
We Can Call Greta One More Time— But Without a Cultural Reset It May Not Work

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Cultural complexities are often confounding variables in climate action. Besides differences between the Global South and Global North in framing what constitutes “urgent” and “viable” action, there are a host of local experiences that can destabilize macro initiatives if ignored. By itself, a call for degrowth—shrinking economies to use less resources—is insufficient unless it acknowledges that top-down prescriptions for climate change are not always welcome by local communities. In parallel, the lack of opportunities to inform and shape decision-making tools also exacerbates the vulnerability of local communities to

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climate change. Furthermore, we live in an era of “eco-anxiety” and mis/disinformation. Hence, we need an alternative to a fevered, high-pitched “now or never” approach and shock tactics. Hard scientific and engineering innovations like cheap energy storage, low-carbon industrial inputs, low-carbon agriculture, transport without emissions, and carbon capture are critical. In parallel, frameworks of climate education, the language of climate communication, and strategies for inter-generational alignment also require new thinking because resilience is as much a cultural phenomenon as it is a feature of built infrastructure. Climate leaders would benefit immensely from investing in dialogue-driven activism by fostering a media culture of reflective listening and honing “green skills.” It is also of utmost importance that we are technically accurate and sober in our claims and expectations—without sacrificing ambition.

Despite the 2015 Paris Agreement and urgent calls by experts to halve emissions by 2030,² why are global commitments by countries to keep temperature rise below 1.5 degrees Celsius falling woefully short?³ Some obvious answers are: the COVID-19 pandemic, global monetary tightening, global inflation, the wait for technological breakthroughs in cheap low-carbon energy generation and storage, and a European energy crisis brought on by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Equally important but underrated factors are culture and the inevitable “clash of cultures,” especially when climate action starts challenging the notions that people have about how to live their lives.⁴ One assumption at the heart of the climate crisis is that the developed world believes its ways of living—economically, politically, socially, and environmentally—can or should be maintained. Meanwhile, the Global South looks forward to emulating what it has seen in the Global North or ideas it has acquired through commerce and trade. But unless we make miraculous technological breakthroughs, given the current systems of production and consumption, it is not ecologically viable for everyone in the world to live like people in Western Europe or the United States. It may seem triggering or unjust, but it is a hard fact: if everyone lives like the average American, humankind will need five Earths to meet its resource needs.⁵

Yet, the American Dream and the American way of life are broadcast across the world through culture and commerce. In the modern era, media and advertising are used to encourage people to consume goods and services in order to feel happy and fulfilled.⁶ There is some truth to consumption driving happiness: not everyone can live like an ascetic or a sage. Frankly, having a certain level of resources is necessary to live a fulfilling life—but there isn’t a lot of conversation about how much is enough. Research from

Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton puts a dollar value on how much money an individual may need to be happy.⁷ However, the popularity and the accessibility of their research among the masses is limited, especially in comparison to the majority of cultural programming that leverages the reach and influence of icons like Tom Brady, Taylor Swift, Ye, Kim Kardashian, Serena Williams, Virat Kohli, or the latest social media sensation. And, in most cases, people are encouraged to buy things to impress people they don't know or like—with money or resources they may not have.⁸

Accumulation of resources is a natural survival instinct, but the modern consumer economy has turbo-charged that instinct. And unless we make radical breakthroughs in providing decarbonized energy and new ways of manufacturing without carbon emissions, addressing our climate goals may be at odds with aspirations created for humans by advertising and our current consumption-obsessed culture.

