EOSE10
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Assignment 2 – Reflection Paper

Through talking about the planetary crisis, we can collectively better our understanding of the issues at hand. The following text summarizes the main ideas from such conversations with friends in the recent days - they have elucidated the complexity of the crisis, as well the answers we are lacking to solve them.

All the interviewees highlight that the current state is a result of a society that views growth and consumption as imperative for achieving well-being, resulting in hazardous lifestyles, especially in the Global North. Furthermore, institutional and market systems are constructed in a way that makes it difficult not to go on with business-as-usual. It was mentioned that the lack of national initiatives to combat the crisis can be seen as an example of a prisoner's dilemma-like situation, where everyone disclaims their responsibility – it's either everyone or no-one's problem.

These structural problems hinder us in organising society in a way that takes the wellbeing of the whole planet sufficiently into consideration. While efforts have been made to foster cooperation, the world seems largely unable to collectively plan for the long-term. On a personal level, the lack of collective action may also be hampered through the denial of the precariousness of the situation. Two of the interviewees stressed that the feel like they know a lot about climate change, but also mentioned how they have started avoiding the topic to protect their mental health. This is problematic, as denial prevents us from creating movements that can drive change.

The lack of action is already being felt around the globe, for instance through devastating floods and forest fires which have deprived many of their livelihood. This development will only continue and particularly affect those that are already marginalised. This is unfair, given the long history of ecologically unequal exchange: core countries live well at the expense of periphery countries, who are trapped in a harmful relationship that forces them to export raw materials, cheap labour, and low value-added products, while paying high prices for technology and energy imports, trapping them in vicious debt cycles. Still, despite the core arguably owing a lot to the periphery, compensation for the results of the predatory relationship is lacking.

It is not only people that are seeing the dire consequences – other life on land and in the oceans have also taken a hard hit. With the current state of things, we are facing mass species extinction. Furthermore, an unsustainable fishing industry, deep sea mining, acidification of the ocean, oil spillages, sea fracking and plastics pose a major threat to the oceans, a crucial component in keeping the planet in a healthy state. To stop these practices, we need to rethink our relationship with the planet: instead of seeing humanity and the planet as separate systems, the planet should be viewed as something humanity is embodied in.

However, regardless of a change in mindset, the impacts of our previously unsustainable behaviour will become increasingly visible throughout the century. For instance, we will see more extreme weather, sea level rise, melting of the permafrost in Siberia and a disturbance of natural processes that in turn will produce devastating results for all life. Extreme weather will deprive people in exposed places of their livelihoods, forcing mass migration. As a result of these changes, we will likely see more political instability and rising conflict levels.

It is evident that, to combat the crisis, efforts should have been made earlier. Still, in recent years, more commitment has been seen, especially with the increased international cooperation through the Paris Agreement and the SDG framework. On the civil society level, we are also seeing changes: people are paying more attention to the issue, and this has for instance resulted in changed consumption habits, higher voting numbers for green political parties, the growth of movements such as Extinction Rebellion and higher participation in demonstrations.

However, international agreements and civil society engagement is not enough, and more initiative must be taken. It was mentioned that the lack of initiatives to combat the crisis can be seen as an example of a prisoner's dilemma-like situation where everyone disclaims their responsibility – cooperation would be the best solution, but due to uncertainty, actors deflect. To solve the issues, major investments are needed, and these are not so easy to come by. The problem is not necessarily scarcity of funds, but rather that they are not directed towards the right measures. A large issue is that the world is steered by large companies and the financial sector – for these actors, turning on business-as-usual is almost

an existential threat. A question in all the conversations was how we can change the system to one that punishes unsustainable behaviour. One of the interviewees talked about the need for increased regulation, but deciding on what regulations to implement is not always straightforward. It was also highlighted that systemic change is needed, but the question on how to create the change remains unanswered.

There is talk about how digitalisation is helping us move towards a more sustainable future. In many ways, this can be seen as true: digitalisation can for instance help us build new, efficient technology, facilitate virtual meetings, connect networks that work for the cause and contribute with the spread of information. However, the emphasis on digitalisation as a force to combat climate change may be exaggerated. For instance, with the rise of the internet, tech companies have taken the advantage to make profits globally through cunning business models, resulting in a seemingly more overconsuming, misinformed, disconnected (ironically) and fragmented world. Another issue is that increasing digitalisation has made us more dependent on electricity. Considering this, we should also ask ourselves to what extent digitalisation also hampers sustainable development.

A common theme appeared in all the conversations, namely, that the current institutional and economic system traps us in a business-as-usual state that fails to properly address the issues that we are facing. Conflicting interests is at the heart of the lack of transformative change, how do we align them?