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Connie I. Reimers-Hild

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, creimers2@unl.edu

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Healing the Planet and Its People: The Need to Create a Global Vision of Leadership for the Planet

By: Connie Reimers-Hild, Ph.D.

Leadership challenges associated with environmental issues are vast. Degradation, alteration and contamination of natural resources, issues related to food security and quality as well as threats to wildlife are causing critical concern. The growing population combined with issues related to quality and quantity of natural resources is problematic. Leaders around the world must work together and create a collective global vision of social responsibility and environmental stewardship in order to help heal the planet and its people.

The world's population has doubled to over 6 billion in the last 40 years, and United Nations projections indicate it could climb as high as 10.7 billion by 2050. Most of the growth will occur in the poorest and least developed regions of the world, which already must work to resolve issues related to shortages of quality food, soil, air and water. Most of the people living in these countries also lack access to education, healthcare and global political capital.

More developed countries face many of the same issues in a different way. Agriculture has been so successful that many people living in the developed world enjoy a high degree of food security but are separated from the growth and production processes. Consumers, in places like the United States, have become accustomed to buying whatever they need at a low price. Many consumers see only products in attractive wrapping on their shelves. For these people, it is difficult to understand the role that high consumption plays in environmental and political stability.

Corporations are focused on profits and have not traditionally been forced to include factors associated with environmental or social economics into their bottom lines. The production of “stuff” has resulted in an acceleration of natural resources consumption and environmental degradation. Pressures on farmers to produce higher yields from their land to feed a growing population has accelerated the adoption of technologies that are less labor intensive but require higher levels of energy and natural resources. Significant changes, including mechanization and the introduction of chemical pesticides, have helped increase agricultural production over the last century. However, these same agricultural practices have contaminated the water and soil. Health concerns, such as cancer, have been related to chemicals used to produce food and consumer goods. Further, obesity and Type 2 diabetes have been associated with poor quality foods that are high in saturated fat and calories but low in nutritional value.

There are signs of a shift in buying trends. Some individuals in more developed countries are demanding more organic and locally produced foods free from chemical inputs such as hormones and pesticides. These production practices traditionally require intensive human input, including labor and time. They also sometimes require a greater land mass. Consumers are also starting to demand products that are safe for their children, pets and the environment. The planet is paying a high price for the exploding human population, and increased contamination of natural resources combined with rising rates of consumer consumption threaten the welfare of the planet.

Environmental issues have become more complicated with population growth and globalization. Humans continue to demand more energy, more food and more “stuff.” Increased consumption takes more resources and creates more waste. Traditional

economic models that remove environmental costs from the equation result in both human and environmental injury. Rapid increases in consumer consumption and waste production must be addressed. Innovation in both thought and technology is needed to change current trends causing environmental degradation as well as concerns related to human health and the well being of wildlife.

The environmental, educational, political and socioeconomic disparities between people around the globe creates a leadership challenge that must be approached from a holistic perspective unlike the world has ever experienced. World leaders, including scientists, politicians, economists, educators, business and community leaders must recognize the interconnectedness of the environment. They must work together to change attitudes, beliefs and behaviors on a global scale. There is an urgent need for world leaders to work together and create a global vision of environmental sustainability and social responsibility that benefits all continents and all countries.