

The Planet, Europe and I: What All of Us Can Do to Save Our Planet



by Joël Christoph

Climate change is one of the preeminent global challenges of our times. Humankind is confronted with a range of immediate and long-term threats, spanning the ecological, physical, economic and health dimensions, and including but not limited to extreme weather, sea-level rise, altered crop growth and disrupted water systems.

Everyone is impacted by rising temperatures and environmental degradation and all citizens, as well as states, international organisations and private companies have a role to play in limiting this phenomenon to ensure a sustainable future for our planet.

Individuals can take immediate actions by changing consumption patterns and living habits to mitigate some of these risks. Not buying a car, taking fewer flights, increasing the use of renewable energy and more efficient forms of transportation, adopting a vegetarian

diet, limiting the use of hot water and heating, as well as air conditioning, and having fewer children are all measures that individuals can adopt to limit their carbon footprint.¹

Nonetheless, some of these measures clearly raise political, economic and moral questions, and may risk placing an excessive burden on citizens. Adopting a normative approach to personal choices, and attributing virtue or sin to actions such as recycling or flying on airplanes runs the risk of shaming people for everyday activities often pursued out of no fault of their

¹ Seth Wynes and Kimberly A. Nicholas, "The Climate Mitigation Gap: Education and Government Recommendations Miss the Most Effective Individual Actions", in *Environmental Research Letters*, Vol. 12, No. 7 (July 2017), Art. 074024, <https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/aa7541>; Sid Perkins, "The Best Way to Reduce Your Carbon Footprint Is One the Government Isn't Telling You About", in *Science*, 11 July 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aan7083>.

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own, but merely because they have involuntarily been born into a global economic system dependent on fossil fuels and in which such activities are presently considered normal.²

Moreover, this emphasis on individual habits and carbon footprints is at most a short-term strategy. We must make sure that such focus does not narrow our view of citizens merely as consumers or prevent us from imagining ways to act collectively.

Most importantly, we must avoid a false dichotomy between individual and systemic action, preventing us from approaching both in symbiosis. The gravest risk is that a focus on individual action obscures the bigger picture, beginning from the reality that 100 companies are responsible for an estimated 71 per cent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, and that these same companies still enjoy broad support from many governments.³

Thus, while individual action remains important, we must not rely only on individual citizens. Consumer choices or lifestyle changes are often only feasible, at least in the short term, for those that are financially and physically able to do so. Instead, we must also ask ourselves what we can do as groups and organised collectives.

² Mary Annaïse Heglar, "I Work in the Environmental Movement. I Don't Care If You Recycle", in *The Highlight - Vox*, 4 June 2019, <http://vox.com/the-highlight/2019/5/28/18629833>.

³ Paul Griffin, "CDP Carbon Majors Report 2017", in *CDP Reports*, July 2017, p. 8, <https://www.cdp.net/en/reports/downloads/2327>.

The need to adopt many complementary approaches to mitigate climate change is demonstrated by climate change simulation models that predict the possible trajectories of global warming.

For instance, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and its affiliated think-tank Climate Interactive, launched a simulator called En-ROADS in 2019 that contrasts different scenarios for limiting global warming worldwide to 1.5°C if not 2°C. Similarly, the policy consultancy Energy Innovation maintains an open-source energy policy simulator that estimates environmental and economic impacts of climate and energy policies for the US context.⁴

Both simulators employ system dynamics modelling to show the connections, play out scenarios and explore different ways to address climate change. Most importantly, they highlight the importance of taking broad, multisectoral approaches and transforming policy across various sectors, including energy supply, transport and industry, in order to develop more encompassing strategies to mitigate climate change.

Promisingly, many European countries have already developed or adopted national and international programmes to reduce emissions and waste. In particular, the European Commission's Green Deal, which aims to make Europe climate neutral by 2050, sets in motion an ambitious transformation of the

⁴ Climate Interactive website: *En-ROADS*, <https://www.climateinteractive.org/tools/en-roads>; Energy Policy Solutions website: *United States*, <https://us.energypolicy.solutions>.

European economy, emerging as key test of the political determination to execute these much-needed reforms.

