Throughout the world, communities are experiencing the twin pressures of institutional failure and environmental stress. Many trends suggest that these interactive pressures will intensify in the years ahead, resulting in public health setbacks, population displacement and violence on unprecedented scales. Informed by many years of fieldwork in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, this talk reviews the forces contributing to crisis and looks at the prospects for transformation toward more sustainable, economically robust, fair and ecologically-sound practices.