

Let me tell you about the **challenges** of the 21st century



Dam

Great challenges await humanity in the 21st century

The greatest challenges facing humanity in the 21st century are the protection of our planet, the defence and affirmation of human rights, the defeat of all forms of inequality, the need to stabilise population growth, the increase in migrations and the expansion of cities.

The earth's fragile equilibrium

Human beings have always transformed the natural environment in which they live in order to improve their living conditions: they have cultivated land, built villages and cities, raised dams to protect themselves from floods and extracted precious sources of energy, like coal and oil, from the earth.

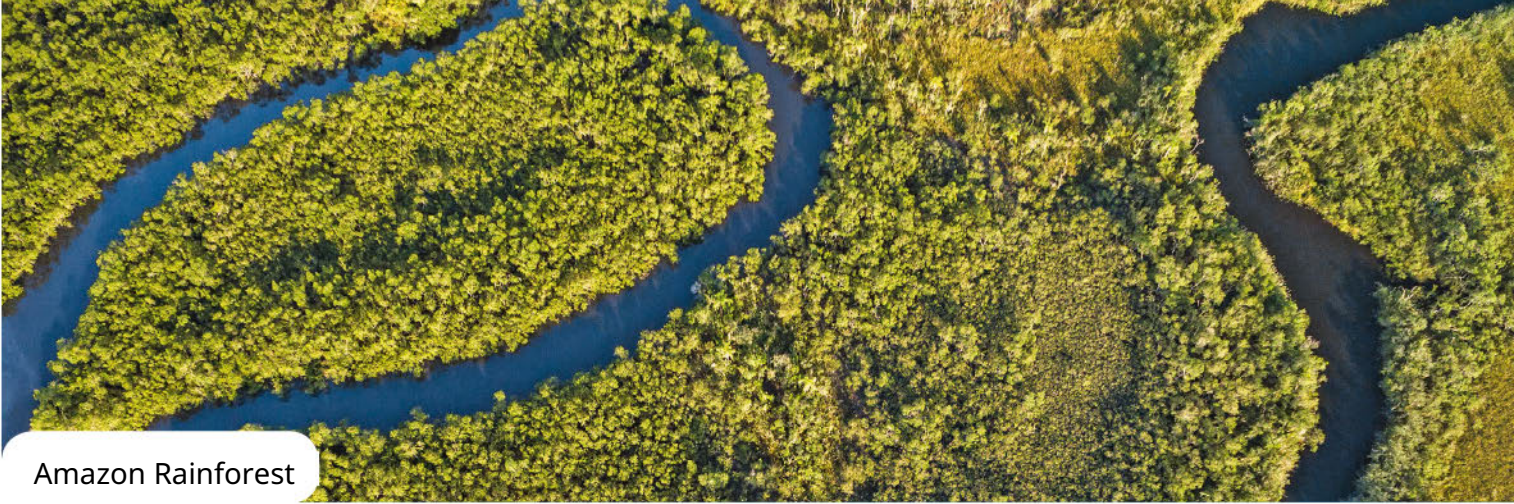
Today, however, these works of transformation, even when necessary, **must take into consideration the natural balance that allows our planet to survive.** In fact, the effects of human intervention on the environment are becoming **increasingly dangerous** because they are damaging the fragile and precious balance which allows nature to regenerate continuously.

The challenges of defending biodiversity

There is an immense variety of plant and animal species alive on the earth today: this is called **biodiversity**. This array of living organisms **exists in every corner of the earth** and is capable of adapting to even **the most extreme environments**. Around the equator, for example, the sun's rays create high temperatures year round, with abundant rainfall. This stimulates the growth of **tropical rainforests**,



Coral Reef



Amazon Rainforest

where the vegetation grows continuously and hosts thousands of animal species. The **Amazon rainforest** in Brazil is the largest in the world, but today it is threatened by commercial interests which are the reason huge numbers of trees are being cut down (**deforestation**).

