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Sharing the World's Resources in a Time of Escalating Climate Emergency

Saturday, 09 July 2016 00:00

By Adam Parsons, Share the World's Resources | Interview

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Northern governments have now moved even further away from accepting the need of a new paradigm for the equitable sharing. (Photo: NASA / Barry Wilmore)

The following interview with Share The World's Resources founder Mohammed Mesbahi examines the contemporary political implications of sharing the world's

Adam Parsons: What is your basic verdict on the Paris Agreement -- was it justified to call it a 'major leap for mankind' and 'the world's greatest diplomatic success'?

Mohammed Mesbahi: There was some justification to the acclamatory news headlines, given the fact that an international climate treaty was finally sealed following the dramatic failure to agree a universal agreement in Copenhagen six years ago. The new language adopted around the goal to keep global temperatures at no more than 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels is also a testament to more than two decades of advocacy efforts and meticulous science. In the light of 21 years of stalled and often factious negotiations, I think few could disagree that this is a surprisingly ambitious target, one that has even taken the scientific community by surprise.

There were also some grounds to hail the talks as a success now that targets have been set around each nation's Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs), which are the first emission reduction plans under the UN Climate Change Convention (UNFCCC) that apply to both developed and developing countries, forming the official basis of a post-2020 global framework. From the most optimistic evaluation, the fact that we now have a long term goal of achieving net zero greenhouse gas emissions by the second half of the century is at least a timeframe for action, albeit with lots of concerns from civil society groups about the uptake of negative emissions technologies. The fact that developing countries made the most ambitious commitments, including China and India, also means there are signs that the geopolitics of global leadership has started to shift, and the South is willing to ramp up their mitigation efforts despite the unwillingness of the North to sufficiently 'take the lead'.

Whether the treaty will bring us any closer to a just and sustainable world order is

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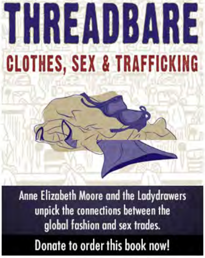
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another matter. Despite the aspirational 1.5°C emissions target, there is no clear roadmap for how to deliver these collective reductions in the short term. Even if the current INDCs are met by 2030, various studies have shown that we will still be on track for a 3 to 4°C warmer planet, leading us to extremely dangerous tipping points. Remarkably, the introductory text to the treaty itself admits this, stating that far greater emissions reductions efforts will be required if we are to address the significant gap between the Parties mitigation pledges and aggregate emissions consistent with even the 2°C pathway. There is nothing to prevent nations from reneging on their already insufficient commitments, which in the history of multilateral UN talks gives us little reason for optimism.

As expected, the only binding element of the agreement is for each nation to submit regularly updated goals on progress. It may be a legally binding document of international law as part of the UNFCCC, but there is no longer a legal responsibility for rich countries to provide finance to help poor countries adapt to climate change, let alone any legally binding targets for meaningful carbon cuts. So in reality, it is a sad indictment of our times that the Paris Agreement has been hailed as 'ambitious' and 'politically historic'. In this respect, we can also observe a striking parallel with the Sustainable Development Goals agreed in September 2015, which promises an 'end to poverty everywhere' by 2030 among other ambitious environmental targets, but without any sanctioning mechanisms or credible means to implement those outcomes.

From your standpoint at Share The World's Resources, it is interesting to note that the concept of 'fair shares' has now become a rallying call for action in the climate change debates. What do you see as the relevance of the principle of sharing to the Paris Agreement and the COP negotiations in general?

The idea of sharing is emerging as a key theme in many areas of policy thinking and activism today, none more so than in civil society advocacy work on climate change. This is perhaps natural and to be expected, as the principles of fairness and equity are of course recognised in the UN Climate Convention, in that Annex I countries are expected to take the lead in emission reductions while respecting the rights of Annex II countries to sustainable development, which includes the right of less developed countries to receive financial and technical support. How to share responsibility for keeping global carbon emissions within scientifically-accepted limits, and on a fair and equitable basis, has always been at the heart of the COP process. The landmark equity principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR-RC) enshrines this recognition, based on the essential premise that all states are responsible for addressing global warming, yet not equally responsible, thus highlighting the profound moral issues that have caused so much contestation and division since negotiations began in 1992.

But that principle has now been all but abandoned in the Paris Agreement, which is a significant step backwards. Major industrialised countries waged a successful campaign against the equity principle by opting to determine their own targets on a purely national basis through the INDCs, and without any reference to the scale of global effort needed to stay within the 1.5°C target. This effectively erases their historical responsibility and militates against effective action from all countries in years to come. One of the key goals of the US in particular was to weaken the language in the text around 'loss and damage', so that they would not be liable for mandatory compensation for climate impacts in poor countries.

