Just as Lester Brown’s early popular book *World Without Borders* (1972) was a plea to look at the world whole and not as one divided into 200 some states, so *Outgrowing the Earth* is a plea for administrative reforms within national governments and the UN system so that the ecological crisis humanity confronts can be faced in a coherent way.

The structure of most of the world’s governments was developed in the early 1900s with the formation of ministries — for foreign affairs, for commerce, for agriculture, for education, for the military. As governments faced more and more complex issues, sections were added to existing ministries, youth affairs was added to education, transportation was added to commerce. Each country developed slightly different patterns, but the end result was largely the same. On the world level, ministers for foreign affairs would meet among themselves; likewise health, agriculture ministers would meet to discuss common interests. When such ad hoc meetings proved inadequate to deal with the issues, and research on common problems needed, permanent bodies were created by the League of Nations and then developed further by the United Nations into an alphabet soup of Specialized Agencies — Food and Agriculture (FAO), Labour (ILO), Health (WHO), Education and Research (UNESCO) etc. As new problems arose, new agencies were created, some independent, others largely integrated into the existing agencies. There are efforts at coordination — numerous coordination meetings — but in the end, most people work on the problems for which they are paid, and the chiefs are concerned with their own budget allocations.

Most newly independent countries followed the administrative pattern of their colonial masters. In the 1960s, most French-speaking African states had a Ministry for Planning, as did France, that developed five-year plans which were supposed to have an over-all view of issues and to develop a coordinated approach. However, the Minister for Planning was just one minister among 20 or so and had no control over what was done in agriculture, health or education. Five-year plans became too unrelated to reality and soon faded from any real power. The economic failures and break up of the Soviet Union also destroyed the Communist approach to planning.

Thus today, we have governmental structures with a host of separate ministries, subsections of ministries, independent boards, and government-funded research institutions largely unrelated to the work of the ministries. However, on the ground, reality is not so divided. As Lester Brown points out well “Future food security depends on stabilizing four key agricultural resources: croplands, water, rangeland, and the earth’s climate system. Stabilizing the farmland base means protecting it from both soil erosion and the conversion to non-farm use...Protecting water resources means stabilizing water tables. The overdrafting that lowers water tables also raises the energy used for pumping... Protecting rangeland is an integral part of the food security formula not only because damage to rangeland from overgrazing reduces the livestock carrying capacity, but also because the dust storms that follow devegetation of the land can disrupt economic activity hundreds of miles away... Most important, we need to stabilize the climate system. The negative effect of higher temperatures on grain yields underlines the importance of stabilizing climate as quickly as possible.
“Stabilizing any one of these resources is demanding, but our generation faces the need to do all four at the same time. This is a demanding undertaking in terms of leadership time and energy and also in financial terms.”

The question we must ask in terms of current government administrative structure is whose ‘leadership time and energy’? As Brown notes “Ensuring future food security therefore can no longer be left to ministries of agriculture alone. Food security is now directly dependent on policy decisions in the ministries of health and family planning, water resources, transportation and energy. This dependence of food security on an integrated effort by several departments of government is new. And because it has emerged so quickly, governments are lagging far behind in their efforts to coordinate these departments and their agenda.

“One of the essentials for success in this new situation is strong national political leaders. In the absence of competent leaders who understand the complex interaction of these issues, the cooperation needed to ensure a country’s future food security may simply not be forthcoming. In the absence of such leadership, a deterioration in the food situation may be unavoidable.

“The integration that is needed across the ministries of government is also called for at the international level. Unfortunately, there may be even less contact among the relevant U.N. agencies such as FAO, the U.N. Population Fund, and the U.N. Environment Programme than there is within national ministries.”

This need for a wholistic vision and cooperation among ministries for food security is also necessary for stabilizing world population. As Brown writes “Stabilizing population is the key to maintaining political stability and sustaining economic progress. And the keys to stabilizing population are universal elementary-school education, basic health care, access to family planning, and for the poorest of the poor countries, school lunch programs.”

However, progress in all these fields does not depend on governments alone. There is a need for village leadership. There is a growing emphasis in development work on what is called ‘human capital’ or ‘social capital’ — that is the ability of people at the local level to work together in groups to manage better local watersheds and forests or to develop credit systems for small-scale farmers.

Moreover, there must be a sense of responsibility of each person to act in the areas over which he has some influence such as food consumption, water, soil conservation, tree planting etc. As Lester Brown urges “Everyone has a stake in securing future food supplies. We all have a responsibility to work for the policies — whether in agriculture, energy, population, water use, cropland protection, or soil conservation — that will help ensure future world food security.”

Rene Wadlow

Drawing: Cecile Wadlow