DEGROWTH IN AN ERA OF VOLATILE POPULISM AND ECO-ANXIETY

Some argue that “degrowth”¹—shrinking economies to use less resources—is the solution.⁹ The idea originated in the Global North, but it is viewed with suspicion in developed and developing nations, especially the latter when they are on the cusp of using hydrocarbons, at scale, to improve their scores on human development indices.¹⁰ Much like emissions reduction goals, the notion of degrowth might only work or appear to be fair if everyone signs up for it. Innovation evangelists like Bill Gates argue that degrowth won't work because it is hard to convince people to give up material comforts and make changes to their lifestyle to address climate change.¹¹ Others believe that growth fuels prosperity and innovation that subsequently help solve more problems in the long run, and thus take the position that degrowth is the “worst idea on the planet.”¹²

The answer to solving climate change lies somewhere in the middle. For example, do emerging economies need investment in cold-storage supply chains for food and critical medicines? Yes. Are “one-click,” “same-day” deliveries of costumes to look like a favored celebrity or monster essential for the tradition of Halloween parties to survive? Probably not. If more people drive to work in their own car each year in a country, does that reflect an optimum utilization of resources? Is it a sign of development? What if higher rates of individual car ownership come with traffic jams, pollution, and higher carbon emissions? The right mix of growth and degrowth requires serious conversations within different cultural contexts.

At humanity's current level of technological capabilities, everybody cannot have luxuries without destroying the planet. This is an unpopular reality during what feels like the zenith of consumerism.

This reality in turn makes it harder for politicians and policymakers to push degrowth that will take away or moderate consumerism in some areas, while prioritizing essential growth goals in others. Another key reason why politicians and policymakers appear to be failing in tackling climate change is the increasing volatility of political cycles that are now flipping national and international priorities back and forth. For example, President Trump's decision to take the United States out of the Paris Agreement and reverse the COP21 consensus brokered during the Obama administration stalled the pace of investment in climate change, and rolled back policies that would reduce emissions in the future.¹³ Brazil's former President, Jair Bolsonaro, opened up the Amazon—the planet's lungs—to industrial activity, a policy that his predecessor Luiz Inácio Lula de Silva has pledged to walk back.¹⁴

In democracies, these shifts in priority are often dictated by the financiers of politics and populist politicians. In authoritarian regimes and dictatorships, finances are subject to the whims of the dictator. Then there is the active sabotaging of climate policies through disinformation by groups that want to deny climate change to benefit the fossil fuel industry and its lobbyists, among others. Priorities are also influenced by politicians changing course on policies because they either do not have answers for climate change or do not like the questions posed by climate change. All this has led younger generations, and Gen Z in particular, to enter an age of “eco-anxiety”—a state of mental anxiety due to worsening environmental conditions and subsequent uncertainty about the future.¹⁵

Today, young activists are tossing soup at Van Gogh's “Sunflowers,” throwing mashed potatoes on “Haystacks,” and pouring milk down shopping aisles.¹⁶ Through their shock tactics, they are calling for urgent action on climate change, including specific demands like ending the use of oil and gas immediately. Some argue that these tactics will do nothing for decarbonization, and point to a faltering social movement.¹⁷ Others argue that targeting the elite art market—a symbol of power—with direct action draws attention to the dissonance and oppression of the current economic system, in which paintings are afforded eye-watering valuations, whereas ecology is severely undervalued.¹⁸

A study of the expansion of civil and human rights suggests that young people need a cause, and many are finding it in climate change.¹⁹ But is society giving them avenues to make constructive contributions? Are existing government, private, and media institutions ensuring that they

are reliably informed? For example, let's examine the celebration of new records in renewable energy power generation. On January 1, 2018, for a brief moment when the winds in Germany were extremely strong and electricity demand was low, the country met 100 percent of its demands through renewable energy.²⁰ Such achievements are celebrated and widely shared as snippets on social media.²¹ But the repeatability of these energy events depends on the weather, which, as we all know, can change at a moment's notice. And today, no country has the installed energy storage to use renewable energy throughout the day to power its needs or a low-carbon way to recreate its energy grid. Celebrating or advocating for technologies that cannot provide reliable uninterrupted electricity for hospitals, airports, defense systems, and other critical infrastructure on today's grid can mislead younger audiences. This can fuel anxiety at a lack of progress and a perception that decarbonization is just a matter of political action and not significant technical breakthroughs. Media figures, political leaders, and climate advocates must strive to be technically accurate in making claims and setting expectations.