As for climate finance to help developing countries with adaptation and mitigation, it was already clear that the goal of raising $100 billion per year is woefully inadequate, and only a fraction of these sums have so far been delivered. But the new language in the text around climate finance being 'voluntary' and 'shared among all countries' further shifts the burden of responsibility back onto poorer countries. Relatively little finance is expected to come from guaranteed public funds, and there is the added risk that finance will be diverted from existing aid flows. The bulk of future financing may have to come from new market mechanisms such as carbon offsets which risks an overreliance on private investments, as there is scant hope that governments will mobilise additional sources of revenue that flow directly into UN climate funds, such as from financial transaction taxes or a progressive carbon tax system.

Many of these points have been expanded on in much greater detail by civil society observers, but what should be obvious is that the COP21 outcome in no way reflects the principles of sharing and justice in a true form. Only the activists and campaigners in the conference halls seemed to embrace a vision of what equity means in addressing the climate crisis through urgent short-term actions and transformative, systemic change. Interestingly, civil society thinking on 'fair shares' has moved on significantly in recent years, based on a global carbon budget that

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accounts for historical responsibility and emissions allocations for individual countries. But Northern governments have now moved even further away from accepting the need of a new paradigm for the equitable sharing of the world's shrinking atmospheric space, and as such the prospect of enshrining a high-ambition carbon budget into a legally binding climate treaty is, alas, still a dream.

Can you expand on the relevance of a carbon budget in formulating an equitable solution to preventing dangerous levels of global warming?

Despite the present failures of multilateralism and the inadequacies of the UNFCCC negotiations, I believe it remains imperative that a vision for a fair climate deal is upheld by campaigning groups and progressive analysts, in accordance with the latest science. The question of a global carbon budget is central to this vision, as it reveals how much carbon can be emitted into the atmosphere without breaching the internationally-agreed upper limits on global warming. Hence if the remaining budget is divided on the basis of fairness and equity, it poses a number of pressing questions about how to share the remaining atmospheric space among the world's nations, particularly with respect to the differing levels of development between the global North and South.

The carbon budget approach has been discussed for many years among NGOs and academics, and is now well established in science following the IPCC's fifth assessment report, which released a budget assessment for different temperature limits based on data up to 2011. The UN estimated that about 1 trillion tonnes of carbon can be emitted into the atmosphere if we are to have a decent prospect of remaining within the 2°C limit, which reduced to about 800 billion tonnes when accounting for additional warming factors or other greenhouse gases. Of this amount, the IPCC calculated that we've already used up more than 500 billion tonnes due to carbon emissions from human activity since the onset of the industrial revolution, which means that at least half of the budget is already spent. On the current emissions path, the remaining carbon space was predicted to be exhausted within 2 to 3 decades.

However, various studies have updated these assessments and calculated that we have far fewer years remaining to stay within the 1.5°C budget. It is well accepted within both the mainstream scientific and NGO community that 2°C does not represent an adequately safe threshold to prevent 'dangerous' climate change, yet most of the scenarios work to date has focused on 2°C or 3°C limits, and the science is less robust on the safer 1.5°C limit. There could be less than five years remaining of CO2 emissions at current levels before we exceed the budget for 1.5°C, and even that gives us a mere 66% probability of avoiding the risks of tipping points and severe impacts on food and human security. It's notable that the 66% probability considered a 'likely' chance in the IPCC terminology is highly questionable, and if we apply a risk level of the kind that would be deemed acceptable in other areas of human activity, say 90% or higher, then there is actually no carbon budget remaining for keeping below 1.5°C.

It's also worth emphasising that the IPCC estimates are extremely complex due to the different assumptions and methodologies used, and there are a lot of uncertainties about the feedback processes that amplify or reduce the warming we see in the atmosphere, hence the need for various probabilities of staying below a certain temperature, none of which can be guaranteed. New studies are often released that find the IPCC estimates are too generous, and that we may be overestimating the total carbon budget by anything up to 200%.

The political, economic and social implications are enormous when you look at how to apply a scientifically-defined and internationally-agreed cap on total global emissions, and how to then distribute the remaining carbon budget between nations or among the population. It's already clear from the official UN data that the challenge of limiting emissions to even the 2°C threshold is extraordinary. An equitable sharing of the mitigation and financial efforts towards these ends will require major sacrifices from the Annex I nations, a renewed focus on the critical social and economic needs of developing nations, and a degree of international cooperation that is without precedent in human history. But as I mentioned, we still appear to be far from acknowledging the true extent of this great civilisational challenge. Political leaders in Paris failed even to discuss a total carbon budget as a basis of targets and effort sharing, while fossil fuels companies are still being facilitated in investing massive sums into the development of new reserves that will make it impossible to keep temperatures within a safe budget.