So far, a broad range of interventions have proven effective on the national and subnational levels in Europe and beyond, including increasing the use of renewable energy and combined heat and power installations; improving energy efficiency in buildings, industry and household appliances; reducing carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions from passenger and commercial vehicles; setting emissions reduction standards in manufacturing industries; and reducing emissions from landfills.⁵

Nevertheless, there are many additional measures that can still contribute, both in Europe and other regions. These include developing and implementing local emissions targets; facilitating car-free lifestyles; curbing the emissions of meat and dairy industries; and adopting budgets, regulations and legislation that accelerate the green transition.

EU regulators, for instance, should include oil and gas in the definition of fossil fuels under the EU's sustainable disclosure regime to prevent the underreporting of environmental risks and appropriately confront greenwashing.⁶

⁵ European Environment Agency (EEA) website: *Climate Change Policies*, last updated 13 December 2016, <https://www.eea.europa.eu/themes/climate/policy-context>.

⁶ Siobhan Riding and Attracta Mooney, "Investors Blast EU's Omission of Oil from ESG Disclosures", in *Financial Times*, 3 May 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/07083de6-c4d4-4f1b-8dc4-c4490e670216>.

This matters because a credible ambition to tackle climate change requires effective development and rigorous disclosure rules that ensure transparency on the environmental, ethical and social risks.⁷ Overall, the EU's commitment to becoming a – if not *the* – world leader on climate action requires the continued translation of civic engagement, scientific expertise and political capital into concrete policies.

Beyond national governance, international and interregional cooperation is also critical. The top 20 carbon-emitting economies are responsible for 80 per cent of global emissions. Seven countries in particular emit over one gigaton annually and among these China, the United States and the EU collectively account for over half of global emissions.⁸

Globally, the closures and lockdowns associated with COVID-19 in 2020 have caused the largest recorded reduction in CO₂ emissions, by approximately 5 to 6 per cent worldwide relative to 2019 levels.⁹ This fall is expected to reach 8

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ The seven countries are China, the United States, India, Indonesia, Russia, Brazil and Japan. See Hal Harvey et al., *Designing Climate Solutions. A Policy Guide for Low-Carbon Energy*, Washington, Island Press, 2018, p. 29; or Energy Policy Solutions website: *The Climate Imperative*, April 2018, <https://www.energypolicy.solutions/?p=27>. See also Hannah Ritchie and Max Roser, "CO₂ and Greenhouse Gas Emissions", in *Our World in Data*, last revised in August 2020, <https://ourworldindata.org/co2-and-other-greenhouse-gas-emissions>.

⁹ Simon Evans, "Analysis: Coronavirus Set to Cause Largest Ever Annual Fall in CO₂ Emissions", in *CarbonBrief*, 9 April 2020, <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-coronavirus-set-to-cause-largest-ever-annual-fall-in-co2-emissions>.

per cent year-on-year over 2020, a drop six times larger than that caused by the 2008 financial crisis.¹⁰

In Europe, CO₂ emissions from energy generation decreased by 39 per cent as lower electricity demand reduced the amount of coal and gas usage and electricity from solar generation rose, partly due to new installations.¹¹ Despite this, we remain considerably short of the emissions reductions target set by the 2015 Paris Agreement, which aims to limit global average temperature rise to 1.5°C.¹²

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), an unprecedented “rapid and far-reaching” worldwide transition that reduces net human-generated CO₂ emissions by “45 percent from 2010 levels, by 2030” is essential to limit global warming to 1.5°C.¹³

Failing to do so risks leading to a surge in involuntary mass migration, sea level rises, coastal disasters, wildfires, deadly heat stress, putting millions

of lives at risk. The estimated costs of these developments will top 50 trillion US dollars, while the changes brought about by climate change and environmental degradation will be irreversible for natural ecosystems and habitats.¹⁴

Individual and incremental steps to reduce fossil fuel consumption are insufficient; even 1.5°C warming requires “reaching net zero around 2050”.¹⁵ As long as we do not have a global economy that is one hundred per cent decarbonised of oil, natural gas and coal combustion, we will need increased reliance on techniques that remove CO₂ from the atmosphere.