FOLLOW WHICH LEADER? PICK WHICH PRIORITY?

The upside of the demands that young activists are making today is that climate change continues to play a key role in election campaigns.²² Yet, the sociocultural norm that regards elected officials of today as leaders that need to drive climate action still dominates. Therefore, it is worth asking; are the established and formal "leaders" of today set up to succeed in meeting the needs of future generations? Can they overcome the decision-making challenges in climate change that impact young people the most?

Today, climate change narratives veer toward sensationalism, or skew the debate for policy makers by framing choices within the narrow confines of "right vs. wrong." Seeking nuance is crucial. The current discourse adds to this polarization while masking the differences in the incentives of leaders across different countries and cultures. For instance, policymakers from members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries Plus (OPEC+), like Saudi Arabia and Russia, rely on revenue from the sale of fossil fuels to fund their states, and will bring that reality to the table. Saudi Arabia may have an impressive 2030 vision for its kingdom (50 percent electricity from renewables²³) and a sharp awareness that its oil bonanza won't last forever, but its time frame or commitment to renewables may shift with changing geopolitical realities. Diminishing investment by Western democracies in oil and gas infrastructure combined with shocks

like Russia's war on Ukraine can, and have, led to spikes in oil prices.²⁴ For Saudi Arabia, the second largest oil producer in the world,²⁵ the current state of affairs makes it profitable to maintain oil wells and draw out oil production in order to sell oil at higher prices. Conversely, falling oil prices may hasten Saudi Arabia's need to diversify its energy mix.²⁶

What about policymakers from developing countries, like India, South Africa, Indonesia, and Brazil, who have energy-starved people to serve? The strong correlation between energy use and per capita income gives these policymakers a strong reason to gravitate toward prioritizing short-term growth in energy consumption over climate change.²⁷ And today, fossil fuels, despite their environmental pollution and emissions, offer the most reliable short-term pathway to the production of large amounts of energy required for building and powering schools, hospitals, transportation, industry, economic activity, lives, and ambitions.²⁸

Given the competing priorities of economic growth and climate change, it is extremely difficult for leaders in developing nations to sell alternatives to their people like degrowth or renewable energy without energy storage, especially after mobile phones, the internet, advertising, and globalization routinely expose people to Western living standards and excesses. Sure, we can call Greta one more time to implore policy makers to act, but her calls to action may not work without a hard cultural reset.

THE CULTURAL RESET WE NEED

To many in the developing world, it seems misguided to implore the poorest to "save the planet" when they wake up each day without the same access to energy and opportunity as people in other parts of the world. In reality, helping people in developing nations fulfill their potential and development goals without emissions is the need of the hour. Even the conservative World Economic Forum argues that the world needs a "Great Reset" to inform and shape climate policy innovation.²⁹ Therefore, tackling climate change will require investment in both existing and new technologies. But it also requires both time and investment in culture too.

The cultural reset we are calling for starts by acknowledging the historical causes of climate change. Some progress has been made in this area with developing nations and small island nations finding the space and courage to highlight their limited role in creating the climate crisis compared to developed countries.³⁰ Furthermore, calling out how colonialism and neo-colonialism have dealt severe blows to the development of peoples in the Global South is also necessary to understand how human beings got to

this juncture. Such dialogue, while difficult, can help in making cultural frameworks to address climate change more inclusive and sustainable. Acknowledging the past while trying to understand affected communities' most pressing needs is a key step in co-creating and re-imagining the contours of a climate resilient future.

