

How prepared is the international community to address the current environmental crisis?

Considered to be one of the foremost threats to humanity, the current environmental crisis has profound consequences for the world and its inhabitants. There is consensus amongst the international community that changes must be made to our environmental practices in order to prevent irreparable damage to the planet. The considerable progress already made has given us not only the technological ability to address these problems, but also the concomitant societal acceptance of both our role in environmental issues and their rectification. Despite this apparent preparedness, little has actually been done globally. This lack of progress can be traced directly to the capitalist politico-economic ideology that dominates international governance. The capitalist mindset exacerbates natural changes in the environment through destructive, profit-centred behaviours, whilst simultaneously obstructing attempts to ameliorate their impact. The potential of capitalist innovation for environmental good cannot be fully realised whilst profit is a guiding principle; preparation to fully address the crisis would therefore require a “rewiring of the entire global economy” (The Economist, 2021) and the political systems built upon it. Until the international community faces this reality, it will remain unprepared.

Science and technology are the most promising aspects of current development and implementation possibilities. Great strides have been made in our understanding of the causes and effects of climate change, which has aided the development of numerous solutions to deal with them. Renewable energy has received particular focus, improving vastly even in the last decade. Continual improvements in cost and efficiency have made widespread use of renewables a more realistic prospect than ever before, facilitating less destructive utilisation of countries’ natural resources.

Iceland, for instance, heats 90% of its homes using its abundant geothermal energy, while only harnessing 20% of this resource (Aldred, 2008). Kenya has also expanded its renewable capabilities, using a combination of geothermal, wind, solar and hydroelectricity to provide more than 90% of its energy (Reuters, 2019). Even the UK is realising more of its renewable potential, accounting for 35.9% of its energy in 2021 (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2021, p. 1). Globally, approximately 25% of energy is generated by renewables (Ritchie and Roser, 2017), which is an improvement on previous years.

Energy is not the only field seeing innovation: a variety of technologies have experienced rapid progress, from track-side solar farms providing sustainable rail transport (Kenny, 2020), and satellites checking for damage on wind turbines and helping the Norwegian government track deforestation (Bates, 2021), to local initiatives in Kenya providing electricity and biofuel (Juma and Ibrahim, 2021; Juma, Lali and Kremerl, 2021). Furthermore, many of the issues that have prevented uptake of these advances until now are being ironed out; improvements in battery technology, for example, are allowing the supply from weather-dependent renewables to be supplemented, thus improving reliability (and profit).

From these few examples it is clear that our technological capacity for tackling the climate crisis is more than adequate, and in this sense at least the international community is well-prepared. However, this position is undermined by the capitalistic mechanisms that control governments and business, whose duty it is to finance and effectuate solutions, and who consistently sacrifice the good of the environment for the sake of profit. Seeing no short term gain (and being apparently oblivious to their moral and ethical obligations), these institutions continue to block new technology's entry

into global markets and so bind us to damaging existing products and processes that directly benefit them, making extensive reform virtually impossible.

Another important facet of the international community's ability to address the environmental crisis is societal receptiveness to progress: in order for technologies to be implemented effectively, they must be accepted by the populations expected to use them otherwise roll-out (as seen with covid vaccines) is almost impossible. Thankfully, global consensus on climate change is positive, and there is widespread acceptance of the need to protect the environment and adjust our behaviour; so-called 'climate deniers' who are not convinced by compelling evidence to the contrary (Masters and Nuccitelli, 2020; Jones, 2020) remain a minority, and do not present a great threat to the acceptance of climate responsibility. The will for reform is further evidenced by the "intense and continuous international negotiation" (Maslin, 2021) on environmental policy over the last thirty years, as illustrated at COP26. Even governments are starting to bend to popular will: election manifestos are plastered with 'green' promises. Even the problematic greenwashing of companies to garner public support demonstrates a recognition of the public's desire for a sustainable society. Much of this environmental activism can be attributed to young people, amongst whom high levels of 'climate anxiety' (Hickman et al., 2021) are testament to their acute understanding of the need for change. Social media is awash with examples of small changes that facilitate more environmentally-friendly lives, from reusable straws to veganism. Making such changes is seen as a social responsibility, hoping that the cumulative effect of individual actions will constitute more significant change, exemplifying an attitude of environmental concern.

Even this social readiness is not enough to effect change, however, as it contains a number of flaws that further impede progress. The political influence of the US and Europe means that

global environmental efforts are tinged with cultural ignorance, as the superiority complex of western capitalism forgets that many populations (especially Indigenous) were already using sustainable practices, and it is the decimation of these customs by the exploitative forces of capitalism and imperialism that perpetrated the ecological damage they now face - deforestation in the Solomon Islands is a case in point (Beck, 2020). This lack of cultural sensitivity hinders effective solutions, as the bottom-up approaches that are most appropriate for many areas are eschewed in favour of solutions which are difficult for local populations to maintain (due to cost and technological reliance) and rarely the most effective utilisation of local resources. Too often, solutions focus on maintaining profit for richer countries, ultimately not addressing the root of the environmental and social problems that abound.

