

GLOBAL ISSUES

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Abstract: The 21st century has brought us closer than ever before, but this closeness comes with a price. When a factory pollutes a river in one country, it can poison the fish that another nation depends on. When a financial system collapses in one region, it can cost jobs thousands of miles away. These are what we now call global issues – problems that simply refuse to stay within the lines we've drawn on maps. This article looks at three of the biggest challenges we face together: poverty that just won't go away, pollution that travels wherever it wants, and inequality that keeps growing between the haves and have-nots. Drawing on recent research and what experts are saying, the article argues that we're not doing enough, partly because many of us don't fully understand how these problems connect. In the end, it suggests that if we want things to get better, we need to start thinking like citizens of the world, not just citizens of our own countries.

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Let's be honest – most of us have enough to worry about in our own lives without taking on the problems of the whole planet. But here's the thing about the world we've built: it doesn't really work that way anymore. The food we eat, the clothes we wear, the air we breathe – all of it connects us to people and places we'll never see. Think about it this way. When COVID-19 showed up in a market in China, within months it had shut

down cities everywhere. When Russia invaded Ukraine, wheat prices shot up in Egypt and bread became too expensive for families who were already struggling. When banks in the United States made risky loans back in 2008, people lost their homes in Spain and Greece. This isn't coincidence – it's just how the world works now. So what exactly makes something a "global issue"? It's not just that lots of countries have the same problem. A global issue is something that spreads across borders in ways that no single country can control by itself. It's like having a leak in your apartment that's actually coming from the neighbor upstairs – you can mop your floor all day long, but until they fix their pipe, you're not going to solve anything. As Zhang Yuyan, who runs an important economics institute in China, puts it: problems like climate change, financial instability, and cross-border crime matter to everyone's wellbeing, and they need international cooperation because honestly, no country – not even the richest and most powerful – can fix them alone. Sure, everyone agrees these problems need solving. The trouble starts when we try to figure out who pays for what. This article focuses on three issues that are especially troubling: poverty, pollution, and inequality. They're not separate problems – they're more like three legs of the same wobbly stool. Pull on one, and the others move too. Understanding how they fit together is the first step toward doing something about them. You might have heard that we've been winning the fight against poverty. And for a while, that was true. Between 1990 and 2015, the number of people living in extreme poverty dropped by more than half. It was real progress, the kind that makes you think maybe humanity is getting its act together. According to the United Nations, we're nowhere near where we said we'd be by 2030. The Food and Agriculture Organization keeps track of these things, and their numbers aren't encouraging. By 2030, nearly 9 percent of the world's people might still be living in extreme poverty. And it's not spread evenly – it's concentrated in places already struggling: rural areas where it's hard to get ahead, countries torn apart by conflict, and communities hit hardest by climate change. Here's something that should worry us all. A UN expert who studies poverty recently warned that wealthy countries are cutting back on foreign aid. The international order that got built after World War II – the one with all those agreements and institutions meant to keep things stable – is starting to come apart. And when that

happens, the people who suffer first are always the ones who were already suffering most. Walk outside in almost any city in the world and take a deep breath. If you're in a wealthy country, you might be fine. If you're not, that breath could be doing real damage to your lungs and your heart. Air pollution is one of those problems we know how to solve, technically speaking. We have the technology. We understand the science. But knowing how to solve something and actually solving it are two different things.

When leaders gathered recently for the seventh UN Environment Assembly, they kept coming back to the same point: pollution doesn't carry a passport. Toxic waste dumped in one place affects the air and water somewhere else. What happens in the atmosphere doesn't stay there – it circles the whole planet. The unfair part is who pays the price. Rich countries have mostly cleaned up their worst pollution – or rather, they've moved their dirtiest industries to places where regulations are weaker. Low and middle-income countries end up with the factories, the smog, and the sick kids. In Africa and Asia, the health clinics fill up with people struggling to breathe, and governments don't have the money or the data to figure out what to do about it.

If you want to understand why so many people are angry these days, look at the numbers on inequality. They tell a pretty shocking story. In early 2025, a G20 report came out that made headlines for all the wrong reasons. Between 2000 and 2024, the richest 1 percent of people on earth grabbed 41 percent of all the new wealth created. Think about that – 1 percent of the population took almost half of everything extra we produced over 24 years. The poorest half of humanity? They got just 1 percent. The same report classified 83 percent of the world's countries – places where 90 percent of people live – as "highly unequal." That's not a small problem. That's pretty much everywhere. And inequality isn't just about money. When a small group controls most of the wealth, they also control most of the political power. They fund the campaigns, they hire the lobbyists, they write the rules. Regular people end up feeling like the system is rigged – because honestly, it kind of is. That feeling leads to anger, distrust, and eventually, the kind of political instability that affects everyone, rich and poor alike. Here's where it gets really interesting – and really depressing. These three problems don't just exist side by side. They actively make each

