

Climate Lollygagging

The most pressing problem we are facing in terms of sustainability

Introduction

While sustainability is an incredibly multifaceted issue encompassing many important problems that need urgent solutions (biodiversity, extreme weather, access to water, etc, etc) [1], there is an all-encompassing apathy on the part of those actors whose decisions actually matter: governments, large corporations, and billionaires. In this essay I have chosen to dub this phenomenon “climate lollygagging,” and I believe it is the single most pressing problem humanity faces in terms of sustainability. Small solutions and “personal responsibility” will not make a dent in global socioeconomic inequality or the climate death spiral: governments need to take action, and this action needs to be targeted against international corporations and the ultra-rich class. Examples might include steep sanctions for breaching agreed upon carbon thresholds; agreeing on extremely low such thresholds; raising taxes for the highest brackets drastically; introducing a maximum wage; aggressively subsidising only those industries that create sustainable solutions for cleaner energy, recycling, etc. These are all radical, decisive moves to drastically decrease emissions and fund meaningful change, so they will undoubtedly be unpopular. In this one case, however, we may have to deal with it or perish.

Background

As Hickel points out in “Less Is More,” even if all terms of the Paris agreement were to be met by all signees, that would still mean a rise in emissions [2]. The targets are simply not high enough. There are many reasons for this, but a majority of them can be attributed to some form of protection of the profit motive and corporate interests; this is why governments and corporations are desperate for some magical solution which allows them to continue overexploiting resources while appeasing the public’s justified fears related to climate change. An example of this is BECCS, which, while interesting, was never meant to be a singular solution, and it is doubtful whether it is even feasible [2]. As Hickel puts it, “Devising climate strategy around [a] dangerous and uncertain technology” [2] means we would be taking a very large risk by continuing to not act.

The top 3 “leverage points” that Meadows describes in her 1999 paper are as follows: the goals of the system; the mindset or paradigm out of which the system arises; and the power to transcend paradigms [3]. These are incidentally also the areas avoided by legislators and other people with power, including when the climate is specifically being discussed, such as at the Paris conference or more recently COP26. Changing the goals of the system would mean taking the focus away from profit, capital, and GDP, and onto human wellbeing, equality, and the environment. This would require corporate entities and the extremely rich to take a large hit - or several - and I believe this is why “personal responsibility” is being used to misdirect the 99% into thinking that whether

they personally use plastic bags could have a serious impact on sustainability as a whole. The “mindset” - in this case, the capitalist mindset - is what needs to change in order to achieve a sustainable society.

Climate inaction: an example

The Bulgarian government, which boasts unrivalled expertise in all kinds of lollygagging, has perfected this art when it comes to the climate as well. In June 2021, the EU Council introduced a law designed to halve carbon emissions by providing guidelines to both private and public entities on how to become more sustainable. Bulgaria was the only country that voted against the new law. Among vague, insufficient explanations and complaints about national interest, it eventually became clear that one of the main issues the country had with the legislation was that it does not specify natural gas as a possible transition fuel [4]. Anyone familiar with Eastern Europe’s political climate will immediately note that this particular demand aims to preserve Bulgaria’s long-standing (if fraught) relationship with Russia’s natural gas industry. This is, of course, utterly unsustainable¹ since natural gas is not renewable and still produces harmful emissions; as Rubin points out in his 2009 work: “energy gets more expensive just about every day” [5].

It is this manner of fumbling when it comes to environmental issues that causes us to reliably miss every climate goal we set; in this case, international relations are placed above government steps towards sustainability - all this in an area where summer temperatures regularly exceeded 40 degrees this past year. Continued refusal to seriously engage with the issue will undoubtedly result in even more dire consequences.

What action could look like

Raworth (2012) provides a good example of workable guidelines for reorienting societal and economic goals with the “Donut” model. The model defines a “social foundation” and “environmental ceiling,” where the zone between them represents a sustainable and just society [6]. It is also worth mentioning that the resources required to achieve such a society already exist, as just 1% of the global food supply would be enough to cover the needs of the 13% of people facing hunger. An even higher 21% are living in poverty: this could be ameliorated by 0.2% of current total wealth [6]. Poverty can exacerbate environmental stress and vice versa [6], creating a positive feedback loop wherein both get worse and worse over time [3]. This is why climate lollygagging is the biggest issue in terms of sustainability; prolonged inaction leads to a progressively worse situation, ironically requiring even more urgent action.

The donut idea seems to me like an attempt to dress up existing socialist and anarchist ideas in such a way that they may be “sold” to politicians as well as regular people, and I

¹ The effects have been evident for years, as residents have been left without heat in the winter due to unavailability of Russian gas.

find this rather admirable. However, the implementation of the model will also require the use of existing socialist and anarchist tactics, which include not simply organising communities, but also potentially organising protests and riots. Unlike individual measures, these are a way for the average person (or rather, the people) to apply pressure on key leverage points and force those who wield power to take decisive action.

Sources

- [1] WWF (2020) *Living Planet Report 2020 - Bending the curve of biodiversity loss*. Almond, R.E.A., Grooten M. and Petersen, T. (Eds). WWF, Gland, Switzerland.
- [2] Hickel, Jason. *Less Is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World*. Windmill Books, 2021.
- [3] Meadows, Donella H. *Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System*. Sustainability Institute, 1999.
- [4] Maria Simeonova, Mariya Trifonova. "Bulgaria's Abstention from the Fight against Climate Change." *ECFR*, 23 July 2021, ecfr.eu/article/bulgarias-abstention-from-the-fight-against-climate-change/
- [5] Rubin, Jeff. *Why Your World Is about to Get a Whole Lot Smaller*. Random House Canada, 2010.
- [6] Raworth, Kate. "A Safe and Just Space for Humanity: Can We Live within the Doughnut?" *Oxfam Discussion Papers*, Feb. 2012.