

All must innovate in this time of climate change

The Asahi Shimbun

To say that climate change is the greatest threat facing humanity is both a necessity and a simplification, because the threat, although very real, is not singular but manifold.

Extreme weather, desertification, land degradation, rising sea levels, the loss of biodiversity, increased water scarcity and the conflicts this will incite are all troubling enough taken individually. Considered together, they represent what the United Nations secretary-general has called "one global challenge."

Our global response to this challenge will determine not just the shape of the world for future generations, but perhaps its very viability. To the various effects of climate change already mentioned, we must add the growing food crisis—the effects of which are already obvious, especially in the developing world where the ravages of climate change will have the greatest and most tragic impact.

A study last year by the United Nations University's International Network on Water, Environment and Health (UNU-INWEH) concluded that climate change was making desertification "the greatest environmental challenge of our times." One billion people in 100 countries are immediately vulnerable to the effects of climate change, but in the not-so-long term that number will include us all.

The intertwined effects of climate change present a clear and present danger to both the natural world that sustains us and to our accustomed ways of life. Yet, within the threatening uncertainty facing humanity lie tremendous opportunities for innovation, entrepreneurship and investment

if we can face this global challenge.

The question is, of course, are we up to the task? Can we face this challenge and can we face it well? I hope and believe, as a father and grandfather, and as a scientist and head of a U.N. organization, not just that we will but that we can.

We have been to the moon, we have, through our instruments and acumen, been to Mars and we have even been beyond our solar system, but we have not been to Earth what the planet has required of us: able stewards and true inhabitants, earning our existence sustainably, seeing ourselves as part of a long chain of humanity and part of the continuity of life on Earth and not just as isolated short-term visitors on a winner-take-all stop-over between birth and death.

This can change.

While it can be argued that our hunger for technology got us into this mess, it is equally true that our technological skill can get us out. Our ability to innovate is boundless. However, the demands of global sustainability are not just technical, although new technologies will certainly be required. This is something we do well, and the only new requirement is that we share the benefits of these new technologies equitably. This too can change.

Beyond technology, we will be forced to reconsider our relationship with the natural world, forced to re-define the meaning of "the good life," and forced to re-examine many of the fundamental assumptions of our lives.

Climate change does not recognize human boundaries. It will affect us wherever we are, north, south, east, west, and we will all have to adapt.

Again, these are challenges we have



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met in the past.

There was a time, for example, when the thought of the Earth revolving around the sun was unthinkable. There was a time when the thought of women voting was outrageous. There was a time in some parts

of the world when the possibility of a black man becoming his party's nominee for president was inconceivable. These things change, and this is something else we do well: think what has been unthinkable, think new thoughts.

In the face of the myriad challenges presented by climate change, there are interests that would have you believe that none of this is true. They can safely be ignored, for if sustainability is our concern, we must act and we must act now, decisively and as one.

The Group of Eight summit in Hokkaido next week is an opportunity to think new thoughts and to act decisively. G-8 leaders will gather to discuss many global issues, but chief among them will be climate change.

The G-8 summit is moreover an opportunity for leaders to go beyond sharing thoughts. They must focus on outcomes that address the current situation.

It may be true the G-8 summit is, as some participants have suggested, not the right place to set targets, but it is the perfect place to set an example and build momentum toward a global movement to combat the crisis. We should sincerely wish the leaders gathering next week all the strength and courage that this will require.

It is just over 20 years since James

E. Hansen, the head of NASA's Goddard Institute of Space Studies, presented testimony to the United States Senate alerting the world to the threat of climate change. In his statement to the Senate, he said, "Global warming has reached a level such that we can ascribe with a high degree of confidence a cause and effect relationship between the greenhouse effect and the observed warming. Certainly further study of this issue must be made."

In the time since then, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, co-recipient of last year's Nobel Peace Prize, has made clear to all, including politicians, scientists and the public, the science behind climate change.

Today at United Nations University Headquarters in Tokyo, I will have the pleasure of welcoming Dr. Hansen to the stage for our G-8 symposium called "Innovation and Entrepreneurship in the Time of Climate Change." In this event, he will, together with a dozen of the world's leading climate change experts, discuss not just science but solutions.

We will explore the opportunities for innovation and entrepreneurship, for new technologies and markets, and for new ways of thinking about this greatest of challenges. We are honored to be able to enlist the help of such experts.

But beyond the shared awareness that we strive to foster, climate change calls for immediate action. It is time for courageous decisions from the G-8 in the first place, and also from the whole international community.

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