

GUEST ESSAY

1.5 Degrees Is Not the Problem

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As leaders around the world meet for the 28th time to address the climate crisis — this time in the United Arab Emirates, one of the world's largest oil producers — they need to rethink this threat and some of the other central challenges of our times.

Those other challenges include devastating losses of biodiversity and plastic pollution so widespread, it is now found on the world's tallest mountain, in its deepest ocean trench and in our veins. In the long history of this planet, our current time, the human age known as the Anthropocene, is the first in which a single species will so rapidly reshape the future of Earth's climate and all the other conditions that make life as we know it livable.

These crises are not about the planet going haywire. They are crises caused by failures to assign and enforce social responsibilities. And the wealthiest, most powerful and most capable societies that have ever existed on this planet are behaving as if they owe nothing for what they have gained at the expense of imperiling life on Earth. Such behavior is not only unethical. It is precisely the opposite of what deep history tells us has enabled societies to avoid collapse in the face of severe environmental challenges.

Past societies have survived and even thrived in the face of serious environmental challenges, but only to the degree that their governing elites have demonstrated responsibility for delivering better lives for their people. The ultimate solution to major societal challenges is clear: leadership by those most responsible to invest in the solutions and restitutions required to mitigate the damage.

Irrigation systems, public granaries and other infrastructures epitomized societal leadership in the past. Today it is clean energy infrastructures and clear support for those most vulnerable to a major energy transition (for instance, workers in fossil-energy-related industries) and to climate change itself. Even with

clear movement in this direction — the Inflation Reduction Act is an example — the overwhelming message remains one of governments failing in the face of global risk. That is the real threat we face. When governing elites fail to deliver on societal commitments, their societies are on the road to collapse.

World leaders must get serious about enforcing these responsibilities. At the same time, those nations that have yet to enrich themselves on fossil fuels have every right to develop their economies as others have. No one can stop them, and no one should. The differences are stark, with cumulative per capita carbon emissions in the United States many times those of the developing world. It is possible that clean energy may soon outcompete fossil fuels. But until this happens, if those nations enriched by fossil fuels wish to end their use globally, it is up to them to support the costs of clean energy in countries that can't afford them.

We have become obsessed with targets, the principal one being to hold planetary warming to no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) above the preindustrial average. But this is a planetary target, not a societal obligation. And in that sense, it is meaningless. The clearest evidence is that the planet is likely to surpass that target by the 2030s. Last year global greenhouse gas emissions continued at their historically high rates of growth. Passing the 1.5 degree mark is merely a symptom of the underlying condition: the continued burning of fossil fuels. That's what we must stop.

We can meet the challenge of slowing the planet's warming. The societal capabilities to end the fossil fuel age — from technologies to regulatory systems — have existed for decades.

The successful effort to save the ozone layer is a case in point. International cooperation, backed by strong scientific evidence and led by the nations most responsible, resolved this global problem. In the mid-1970s, scientists discovered that a novel group of chemicals portrayed by industry as chemically inert, chlorofluorocarbons, were depleting stratospheric ozone and allowing more UVB radiation to reach Earth's surface. This radiation can cause skin cancer and lower a body's ability to fight illness. Little progress to reduce harmful chlorofluorocarbon emissions was made until the discovery of a hole in the ozone layer over Antarctica in 1985, leading to an agreement by the 20 major chlorofluorocarbon-producing nations to phase down and ultimately end their production. The ozone layer is expected to fully recover to pre-1980s levels within decades.

As with the ozone crisis, the solution to the climate crisis lies at the feet of those responsible. There should be no acceptable allowance for the wealthy producers of carbon pollution to continue to emit any of the greenhouse gases that are heating our planet faster than at any other time since the dinosaurs. We must end investments in carbon-polluting industries and ramp up investments to build clean energy systems. No more offsetting industrial carbon pollution in forests and other ecosystems. If there are to be targets for shaping a better climate future, they should be directed at the specific industries and nations responsible for polluting the atmosphere with fossil carbon emissions — and incentivizing them to replace carbon-emitting technologies with clean ones.

Progress should be measured by the shift from fossil fuels to clean energy. The target for all developed nations should be 100 percent clean energy, with an agreed-on deadline — the sooner the better. Tripling renewable energy capacity by 2030, a policy priority in Dubai, is not a bad goal. Yet like past climate agreements, it would fail to recognize the developed world's primary responsibility to end climate change,

undermining trust in such agreements, especially in the developing world. International efforts must clearly focus on the obligations of the world's wealthiest and most powerful people, industries and nations to end the harm they are causing.

A global clean energy target would depend entirely on investment commitments from the developed world, in addition to existing commitments, and would not come into force until such commitments have been confirmed. As with the chlorofluorocarbon phaseout, national and industry-linked clean energy targets would highlight directly who is — or is not — meeting them, encouraging action and calling out the laggards.

The climate drumbeat of the future must go beyond endlessly declaring a planet in crisis. The essential question of the Anthropocene is whether the most powerful, affluent, technologically advanced and interconnected societies to have ever existed on Earth will deliver on their shared aspirations for a better future for people and the planet.

And that means taking responsibility.

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