In order to defend biodiversity, we must fight against all those forms of intervention responsible for a decrease in the number and variety of living organisms. Above all, **the pollution of the earth's air, water and soil must be contained**.

The challenges of reducing global warming

The **excessive pollution** produced by fierce industrial growth and by many human activities **is the cause of the increase in the overall temperature of the earth**, a phenomenon which is called **global warming**. The effects of this climate change are disastrous because they determine the intensification of **violent atmospheric events like hurricanes and tornados**, the **desertification** of certain areas around the world, and the **inundation of islands and coastlines** due to **the rise in sea and ocean levels caused by melting polar glaciers and ice-caps**.

The challenges of protecting human rights

Every human being is entitled to certain **fundamental rights**, as described in the United Nations' **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**; some of these are the right to life and safety, the right to freedom of thought and religion, the right to freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work, the right to an adequate standard of living and healthcare, the right to education, the right to equality before the law and, in its preamble, the right to equality between man and woman.

Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger is one of the basic goals necessary for the protection of human rights. There are more than 800 million people in the world today who are starving. A large percentage of the population in Africa lives with the tragic reality of hunger every day.

Education and **healthcare** are also inalienable rights; poverty is often the cause of the lack of these rights.



Hurricane damage



The United Nations



Child labour



New York



Children in Africa

Children, who are vulnerable because of their youth, and women, who are often victims of discrimination in workplaces and in society, are the ones most often without rights.

The challenges of fighting inequality

Hunger, poverty and the lack of essential medicines are a consequence of the **unequal distribution of the world's wealth**. A crucial challenge of the 21st century is the reduction of the differences between rich countries and poor countries, but also of the miniscule number of the very rich and the ever-growing number of the very poor within single countries.

The challenges of containing population growth

In the last two hundred years, **the world's population has increased dramatically**, from one billion to 7.2 billion people. **This increase has taken place mostly in Asia and in Africa**. Currently, predictions are that the population in Africa in the 21st century will continue to boom because of the high birth rate there. Consequently, it will become a continent with an ever greater number of young people, which could create substantial opportunities for development.

The population growth in developed countries has, instead, been decreasing. In fact, even though people there are living longer and longer, there are fewer babies being born and so the population is ageing.

Population growth in Africa, Asia and Central and South America and the ageing of the population in Europe and North America have triggered the migration phenomenon.

The challenges of the migration phenomenon

The **population growth** in certain parts of the world, **poverty**, **wars**, **persecutions** and **environmental disasters** all push millions of people every year to **migrate**, i.e. to leave their own homes and look for a better life somewhere else.

About **250 million people**, or 3.5% of the world's population, **have emigrated to another country**. These emigrations are often from Africa and Asia towards developed countries in Europe or towards the United States.

Immigrants are an economic resource for the countries they reach because they bring energy and skills to what they do.

Furthermore, their arrival in developed countries compensates for the low birth rates and ageing population in those countries.

Most migrants move within the borders of their own country, usually from the countryside to the city in search of work.

The challenges of the expansion of cities

Due to these huge migrations, in 2006, for the first time in history, **the number of people living in cities surpassed the number of those living in the countryside**. Cities, in fact, offer more opportunities for finding a job and for social encounters than rural towns do.

When, however, the population of a city grows too rapidly, **run-down neighbourhoods, called slums or favelas**, tend to appear. In these areas, hundreds of thousands of people live in extremely difficult conditions and without basic services, like drinkable water, a sewage system or roads. The cities most likely to suffer from these problems are in Asia, Africa and Latin America.



Tokyo



Slum in Kenya

Activities

- Complete the following sentences by inserting the correct term in the blanks:
goal – plant – global – hunger – animals – human – earth – temperature
- The term «biodiversity» indicates the assortment of
and animal present on
- The phenomenon that corresponds to the increase in the overall
..... of the earth is called
warming.
- The war on poverty and is a fundamental
in the defence of rights.