other worse. Start with inequality and poverty. When wealth pools at the very top, governments have less money to spend on schools, hospitals, and roads. The quality of public education drops. Good healthcare becomes something only the wealthy can afford. Kids born into poor families stay poor, not because they don't work hard, but because the ladder they're trying to climb has missing rungs. Oxfam points out that 3.4 billion people live in countries spending more on paying off debt than on education or health. That's not an accident – that's how an unfair financial system works. Then look at how poverty connects to pollution. Who lives closest to the highway, breathing exhaust fumes all day? Poor people. Who drinks water from contaminated wells because bottled water costs too much? Poor people. Who can't afford solar panels or electric cars and ends up burning cheap coal or wood just to cook dinner? A UN expert recently noted that over 90 percent of people in the world's poorest countries have no social protection at all. When a flood destroys their home or a drought kills their crops, there's no government check coming. No insurance payout. Just whatever help family and neighbors can offer. These are the people least responsible for climate change – they're not flying on airplanes or driving SUVs – but they're the ones hit hardest by its effects. And pollution circles back to make poverty worse. In the Middle East, dust storms caused by land degradation and climate change cost about \$150 billion every year. That's not just an environmental problem – it's an economic one. Dust storms ruin crops, close businesses, send people to hospitals. The people who suffer most are already struggling to get by. So they fall further behind, and the cycle continues. So these problems are big and complicated and connected. What can any of us do about it?

More than you might think. But it starts with awareness – actually understanding what's going on, not just in your own neighborhood but in the bigger picture. Most of us live in bubbles. We see what's right in front of us – our jobs, our families, our local news. We don't see the Bangladeshi teenager sewing the clothes we buy at the mall, or the Congolese miner digging the cobalt that powers our phones, or the Guatemalan farmer whose corn crop failed because the rain stopped coming. But we're connected to all of them, whether we know it or not. This is where Global Citizenship Education comes in. It sounds fancy, but it's really just about helping people understand those connections. The

EU runs programs called DEAR (Development Education and Awareness Raising) that do exactly this – they help Europeans see how their choices affect people elsewhere. How the coffee they drink or the t-shirt they buy connects to global supply chains, working conditions, environmental damage. Some projects get really creative. "Snapshots from the Border" puts real faces and real stories on migration, pushing back against the stereotypes that dominate political debates. "CULPEER" connects students in Europe with students in developing countries so they can actually talk to each other about climate change and poverty, not as abstract issues but as lived experiences.

When you understand these connections, you start to think differently. You ask different questions. You vote differently. You might even change what you buy or how you live. That's the power of awareness – it turns passive consumers into active citizens. Okay, so awareness is important. But let's be real – awareness alone doesn't fix anything. At some point, you need actual action. And because these problems cross borders, the action has to cross borders too. Right now, we have this patchwork of international agreements and organizations, but they're not really equipped for the challenges we face. They were built for a different world. There are some interesting ideas out there. The 2025 G20 report suggested creating something new – an International Panel on Inequality, modeled after the climate change panels that bring scientists together to assess what we know and what we don't. The idea would be to track inequality systematically, figure out what causes it, and evaluate which policies actually work. On the money side, experts are floating proposals for "solidarity levies" – small taxes on things like international flights or financial transactions – that could fund a Global Fund for Social Protection. Even a tiny tax on the right things could raise hundreds of billions of dollars. That money could provide basic social safety nets for people who currently have nothing. We have lots of environmental agreements. Countries sign them, hold press conferences, and then often... don't really follow through. At the UN Environment Assembly, leaders talked about needing stronger implementation – making sure promises actually turn into action. Inger Andersen, who runs the UN Environment Programme, put it plainly: environmental threats don't respect borders, so our responses can't either. That means legally binding

commitments, not just voluntary goals. It means regional cooperation, like African countries working together on air quality instead of each trying to solve the problem alone. It means global treaties on things like plastic pollution, with real enforcement mechanisms. Here's something encouraging – we actually know a lot about what works. There are thousands of successful poverty reduction projects around the world. The problem is that they stay small, stay local, and never scale up. The Global Poverty Reduction Seminar in Beijing earlier this year focused on exactly this challenge. How do you take a project that worked in one village in one country and adapt it for a completely different context? They've been collecting cases – over 4,500 from 88 countries – creating what amounts to a global toolbox of solutions. Need ideas for improving agricultural productivity in a drought-prone region? There's probably a case study for that. Looking for ways to get girls into school in conservative communities? Someone's already figured it out.

Technology helps here too. Some projects are experimenting with AI-powered tools that can match problems with proven solutions, helping communities find what they need without reinventing the wheel. Let's be honest – reading about poverty and pollution and inequality isn't fun. These are heavy topics, the kind that make you want to put down the article and scroll through something lighter. I get it. I feel that way too sometimes. But here's what keeps me from looking away. These problems aren't distant and abstract. They're shaping the world we live in right now. They're creating the conditions that lead to wars, to refugee crises, to political extremism, to pandemics. They affect all of us, whether we pay attention or not. And here's the other thing. We actually know what to do. The solutions exist. Countries have cut air pollution dramatically when they decided to. Extreme poverty has been reduced before – it can be reduced again. Inequality can be measured, tracked, and addressed through policy choices. This isn't hopeless. The collective, coordinated, stubborn determination to make things better. That will have to come from somewhere – from citizens who understand what's at stake and demand action from their leaders. From young people who refuse to accept that the world has to be this way. The problems are global. The solutions have to be too. And that starts with seeing

ourselves not just as Americans or Europeans or Asians, but as humans sharing one small planet, facing challenges that none of us can solve alone.

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