

Headline: Humankind is doomed

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Published Date: 12:18 AM December 30, 2015

Section: opinion

Word Count: 6257

Content:

A future historian who barely survived the cataclysmic events of severe global warming in the final decade of the 21st century would look back at COP 21 and mutter: "World leaders fiddled in Paris while Earth began to burn."

Alas, that was also the woeful sentiment of a small group of protesters in the midst of the joy that concluded the Paris summit. Yet for all the acclaim that it reaped, the conference will go down in history for focusing on intentions rather than results and, more critically, for evading the real problem of climate change.

Treating the symptoms of a disease called global warming, world leaders applied an analgesic called "intended nationally determined contributions." Not once did they make a meaningful reference to the scientific root cause of climate change: It is anthropogenic—that is, manmade.

The real problem, therefore, is humankind itself and, specifically, the crisis over the burgeoning human population that now stands at over 7.4 billion. In the previous century, global population increased nearly fourfold, with the last billion added in only 12 years. It is growing by another billion in the next 12 years. By mid-century, the United Nations forecasts a population range from 8.3 billion to 10.0 billion, with 9.6 billion as a median.

The collision between this demographic explosion and the planet's dwindling resources is inevitable. Our sources of food and water are being depleted daily, and the air we breathe is being increasingly contaminated. Basic raw materials for shelter, transport, weaponry and creature comforts—such as iron, copper, aluminum and magnesium—are being mined with frenzied impunity as though these were limitless.

To allay global fears on the coming collision, world leaders created the myth of "sustainable development." But given the Earth's finite resources, development that meets the present generation's needs is certain to compromise, not enhance, the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The environmental consequences of economic growth and sustainable development have led to a Catch-22 situation. US President Barack Obama says the Paris accord will create "more jobs and economic growth." Yet economic growth is precisely the central dilemma in a circumscribed world: It leads to increasingly higher rates of consumption.

Sustainable development is abetting, not impeding, climate change. To feed the world's expanding population, for instance, there is a concomitant effort to expand arable land or to make existing farmlands more productive. But the entire effort is harmful since agriculture per se contributes to climate change—by anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases and by the conversion of unsuitable lands into agricultural lands. Agriculture, deforestation and land-use change contribute an estimated 20-30 percent to global annual emissions.

The same is true in livestock raising. It contributes disproportionately to land-use impacts, since crops and grasslands are cultivated in order to produce animal feed. Globally, livestock production occupies 70 percent of all land dedicated to agriculture, or roughly 30 percent of Earth's land

surface.

Can the world meet the growing demand for materials without destroying the environment? Impossible. As the human race increases exponentially, all natural resources, including ecosystems and biodiversity, move inexorably toward massive degradation, overexploitation, exhaustion, or extinction.

By evading the population dimension of climate change, the world's political elite in Paris demonstrated a singular lack of courage, vision and imagination. In two decades of climate negotiations, international diplomats tiptoed around this issue, fearful of the backlash from political, ethical and religious sensitivities.

Understandably, population management continues to be repugnant to governments and international institutions. Human rights concerns were raised in the 1960s and 1970s over aggressive "population control" policies, notably in India and China. In 1994, the International Conference on Population and Development sought to dispel notions of coercive family planning by promoting a broad rights-based approach to sexual and reproductive health.

But today the crisis of overpopulation can only be ignored at our own peril. We live in a world that is 1 degree Celsius warmer than in preindustrial times, a temperature increase that is devastating people's lives and communities worldwide.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates that, from the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, cumulative carbon dioxide emissions related to human activities should be limited to 1 trillion metric tons in order to limit global warming to 2 degrees C. This is the global "carbon budget."

From 1760 to 2011, human activities emitted roughly 52 percent of this carbon budget, leaving a balance of 48 percent. This means that more than half of the global carbon budget was used up in over 250 years. Under the current emission rate, the balance will be used up in about three decades.

The Paris mandate, to keep global temperature increase to below 2 degrees C, is unlikely to be met since any potential gain in emissions cut by mid-century will be wiped out by an additional 2.6 billion people on Earth—with each new person struggling for his or her own space, abode, appliances, car, clothing, furniture, food and fuel.

It is also difficult to believe that the accord is the best possible response to an emerging global catastrophe. On climate finance, it merely acknowledges the need for \$100 billion a year to promote sustainable practices in developing economies. This is a pittance compared to over \$1.8 trillion in yearly global military expenditures, or some 2.5 percent of world GDP.

All this points to a tragic fate. Humankind is doomed if the population crisis is not directly addressed. And it will not be addressed so long as political and economic systems are committed to the fantasy that growth is necessarily good.

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