Even in some of the world's richest countries, what are by now seen by white, middle-class populations as lifestyle standards remain out of reach for many: electric cars, veganism and zero waste shopping, for instance, can be cost prohibitive, and often geographically inaccessible for rural communities. Even the much maligned fast fashion industry is necessary for those who can only afford its inexpensive wares. The blame directed at these groups illustrates the culture of consumer responsibility constructed by governments and businesses to draw our attention away from their role in reform: as holders of the majority of the world's wealth and political power, it falls within the purview of these institutions to implement both the higher-level politico-economic changes that constitute the backbone of an ideal approach to the environmental crisis, as well as making lower-level changes viable for their populations to attain comprehensive reform. Reaching this point relies upon the dismantling of an ideology intrinsic to the most powerful individuals in our society: while they are not willing change, the international community remains unprepared.

When presented with possible solutions to environmental problems, lack of funding is often cited as a hindrance to reform. This is not entirely unfounded; Turner (2020) suggests this figure may be around \$2 trillion annually for the next 30 years. Though this seems an intimidating statistic, when compared with current global spending on environmentally-damaging practices it appears far more achievable. If governments can shell out \$4-6 trillion a year on fossil fuel subsidies (Patrick, 2021) and US billionaires can add \$1.8 trillion to their net worth during a global pandemic (McCarthy, 2021), it is clear the issue lies not with the amount of funds, but rather their allocation - a direct result of capitalism.

Our current economic system concentrates 43.4% of the world's wealth in the hands of just 1% of the population (Shorrocks, Davies and Lluberas, 2020, p. 29), most of whom have a vested interest in heavily polluting industries. Wielding such influence in global economics engenders an unwillingness amongst governments to tax these individuals heavily; the fact that many politicians benefit from these industries fosters more hostility towards 'green' legislation, effectively hobbling the international community. Profit also drives resistance to sustainability: despite falls in renewable energy prices, lower profitability than fossil fuels deters investors. The price of new technologies therefore remains high, and without intervention from global wealth holders cannot be adopted by the wider population. This leaves the international community in a catch-22 whereby they cannot invest in or introduce new technologies due to lack of 'sufficient' profit.

The capitalist preoccupation with profit has even percolated into international climate agreements (highlighted by the indulgence of India and China at COP26), adding another layer of greed that must be stripped away before real progress can be made: as Guerrero (2018, p. 34) suggests, "the corporate nature of UN climate processes and other policy arenas" allows the interests

of profit to take precedence over the environment, reinforcing the lack of concern for life inherent to a capitalist system. The sense of ownership and territorial sovereignty promoted by capitalistic ideas, which in the minds of many governments “[constitutes] a blank check to plunder collective resources” (Patrick, 2021), is a further danger to the environment not present in a system that instead puts custodianship of the natural world at the forefront of international policy. It is imperative, but improbable, that those in power “acknowledge that the capitalist economic model they espouse and rely on is based on plunder, waste and pollution” (Guerrero, 2021, p. 31). Once these principles are overcome, the international community can begin to make meaningful changes. Until that point, it is fundamentally unprepared to address the environmental crisis.

Capitalism may have made our current situation feel hopeless, and imposed impediments to comprehensive reform, but we should not give up just yet: maintaining constant pressure on powerful bodies to effect change is a potent tool against institutions that would otherwise be disinclined to acquiesce to popular demands, and could, over time, force change from the inside out. Whether this could happen in a time frame that matches the urgency of the environmental crisis is another matter. Whilst the framework for systemic change has been created by technological strategies and positive societal attitudes, unless and until the international community is willing to change, the environmental crisis will remain unaddressed.

Bibliography:

Aldred, J. (2008). Iceland’s energy answer comes naturally. *The Guardian*. [online] 22 Apr.

Available at:

Rosie Bray

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2008/apr/22/renewableenergy.alternativeenergy>
[Accessed 20 Jan. 2022].

Bates, C. (2021). Six ways shoebox-sized satellites are trying to change the world. *BBC News*.
[online] 23 Nov. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-59346457> [Accessed 20 Jan. 2022].

Beck, J. (2020). Logging is corrupting these islands. One village fights back—and wins. *National Geographic*. [online] 3 Jan. Available at:
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/deforestation-in-the-solomon-islands>
[Accessed 20 Jan. 2022].

Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2021). *Energy Trends UK, July to September 2021*. [online] *Energy Trends - GOV.UK*, p.1. Available at:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1043311/Energy_Trends_December_2021.pdf [Accessed 20 Jan. 2022].

