

Climate Change Action Cannot Ignore Social Issues



Despite a series of troubling new reports and studies, the world has yet to respond adequately to the threat posed by global warming. One reason is that policymakers have not made the connection between climate action and the social and political challenges their countries face.

PRINCETON/VIENNA – Climate scientists are sounding the alarm about global warming, but the world is not responding. In October, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned of catastrophic risks to health, livelihoods, water supplies, and human security if global warming is not limited to 1.5° Celsius relative to the pre-industrial level, a target set by the 2015 Paris climate agreement. At the moment, however, we are on track for a 3°C increase.

Then, in November, the Fourth National Climate Assessment in the United States predicted that without swift action to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions, the US economy would suffer “substantial damages.” But President Donald Trump’s administration appears utterly unconcerned.

How is it possible that the slow-motion threat of climate devastation has not yet been halted?

Insights from the social sciences can help answer this question. In a recent report and companion book, the International Panel on Social Progress (IPSP), where we serve as committee members, analyzed social justice and equality across a number of sectors. One conclusion stands out: the only way to tackle the threat posed by climate change is by simultaneously addressing social and political challenges.

When ignored, social issues can trigger political turmoil, which can undermine the political will to fight climate change. For example, despite the implementation deal that was reached on December 15 in Poland, the Paris agreement remains in jeopardy, owing to political upheaval in many countries. In the US and Brazil, voters angry over socioeconomic issues elected leaders who are hostile to climate action. In France, protesters have taken to the streets to oppose a fuel-tax hike, not because they are against climate action per se, but because they are anxious about the high cost of living and frustrated with the elite's perceived indifference. France's experience echoes the difficulties that many developing countries have when trying to eliminate fossil-fuel subsidies.

These developments confirm what social scientists have long suspected: an environmentally-centered, technocratic push for climate action is destined to fail. But the IPSP's recent work offers insights into how to achieve social progress and environmental sustainability concurrently.

On the socioeconomic front, inequalities can be curbed with policies that go beyond standard interventions, like wealth redistribution. It has been shown that people can be empowered with skills training and better health care, as well as with bargaining rights and appropriate regulation of labor contracts.

Addressing anxiety about the future of work is both necessary and feasible. Although there is no compelling evidence that automation will lead to widespread unemployment, job reshuffling will be disruptive. Ambitious “flexicurity” policies to ensure workers’ long-term security would help. With a combination of wage compression (closing the wage gap between jobs and industries), asset redistribution, and universal welfare, it is possible to accelerate innovation, empower workers, and promote growth and social mobility. Moreover, reforming the mission and the governance of corporations to better take account of all stakeholders would promote social justice and strengthen environmental stewardship.

Through such policies, governments would make economic democracy and empowerment a top priority. They could also promote economic efficiency with tax reforms that account for negative environmental and social externalities as well as monopoly profits and capital gains from real estate. Health care, education, and urban policy reforms can improve economic opportunities and yield important moral, civic, social, and ecological benefits.

Restoring trust in institutions also requires addressing democratic shortcomings in political systems and global governance. Corporate power and the influence of wealth in politics must be reined in; aligning antitrust legislation with twenty-first-century technologies is one place to start. Social media, once touted as a boon to democratization, may corrode the transparency and accountability on which democracy depends. Digital and traditional media should therefore be treated as common goods, and appropriate governance, involving civil society, must be set up to preserve content quality and producer independence from business interests and partisan influence.

The architecture of global governance mechanisms is still dominated by the richest countries. International

organizations and their policies will not find their place and voice unless and until this power imbalance is ameliorated.

Around the world, experiments in democratic participation and deliberation held out the promise of more inclusive decision-making. This makes it possible to envision societies with less inequality and stronger environmental safeguards. With the right regulations and incentives, markets, corporate behavior, and new technologies can serve social progress and ecological goals. We are convinced that a better society is possible.

The authors of the IPSP's report are not naive; we recognize that many of our contemporary institutions have been designed to address the problems of another era and must be reinvented. It is not easy to identify actors or organizations that are up to the task. But in the absence of a cohesive movement effecting change, loose coalitions of actors, political and environmental movements, business leaders, workers, philanthropists, minorities, and activists are capable of pursuing environmental and social causes in a decentralized fashion.

Taking action against climate change cannot be separated from social issues. In fact, simultaneously fighting climate change and promoting social justice makes it harder to ignore either one.