What starts with dialogue should continue with education, especially when it comes to young people. In their report, *Unleashing the Creativity in Teachers and Students to Combat Climate Change*, Kwauk and Winthrop speak of tackling climate change through educational innovation and leadership steered by climate instruction, "argument-led inquiry," and "locally relevant" data.³¹ Instead of rhetoric, fear, and abstraction, the focus of climate innovation should be on mapping the numerous micro-changes in the lives of communities wrought by climate change. Whether it is depleting water reserves, changes in migratory patterns of birds, or even crop cycles, these changes provide anecdotal and factual data as a basis for communication and educational materials, fundraising, and policy change. Involving youth climate activists in collecting data on gaps in existing interventions, researching locally relevant technology solutions or innovations, and archiving stories of successful climate change advocacy can give a positive inflection to eco-anxiety. Youth and community members can be encouraged to work with/invest in entrepreneurial ventures focused on climate resilience. Climate research is likely to have greater impact if the design involves facilitating youth and community participation in co-creating and framing research questions. By working with youth to archive intergenerational experiences and lessons through surveys and interviews, policymakers can create a precedent for inviting climate activists to co-design education and policy communication across various media platforms.

Bolstering the agency of communities and bringing coherence to climate change policy requires that local experiences are listened to with empathy. They also must be documented in order to inform diagnostics and decision-making on allocating resources and deciding priorities in climate policy. A companion report by Kwauk and Casey on climate-focused learning proposes that skills such as empathy, creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking be reframed as "green skills," and encouraged widely.³² If news coverage, consultative dialogues, and advocacy could incorporate reflective listening as a format for building consensus and cooperation on climate change, then some eco-anxiety could be assuaged.³³ The process of reflective listening, often employed in therapeutic and conflict mediation, involves paraphrasing, withholding judgment, and acknowledging the emotional impact of any communication.³⁴

Such approaches would be a departure from the current style of discussing climate change that implores people to act without acknowledging their constraints or chastises them for a lack of action and fixates on doomsday possibilities. Perhaps asking stakeholders what is stopping them from being bold and effective might turn out to be as valuable as telling them what needs to be done. Activists, policymakers, educators, and communities also need to create space to reflect on failures as much as successes. That is how avenues for intergenerational learning and archiving of best practices can be created.

The foremost of “green skills” is therefore empathy—a hard-won and interactive practice that involves imagining the triggers and experiences of another. An application of this skill can be in facilitating transitions. For example, cutting down on dairy and meat consumption, in general, will have a huge impact on emissions. This should be advocated for without painting cattle farmers as evil villains. Instead, activists and concerned citizens should ask their representatives how such industries and their workers can be supported in a transition. How can their practices be more sustainable? How can society acknowledge their contributions while giving them dignified and meaningful alternatives to make a living?

Climate change conversations should also be cognizant of the effects of climate change on non-humans and must be able to imagine more deeply the kind of transformation needed for the planet as a whole. As the way society discusses climate change evolves, policymakers should find avenues to accelerate the implementation of ideas and policies that emerge. Today, climate policy also needs an equal emphasis on real experiments and action alongside inclusive dialogue to demonstrate sincerity and commitment. In fact, in the case of climate change, policymaking without a delivery unit that gathers feedback on implementation and iterates or adjusts policies based on that feedback is useless. In this age of constant chatter, writing out long policy documents or tweeting calls for change is not enough without actual results.

CONCLUSION

Over the last two decades—despite interruptions by the global financial Crisis, President Trump’s anti-climate agenda, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Russia’s war in Ukraine—it appears that the climate crisis is back on the agenda.

“We” the people who care about climate action and have the resources to prioritize this challenge, among several others faced by

humanity, must lead by example. Solving for climate change and development is one framing that may gain more traction than simply urging action on a problem that is complex and stretches for centuries beyond four-to-five-year political cycles. As we prioritize actions with the greatest material impact, we need to lead with humility and respect for the most entrenched opponents. Undoubtedly, any plan for climate action will be challenged—at best by people with other urgent needs, and at worst by saboteurs. To get everyone on board we need nuance, courage, empathy, creativity, ambition, and humility to formulate and implement plans for climate action that will deliver meaningful reductions, while spreading the costs and opportunities more evenly. *f*

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