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Paper 2

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READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST

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Gernot Wagner considers the various ways in which we can combat climate change.

- 1 Twelve years ago, the United Nation's climate summit in Copenhagen, COP15, was dubbed "Hopenhagen". The 11-day event opened with a short film depicting a fictional Scandinavian girl having a nightmare: an Earth wracked by climate change opens up to swallow her and violent waters threaten to drown her. She wakes up screaming, watches world leaders giving speeches about climate change on the COP15 website, and then videos herself begging the politicians to "please help the world!". But the proceedings ended in failure. Environmental groups and European officials blamed America. Small island nations blamed China. China and India blamed rich countries. 5
- 2 Today, a real Scandinavian girl insists the nightmare has come true – and blames world leaders for failing to act. "There is no Planet B", Greta Thunberg thundered, to cheers from the environmentalists at the United Nations General Assembly. But let us be honest, you are no Greta Thunberg (who has both Asperger's syndrome and autism). Even if your choices do ripple out into the world and affect a few other people, your decision to eat a little less meat and turn down the thermostat a notch is not the clarion call that is about to rally the world to the carbon cutting cause, is it? Climate change can seem like such an enormous problem that individual actions would have little impact. So, why then should us individuals take action? 10 15
- 3 It is tempting to dismiss personal responsibility for lowering our carbon footprint. After all, it was oil-giant BP¹ that popularised the concept in the mid-aughts, telling everyone that it was "time to go on a low-carbon diet", even though the company knew full well how impossible that was, much like its own ambition to go "beyond petroleum". Sharply cutting emissions requires changes in business operations, advances in technologies, financial incentives for eco-friendly solutions as well as muscular government policies, in addition to individual efforts. 20
- 4 Moreover, not all personal actions are equal. Refusing a plastic bag at a sales counter looks saintly but it would not do much, especially if one then carries the bagless products onto an aeroplane. Scale matters, as do actual emissions reductions. There are good reasons why airlines offer to offset flight emissions: it makes passengers feel better and fly more. The illusion of progress that comes from performing small, single actions is a cognitive bias that undermines real advancement. 25 30
- 5 For individual actions to be effective, it is essential that they generate momentum. Amsterdam, Copenhagen and other cities famous for having more cycle-trips than car-trips reached that point because of early cycle activists demanding safer roads. This in turn led to more cyclists – virtuous cyclists leading to a virtuous cycle of policy push and pull. 35
- 6 It takes a group of early adopters of green products to start the process. They demonstrate what is possible and spur the market. This inspires a wave of others to follow suit. The market eventually responds by turning its attention toward green alternatives, to match the growing demand. This establishes a self-reinforcing loop, eventually leading to sustainable living becoming a societal fixture. 40
- 7 Individuals can also have significant impact through how they spend their money. We can buy products from companies that emphasise sustainability. We can also recognise that dogs and cats, while beloved companions, are nonetheless carnivores that are bad for the environment. However, individual initiatives can also be costly at times. There are a plethora of appliances that are not green, and that can be replaced, albeit with an increase in cost. What is required of individuals is for them to be open 45

¹ BP is a major global oil and gas company.

- to these alternatives. The task for governments is to subsidise these green alternatives and incentivise their adoption. Yes, this would mean subsidising things that the well-off are buying, but policies could be targeted to include the less well-off. What is key for governments, is to get the public on their side. 50
- 8 Choice of residence also plays an outsized role when it comes to individual effectiveness. By choosing to live in cities instead of suburbs, we occupy smaller spaces and enjoy shorter commutes to work. Does that imply a personal sacrifice? Judging from the eye-popping property prices in major cities, people do not consider it as such. Of course, there are misaligned incentives that lead people to maximise rather than optimise living space. A fundamental rethink of what 'living well' means is necessary if we would like to see the majority of individuals opt for city-life instead of a sprawling suburban bungalow. Again, as was the case with the adoption of green products, governments can support this process by putting in place policies, in this instance, to make city-living more attractive. 55
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- 9 Time is the essential factor. It is one thing for a government to promise significant carbon cuts by the end of the decade. It is another to realise that today's living and mobility choices lock in emissions for years to come. New York City has laws for large buildings to cut carbon emissions by 40% by 2030. In building terms, that is right around the corner. It takes years to draw up plans, secure financing, obtain permits, hire contractors and then manage the renovations. 65
- 10 What is crucial is to find the right balance between a top-down push and bottom-up pull. Just as "sequencing" public policy requires pushing renewable technologies first in order to price the cost of carbon emissions later, so too must committed individuals be the starting point for broader green policies. Reducing beef consumption is a crucial individual contribution to cutting emissions. Vegetarians, meanwhile, will not cut carbon at scale because of having removed beef from their diet: they will cut carbon because they represent a committed, vocal, core group organising and pushing broader climate policies. 70
- 11 The most recent climate summit in Glasgow ended with some significant accomplishments, including new pledges on methane gas pollution, deforestation, coal financing, as well as completion of long-awaited rules on carbon trading and a notable United States-China deal. The summit also closed with calls on governments to return with stronger pledges to slash greenhouse gas emissions and to provide more available funding for nations most vulnerable to a changing climate. Everyone will be affected by the push to decarbonize the economy. To prevent the nightmares of tomorrow, we must work together and seize opportunities to live better based on the greener world of tomorrow rather than the waning fossil age of today. 75
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