

Why won't we change to a sustainable future?

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Humanity is on an unsustainable path. Many of us realise that this could potentially be disastrous for humanity, especially for future generations. We can envisage potential solutions or at least part-solutions that could move us to less unsustainable paths, however these would require major changes on a global scale. Humanity appears to be unable to embrace these changes in any meaningful way, even in the face of some potentially disastrous consequences of our current unsustainable path. This paper endeavours to identify and describe reasons for why we are not having any meaningful change. It uses one of the major issues, energy and climate change, as an example, although many of the reasons explored could be equally applied to other major issues that are contributing to our unsustainable path.

Yes, there are major technological challenges in moving to a sustainable energy future. The current technology cannot make the transition right now, however it can be argued that there is enough current technology to make a good start. It is almost as if we have not tried on the scale required to make a significant difference. This paper suggests that the major reasons preventing a significant move exist in the economic and social-political domains. Based on our current societal construct, moving to a sustainable energy future is likely to be costly. It would most certainly mean higher energy prices in the short to medium term (decades). This would most likely induce global recessions because the cost of most products / services depends on energy costs, thus GDP would decrease. This would result in lower incomes, more unemployment and potentially greater social instability. All this is very undesirable and a major reason for not changing.

Surely governments and those with power, in particular corporate leaders, should be concerned about climate change and should be actively trying to make major real global progress. It is true to say that in general governments and those with power are well aware of the energy and climate change issues, thus lack of awareness is not a barrier here. However, the current economic focus amongst the governments of most nation states is an obsession with economic growth. The current market economic system requires growth just to maintain and even more so to grow employment for enlarging populations. Without growth, there is more unemployment leading to greater unrest amongst the population and the possibility of society destabilisation, which are all highly undesirable for governments. Furthermore, growth is required to pay government debt. Many nation states are in major debt and are desperately seeking economic growth to help pay back their debts. Thus, the current economic system has trapped governments and humanity in general. This obsession with economic growth means that economic growth is given the number one priority and climate change is given a lower priority, consequently economic growth is given precedence over climate change. Thus, rather

than trying to reduce climate change we are actually increasing it due to pursuit of the number one priority, economic growth. But this is a completely rational response when viewed from the lens of the dominant modern societal paradigm based on a Cartesian reductionist and atomistic approach. This paradigm promotes a society and an economics of limitless ongoing growth with a singular drive towards ever greater competition, consumption, control, resource accumulation and individualism ahead of the counter-balancing forces of interconnectedness (trans-disciplinarity), cooperation, contingency, resilience and social and inter-generational solidarity. The immediate economic bottom line is all that matters, and progress is seen merely as an ongoing process towards ever increased ascendancy, efficiency and accumulation of resources and monetary wealth. Once this paradigm remains in place as a basis of reality, all the above factors naturally follow and recognised as are largely immutable and reflexive truths.

Many of the reasons provided in the paper for climate change and energy can be applied to other environmental unsustainabilities. For example, depletion of global fisheries: the knowhow is good enough today to make a good start at managing global fisheries sustainably but it is like the current economic and social-political system needs to be modified to allow this to happen. This is not easy. It will most likely entail economic hardship. However, the consequences of not addressing this is the eventual collapse of the natural capital, and this will most likely lead to greater economic hardship sometime in the future. Even considering this, humanity appears unwilling to change because life is considered tough enough right now, even for those in developed countries. Furthermore, it is almost as if humanity is hoping that the environmental impacts won't be as bad as predicted; maybe the IPCC scientists are wrong; maybe "silver bullet" fixes will materialise. Humanity appears to be unable to change and react to future possibilities until it actually senses them physically or financially. It could be argued that humanity won't change until environmental unsustainabilities significantly "hurt" the global economy and that this becomes clear to humanity.

Humanity is actually good at facing grand challenges, but the crucial factor is that they need to be given a very high priority, so as to unleash a "wartime mobilisation" which will catalyse the required levels of innovation and effort to successfully address the problems. Currently, they are not receiving the required priority.