However, such technologies remain unproven at large scale and may carry significant risks for sustainable development according to the IPCC.¹⁶ A particular risk over the long term will be that of a possible leakage of stored CO₂, which would negate the initial environmental benefits and could lead to detrimental effects on the livelihood of both animals and humans.

Transitioning away from fossil fuels towards a sustainable economy will not be an easy task. It implies significant short-term costs and investments, while the benefits can only be expected in the long term. To protect workers, not just jobs, increased income guarantees, public investment, social safety nets, education and training will

¹⁰ International Energy Agency (IEA), *Global Energy Review 2020*, 28 April 2020, p. 4, <https://www.iea.org/reports/global-energy-review-2020>.

¹¹ Dave Jones, “Analysis: Coronavirus has cut CO₂ from Europe’s electricity system by 39%”, in *CarbonBrief*, 29 April 2020, <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-coronavirus-has-cut-co2-from-europes-electricity-system-by-39-per-cent>.

¹² UN Environment Programme (UNEP), *Emissions Gap Report 2019*, Nairobi, UNEP, November 2019, <https://www.unenvironment.org/node/26776>.

¹³ IPCC, “Summary for Policymakers”, in *Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways...*, 2018, p. 15, 12, <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/?p=6333>.

¹⁴ Ove Hoegh-Guldberg et al., “Impacts of 1.5°C Global Warming on Natural and Human Systems”, in *ibid.*, p. 264, <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/#home-chapter-3>.

¹⁵ IPCC, “Summary for Policymakers”, *cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

be instrumental, at least in the early phases of the transition.¹⁷

While important to mitigate the social effects of the transition, these policies are also instrumental to create new opportunities, helping to reduce economic, social and other inequalities.¹⁸

The societal responses to COVID-19 we have witnessed in 2020 raise monumental questions for the future of humankind. In particular, if entire economies can be shut down to deal with a novel, life-threatening global health crisis, then to what extent can similarly drastic measures be implemented to deal with a life-threatening global climate crisis that is already far better understood?

The COVID-19 crisis provides a unique opportunity to reflect on our economic and ecological trajectory and to plan and develop measures to accelerate the transition to a more sustainable and inclusive economy. The European Commission has placed its Green Deal at the heart of its post-COVID recovery plan and proposed new instruments including the 750 billion euro new Next Generation EU recovery instrument.

These interventions form part of a series of policies that weave together related action areas including the EU Single

Market, the digital transformation, an inclusive recovery, a skills and digital education agenda, as well as minimum wages and pay transparency measures.

Importantly, the European Green Deal is operationalised through multiple pillars such as promoting energy efficiency, incentivising transportation reforms, introducing stricter pollution rules and implementing carbon pricing across all sectors. If successful, these may reshape not only Europe's campaign against climate change but the world's approach as well.¹⁹

In conclusion, let us recall the words of the late David MacKay, "If everyone does a little, we'll achieve only a little. We must do a lot."²⁰

Climate change remains one of the most pressing global challenges of our times. We must remember that individual efforts can only go so far and must therefore be matched by those of companies, institutions and governments, on both national and international levels. Notwithstanding the breadth of action required, the change begins with each and every one of us, by organising, adapting our lifestyles and civic and consumer choices as citizens and agents of societal change, and by working together to promote and realise a more sustainable future.

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¹⁷ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *OECD Employment Outlook 2019. The Future of Work*, Paris, OECD, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9ee00155-en>.

¹⁸ Yeva Nersisyan and L. Randall Wray, "How to Pay for the Green New Deal", in *Levy Economics Institute Working Papers*, No. 931 (May 2019), <http://www.levyinstitute.org/publications/how-to-pay-for-the-green-new-deal>.

¹⁹ Niokos Tsafos, "Why Europe's Green Deal Still Matters", in *CSIS Commentaries*, 24 March 2020, <https://www.csis.org/node/55949>.

²⁰ David J.C. MacKay, *Sustainable Energy – Without the Hot Air*, Cambridge, UIT Cambridge, 2009, p. 114, http://www.withouthotair.com/c19/page_114.shtml.

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