

Avoiding the apocalypse: a call for global action

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According to an authoritative report published at the beginning of the 21st century, in the coming century the countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) will have to face the real risk of being subjected to potentially catastrophic events [1]. The quick climate change, leading to wind storms and floods across Europe, ice storms in Canada, and global warming; the emergence of new forms of contagious and deadly infectious diseases such as AIDS and Ebola; terrorist attacks such as that of 11 September 2001 in the United States along with armed conflicts; devastating earthquakes such as the one in 2011 in Fukushima, Japan that caused the third largest nuclear accident in history; as well as a long list of other horrific environmental disasters to which we are witnesses every day, cannot fail to have a strong negative impact on the lives, health and well-being of all the world's peoples. These 'new emerging risks' will annihilate the

poorest countries, which are unprepared, but may also affect vital sectors of the developed countries (i.e., health services, transport, energy, food and water supplies, information and telecommunications) [1]. The consequences, therefore, could be serious and unpredictable for all. Probably, according to some, we are witnessing the opening of seals described in the Book of Revelation of John [2]. In any case, 15 years after the OECD report was published, it has turned out to be prophetic. Today, we are witnessing events that may in the near future put at risk life on our planet. In this global scenario, the task of all the sciences, from medicine to sociology, is to study the nature of these 'new emerging risks' to understand the conditions that favored their onset and development and to find new technological solutions to face them; on the other hand, the task of world politics must be to develop a coordinated program to support industry and science in an effort to improve the levels of health and well-being of

all citizens of the world. Scientific discovery and technological innovation, in fact, should be used in ways that best address these 'new emerging risks' for our planet. Thus, because of globalization—economic, technological, cultural and environmental—governments should have to coordinate their actions to create concrete responses to the needs of all people. Increased population density could make food and water resources insufficient for all living beings, so that some scientists are already talking of using new forms of food such as, for example, locusts and insects in the future [3]. However, in spite of this, economic inequality in the world seems to be growing both within nations and between the various countries of the world [4, 5]. In Europe the economic policies of governments have led to lower-quality public health care systems, with negative consequences for the low-income citizens especially [6].

According to the famous astrophysicist Stephen Hawking, we should add 'stupid human violence' to the list of risks that could annihilate the human race. The lack of resources will probably only accentuate our current conflicts and possibly lead to the onset of new wars [7]. World politics, therefore, must respond quickly. Today more than ever, a new 'alliance' between science and policy is needed. The policy should ensure the sharing of scientific findings, meaning the free access to scientific information, the subsidization of really necessary scientific research and the creation of teams composed by the best scientists from around the world. It is hoped, in fact, that after economic and technological globalization we could see the scientific one; scientific evolution, in fact, could have positive effects on the health and welfare of all people only if the policy succeeds in not being 'stupidly aggressive', putting itself at the service of people of science and good will for the promotion of a path of peace and cooperation. According to climatologist Veerabhadran Ramanathan, engaged in confrontation with ongoing climate

change, a shared planet will require coming to an agreement on science, religion and politics [8]. However, in my opinion, this path will have to respect all our ethnic, cultural and religious views; it is in accepting and working with the diversity of others that the multiplicity can facilitate and enhance the well-being of everyone.

In this second issue of the *Journal of Health and Social Sciences* we present a 'special article' on the organization of the health emergency service during the 2015 Milan Expo mass gathering [9]. A mass gathering is a typical situation in which the alliance between science and policy is essential for the success of the event. In a mass gathering, in fact, science should provide risk-assessment models on the hazards to the health and safety of a large number of people. In today's globalized world, if a hazard becomes a negative event, an incorrect risk assessment could have potentially catastrophic consequences not only for the community hosting the event but also for many others. To give just one example, it has been shown that children can have negative psychological consequences and an increase in post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the wave of pain, fear and anger in the media unleashed by terrorism. Among the risks to be assessed in a mass gathering are some of the above 'new emerging risks': how can we react to sudden or severe weather events, or to cluster outbreaks of contagious infectious diseases, or to terrorist attacks using unconventional weapons, chemical, biological, radiological? The role of policy, therefore, is essential in mass gatherings: to make the best economic investments for the proper planning, coordination and management of resources to prevent and address these risks. In a mass gathering, all forces, health services, public transport and security must be coordinated perfectly to ensure a good result. In the case of the Milan Expo 2015, this worked very well. I hope this is a good omen for the future of all!

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