Guerrero, D.G. (2018). The Limits of Capitalist Solutions to the Climate Crisis. In: V. Satgar, ed., *The Climate Crisis: South African and Global Democratic Eco-Socialist Alternatives*. [online] Wits University Press, pp.31, 34. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.18772/22018020541.7>
[Accessed 20 Jan. 2022].

Hickman, C., Marks, E., Pihkala, P., Clayton, S., Lewandowski, R.E., Mayall, E.E., Wray, B., Mellor, C. and van Susteren, L. (2021). Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey. *The Lancet Planetary*

Health, [online] 5(12), pp.e863–e873. Available at:

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(21\)00278-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(21)00278-3/fulltext)

[Accessed 20 Jan. 2022].

Jones, H. (2020). Animals that went extinct in 2020 and ones that could disappear after 2021.

Metro. [online] 31 Dec. Available at: [https://metro.co.uk/2020/12/31/animals-that-went-extinct-](https://metro.co.uk/2020/12/31/animals-that-went-extinct-in-2020-and-the-ones-that-could-disappear-after-2021-13780929/)

[in-2020-and-the-ones-that-could-disappear-after-2021-13780929/](https://metro.co.uk/2020/12/31/animals-that-went-extinct-in-2020-and-the-ones-that-could-disappear-after-2021-13780929/) [Accessed 20 Jan. 2022].

Juma, M. and Ibrahim, R. (2021). How to make electricity for your neighbours. *BBC News*.

[online] 14 Dec. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/stories-59635134> [Accessed 20

Jan. 2022].

Juma, M., Lali, H. and Kremer, W. (2021). The ATMs that dispense green fuel. *BBC News*.

[online] 4 Sep. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/stories-58425184> [Accessed 20 Jan.

2022].

Kenny, R. (2020). How sunshine can make the railways greener. *BBC News*. [online] 25 Nov.

Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/stories-55044198> [Accessed 20 Jan. 2022].

Maslin, M. (2021). A Short History of International Climate Change Negotiations – from Rio to

Glasgow. *UCL Global Governance Institute*. [online] 25 Jan. Available at:

[https://www.ucl.ac.uk/global-governance/news/2021/jan/short-history-international-climate-](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/global-governance/news/2021/jan/short-history-international-climate-change-negotiations-rio-glasgow)

[change-negotiations-rio-glasgow](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/global-governance/news/2021/jan/short-history-international-climate-change-negotiations-rio-glasgow) [Accessed 24 Jan. 2022].

Masters, J. and Nuccitelli, D. (2020). The Top 10 Extreme Weather and Climate Events of 2020. *EcoWatch*. [online] 23 Dec. Available at: <https://www.ecowatch.com/extreme-weather-climate-2020-2649628910.html> [Accessed 20 Jan. 2022].

McCarthy, J. (2021). 6 Things Billionaires Keep Spending Money on Instead of Helping Solve the World's Biggest Problems. *Global Citizen*. [online] 26 Jul. Available at: <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/what-billionaires-spend-money-on-instead-charity/> [Accessed 20 Jan. 2022].

Patrick, S. (2021). The International Order Isn't Ready for the Climate Crisis. *Foreign Affairs*. [online] 3 Dec. Available at: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2021-10-19/climate-crisis-international-order-isnt-ready?utm_medium=promo_email&utm_source=lo_flows&utm_campaign=registered_user_welcome&utm_term=email_1&utm_content=20221228 [Accessed 20 Jan. 2022].

Ritchie, H. and Roser, M. (2017). Energy. *Our World in Data*. [online] Available at: <https://ourworldindata.org/renewable-energy#citation> [Accessed 24 Jan. 2022].

Shorrocks, A., Davies, J. and Lluberas, R. (2020). *Credit Suisse Global Wealth Report 2020*. [online] p.29. Available at: <file:///home/chronos/u-559bebe847c46aab53963b55cb874e9a8a4ab77a/MyFiles/Downloads/global-wealth-report-2020-en.pdf> [Accessed 20 Jan. 2022].

Staff (2019). UPDATE 1-Renewables hit 90% of Kenyan power with new 50 MW solar plant.

Reuters. [online] 13 Dec. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/kenya-electricity->

idAFL8N28N4TK [Accessed 20 Jan. 2022].

The Economist (2021). *How can business survive climate change?* | *The Economist - YouTube*.

www.youtube.com. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7vOwjNTDwBE> [Accessed

24 Jan. 2022].

Turner, A. (2020). The costs of tackling climate change keep on falling. *Financial Times*. [online]

11 Dec. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/33bb3714-93cf-4af5-9897-e5bf3b013cb7>

[Accessed 20 Jan. 2022].

