

Headline: Humanity: Biggest obstacle to climate change

Byline: Andrew Sheng

Published Date: 05:01 AM February 11, 2023

Section: opinion

Word Count: 5758

Content:

Why is it so difficult to tackle climate change?

Sixty years ago, the Club of Rome's report "Limits to Growth" already projected how human activity was going to change the planet, heating up the climate through carbon emissions that would raise the sea level, change the weather, and damage food, water, and natural resources.

Since most people do not understand how their individual activities change the planet, scientists worked hard to provide more evidence, but economists thought they had a perfect market solution.

If carbon markets can be created to price carbon costs and benefits, emitters could pay those who are willing to sequester carbon at the right price. Unfortunately, carbon markets are still nascent in most countries and are so fragmented that their impact is limited. People don't trade carbon if they don't understand it.

Dealing with climate change is a complex system change. This is tough because everyone is connected or interdependent in this complex world. This leads to "collective action traps." Human beings find it difficult to work together because of different values, objectives, and circumstances. Each expects the other to act, whereas if all do not cooperate, nothing will change. Like a network of individuals bound to each other, one virus can take the whole network down. This inability to act is called the "tragedy of the commons" because individuals, for their selfish actions, destroy the commons, or what is considered public good.

When the corporate world adopts ESG (environment, society, and governance) standards to improve corporate social responsibility (CSR), it forgets that all three are entangled together.

Fundamentally, poor human governance is actually the evil that creates environmental destruction and social injustices.

United Nations special envoy on climate action Mark Carney identified what he called the "tragedy of horizon," namely, people cannot cooperate because of different time horizons. Profit-motivated companies are reluctant to cut carbon emissions because they involve additional costs. Corporate quarterly and annual financial reporting cycles mean that CEOs whose bonuses are tied to short-term profits decline long-term investments for the future.

Similarly, few politicians in a democracy will make very tough decisions for the long term because they all face electoral cycles of not more than four to five years. In seeking popularity, they will not act to inflict pain through tougher regulations or higher taxes. The tragedy of horizons almost guarantees that long-term or public interests will be sacrificed for short-term gain.

All these explain why governments and corporations find it hard to change. However, communities (either urban or rural) that face the consequences of climate change, such as those hurt by wild forest fires, rising seas, food shortages, water pollution, etc., are more driven to work together when they identify common threats. The bottom-up approach works better because those who are most directly affected by climate threats have a common fate and therefore are incentivized to work

together to meet these challenges. On the other hand, governments and corporations are hierarchical, divided into top-down bureaucracies that have few incentives to work together because each seeks to deliver partial results for their own vested interests.

The tragedy of horizons reveals a fundamental mismatch of different cycles. What goes around must come around—meaning that there are consequences for any action. Agricultural communities work together because planting any crop works in cycles and seasons. You cannot rely on too many chemical fertilizers or pesticides without polluting or poisoning the crops. Grain crops like rice and wheat or vegetables can be planted once or twice a year. Fruit trees and trees cultivated for their wood have cycles that last decades, since the former may take four to five years before they bear fruit, and commercial forests may take much longer, requiring planned cutting, planting, and replanting. Indigenous farmers know that you cannot rely on monocrops, which kill the soil, and that diverse crops, as well as crop rotation, would regenerate the soil.

The real barrier in tackling climate change is therefore high population *Homo sapiens*, a species that has grown to become a monoculture that is killing biodiversity through the overconsumption of natural resources. Indigenous people have always lived with nature. Life is a cycle from dust to dust, but death returns our physical body to the soil, so that microbacteria, viruses, and fungi replenish the soil from which other plants, worms, and life regenerate. Tackling climate warming and biodiversity cannot be two separate tracks, as is being done through COP27 in Egypt and COP15 on biodiversity in Canada.

When individuals, communities, corporates, and states want to deal with climate action, they only have to look in the mirror as to the major culprits. Until we become aware that we, the collective humanity, are the ultimate threat to our own existence, through either nuclear war or wanton waste of what nature provided, we will never stop climate warming.

Life begins with a single cell, and is a journey from life to death to renewal. Not dust to dust, but soil that nurtures life to soil. Destroy that diversity, and we destroy ourselves as part of that diversity.
Asia News Network

Subscribe to our daily newsletter

By providing an email address. I agree to the Terms of Use and acknowledge that I have read the Privacy Policy.

Andrew Sheng is former chair of the Hong Kong Securities and Futures Commission. _____

The Philippine Daily Inquirer is a member of the Asia News Network, an alliance of 22 media titles in the region