legitimacy and effectiveness of such a global guardian. He is also proposing a legal framework for the creation of a global guardian to ensure all countries step back and take responsibility for reducing our global ecological footprint.

A GLOBAL GUARDIAN

Sufficiency narrows the scope of the global guardian to issues exclusively related to ecological sustainability. Subsidiarity supports multi-layered global governance, where decisions are taken at the hierarchically lowest possible levels. Democracy ensures that the international process is owned by the member states. Solidarity evokes a duty to assist societies that do not manage to keep pace with the ecological transformation. More importantly, it imparts a sense of collectively addressing

shared adversity, where the fate of one people is tied to the fate of everyone.

Debono argues that observance of these four principles should allay fears of a constitutionally-limited and legally coercive global authority, secure the global guardian's legitimacy, and safeguard the global guardian's mission to steer humanity towards ecological sustainability. But how did we get here?

'As I dove into economics for my research, I found that ecological economists, among others, argue we cannot have limitless economic growth. This argument has been around for more than half a century, since at least the Club of Rome's 1972 publication *The Limits to Growth*,' Debono tells **THINK**.

A competitive, state-based, international political system fuels economic growth, which underpins an individual country's geopolitical performance. Political leaders worldwide are often appointed or expected by the populace to support economic growth. But as the economy grows, it often takes up ecological space, essential for humans to live a sustainable and quality life.

A UTOPIAN PRINCIPLE

But what is the ecological crisis in reality? 'Humanity is at a turning point. We must ensure that we do not push Earth into a transition to Hothouse Earth, where the planet could become uninhabitable for humans. We are also experiencing a sixth mass extinction event. The last such, the fifth mass extinction event, happened 65 million years ago to the dinosaurs. The sixth mass extinction event is seeing rates of biodiversity loss that undermine our livelihoods as part of the biosphere,' Debono says.

All four principles Debono proposes should be observed to secure good global governance. But this may irk people who could easily see such an entity as



a 'totalitarian monster on feet of clay'. Debono insists we can design a global guardian and introduce checks and balances to ensure it does not trump national liberty and self-determination.

'My proposal is a utopian one. But it is a realistic utopian proposal: an imagined reality based on observed reality. In addition to securing a safe operating ecological space and to apportioning available ecological space justly among states worldwide, the global guardian must ensure that the global ecological transformation is temporally just. It must give people time to adjust to the ecological space attributed to them and will probably require some countries to lower their material living standards,' Debono explains.

With the coming into existence of a global guardian, each member state would receive ecological entitlements. Such entitlements include carbon credits and should not be tradable on the global market, Debono says. 'I argue that carbon accounting should happen where it is enjoyed and has an effect, such as a positive effect on material standard of living. Practically, it means that the client, the consumer country, shall start shopping from greener companies,' he adds.

POLITICAL INTERESTS

But do we need all countries of the world to sign up for the idea of a global guardian? What happens to stray countries that may not be interested?

'There will be countries who do not sign up. But I believe once you have a sufficient number of states agreeing to and binding themselves to the idea, others will start joining too. Still, non-member countries will need to honour their respective ecological space.

On the principle of no harm, member countries can legitimately interfere in the affairs of non-member countries if the latter undermine global ecological sustainability,' Debono said.

But how can you oblige countries unwilling to sign up for the idea of a global guardian? 'My argument is this: If you are a citizen of a country, you are obliged to honour the law. If you are not a citizen and you are in that country — you are still obliged to honour the law, even if you do not sign up for citizenship,' Debono says.

He believes his proposal can work as long as the global guardian enjoys sufficient legitimacy by most countries worldwide. He returns to the classical definition of liberty: you are free to do as you will so long you do not harm others.

'If you have a few countries polluting and therefore infringing the mutually accepted principles, the global guardian will be justified in intervening economically or militarily in the same way that the international community is legitimately entitled in intervening in the affairs of a state if it constitutes a threat to international peace,' Debono says. He argues that his concept is not entirely new and is prefigured by the practices of entities such as the European Union, the United Nations, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

Debono argues that the most critical and powerful point of entry for such an entity would be via the most influential players in the world. He believes a ripple effect would reach other countries if world powers come together to launch such an initiative and the most powerful states sign up.

While the concept of a global guardian certainly has its merits, especially in the wake of climate disasters such as wildfires, temperature increases, and rising sea levels, could such climate action work? Is the world ready for a global guardian? Time will tell. 