

WHAT IS A WORLD CITIZEN?

World citizen -- it's a term we hear often these days, but how many of us have actually taken the time to think about what it really means? We know that it is supposed to reflect the fact that we now exist in a highly interconnected world. After all, we can send instant messages to friends in Japan, listen to reggae music from France, and snack on some fruit from Chile -- all at the same time. On the other hand, we can just as easily contract a disease that has just come off an intercontinental airliner, worry about terrorists from a failed state halfway around the world, have our stock portfolio tank as a result of disturbances in foreign markets, or even be slowly poisoned by pollution blowing in from across the oceans. So it's certainly true; we are all interconnected. But does that make us world citizens?

Not really -- all that interconnectedness makes you little more than a world resident. You see, the word "citizenship" entails something more. Citizenship is not a passive state but an active one. Citizens are not merely people living within a certain territory; they are part of a political community, and as such they have rights and responsibilities. Some of those rights include the right to due legal process and the right to participate in their democratic governance. As far as responsibilities go, citizens may be expected to pay taxes, protect their community from threats, and abide by the laws of the land. They also assume the more positive responsibility of creating and maintaining a government that is responsive to their needs. After all, the Enlightenment philosophers, who created many of our modern concepts of government, stated emphatically that the authority to rule -- sovereignty -- *is held by the individual citizens*, who delegate powers to governments in order to serve *their* interests.

On the world level, as things stand now, we couldn't be real citizens even if we wanted to. The structures that would allow for civic participation simply don't exist. That reality has important implications for everyone living on this planet.

First, we have to realize that it is critically important that we do build those global political structures, that we do it right, and that we do it soon. People today face too many dangerous problems that just can't be solved without a coordinated global policy and an integrated response. Such is the case with issues like global warming, resource depletion, extreme poverty, and pandemic disease. Still other problems like wars and nuclear proliferation are actually a direct result of our current fractured and competitive inter-national structure. Finally, we must consider all the things that we are not doing as a result of spending so much time and so many resources in divisive practices. We're selling ourselves short and making ourselves miserable for no good reason. Just think of the money spent on militaristic projects that could otherwise be spent on the arts and education. Consider the heartache and pain that we inflict on each other when we could instead be bonded in the pursuit of a truly civilized human civilization.

Why else is it important that we create global government? Because right now we're being taken advantage of -- we're being played for dupes. As we speak, our human rights are routinely compromised. That's because many important global political decisions are being made, but not by us. From those with benign interests like the United Nations and World Bank, to those with selfish interests like transnational corporations, to those with malicious intentions like international criminal rings, organizations and the people in them are making global-level policy decisions all the time. All the while, we're left in the dark. In most cases we don't have any means at all, much less formal structures of legitimate democracy, to affect the policies that have direct impacts on our lives. For hundreds of years now people have been willing to give their lives to prevent this very condition. They have killed and died just in order to live free

from arbitrary rule and have the liberty to participate in their self-governance. We owe it to ourselves to demand democratic privileges not just within our towns, states, and nations, but on all levels of society at which our individual interests are at stake – including the global level.

What we need now is for more people to realize that *we are “the system”*, that it is only natural that political structures in which the people are not engaged in their civic duty will become defective and corrupt, and that that it doesn't do any good to complain about the way things are going unless you're willing to take it upon yourself to fix them. In other words, if ordinary individuals like you and me wish to be well governed then it lies on our own shoulders to make it happen.

Is that a daunting responsibility? You bet! The status-quo is deeply entrenched in our politics and culture. We'll also have to involve billions of people spread over the whole face of the globe. On the upside, three historical trends all seem to indicate that the time for world governance has come. Since the beginning of civilization, the size of the groups with which an individual shares a political identity has grown. Going beyond the extended family with tribal groups, humans have organized themselves into local city-states, large nation-states, and now even supra-national confederations like the European Union. At the same time, the practice of democratic governance is on the rise. Beginning in ancient Greece, that kind of political organization has had to come a long way in its development, and more people than ever are growing up accustomed to its practices. Finally, there is a growing movement of activists and organizations that are specifically dedicated to creating good global government. As they develop, so too will their capability to educate and inspire more and more people toward this end.

It is exciting to realize just how special the period of history in which we live really is. People alive today have the potential to lead the world through its final political unification, and in doing so, rid humanity of international war, establish a human community based on freedom and justice, and create a political order in which everyone can work together to create a healthy and rewarding global civilization. Now that we know what needs to be done, the time has come for us to take the steps that can transform the vernacular term “world citizens” into a political reality.

Eric Schultz is Executive Director of Democratic World Federalists.