Please do comment further on what a truly equitable and ambitious level of international cooperation should look like on a country-by-country basis. What do you see as the specific achievements of current civil

society thinking on how to translate the principles of sharing, justice and equity into a multilateral climate regime?

A lot of attention has now been given to this question among civil society groups, which has evolved from the 'climate debt' debates in activist circles that came to prominence around the time of the Copenhagen summit in 2009. The question is how to develop an ambitious climate regime that is “in the light of equity and the best available science”, as long accepted as a principle in the UN Climate Change Convention and reaffirmed by world leaders in the Paris Agreement, but not yet translated into a quantitative global framework. A number of NGOs have therefore looked at how to operationalise the core equity principles of the Convention, fundamental to which are the concepts of historical emissions and historical responsibility.

One of the commonalities of the various prominent proposals discussed is the concern for economic justice in any approach to climate protection, which gives rise to the need for an equity-based effort-sharing framework that safeguards the right to sustainable development for countries in the global South. The politics of the COPs negotiations have proven that this is not merely an ethical priority, but the very basis of geopolitical realism and the gateway for increased environmental ambition -- a point that has been well argued by many civil society observers.

In the highly regarded Greenhouse Development Rights (GDRs) framework, the right to sustainable development is codified by way of a 'development threshold', meaning a level of income per capita that should not be accounted for in calculations about a country's capacity to tackle climate change. In other words, a country's capacity can be defined as the sum of all individual incomes, excluding incomes below the development threshold, which should be higher than the official global poverty line so that it can reasonably apply to all citizens of both the North and South, and somewhat reflect an adequate standard of living. The persuasive reasoning is that people below this level of income, those who have yet to realise their right to development, should not have to bear the burden of a climate transition.

To further account for the inequitable historical emissions between the North and South, the GDRs framework also proposes the use of equity indicators to calculate each nation's responsibility, as well as its aggregate capacity. For example, historical responsibility is calculated by the cumulative per capita greenhouse gas emissions of each country since an agreed start date, such as 1850 or 1990, which is adjusted to account for the development threshold. In this way, a country's fair share of the global mitigation effort can be defined by combining its responsibility and capacity, thus generating a single indicator of obligation. The real dynamic potential of such an index of course depends on first defining the remaining carbon budget, for which a 1.5°C marker pathway should clearly be the basis of negotiations.

My brief explanation here of the GDRs methodology is rather cursory and incomplete, and I would recommend referring to their literature to better understand how the use of equity indicators can provide a quantifiable, fair system for sharing the global effort among all countries. But I think their key achievement is to demonstrate how a major commitment to North-South cooperation is essential for any viable climate change mitigation framework. The Annex I countries have such a comparatively larger share of global responsibility and capacity that they cannot possibly meet their fair share of effort through domestic action alone. Thus they are duly obligated to provide less developed countries with the finance, access to technology and capacity building that is necessary for them to exploit their full mitigation potential, in line with their sustainable development strategies.

In the latest iteration of such an equity-based framework prior to COP21, a civil society review of the INDCs was able to illustrate just how far the pledged actions of wealthier countries compare to their respective fair shares of effort, central to which is the need for vastly scaled-up means of implementation. The INDCs of the US and EU, for example, only represent about a fifth of their fair shares. But it should be emphasised that even these estimates are conservative and pragmatic, based as they are on a 2°C global mitigation pathway and with reference to the wholly inadequate INDCs, leading civil society organisations to recommend a 'ratcheting-up mechanism' that can enable deeper, and possibly legally-binding commitments to be made in the future.

Then again, we cannot expect developing countries to accept a binding mitigation framework unless the principles of sharing and equity are at its heart. It must be seen that poverty eradication and human development can go hand in hand with a

Marshall-style transition to a zero-carbon energy supply, consistent with the scientific reality. There is no way around the impasse: Northern countries will need to take a greater share of the burden at first, and face up to their obligations for massive international transfers of technological and financial support to poorer countries in the South. What we are talking about, really, is a new vision of international cooperation that is somewhat akin to the Brandt Report of 1980. It is high time that report was updated to reflect the reality of a world that is fast exceeding ecological boundaries, in which a global reallocation of resources is needed to address both the climate and poverty crises simultaneously.

The Brandt Report proposed a kind of Marshall Plan for the Third World based on global Keynesian-style stimulus measures, but is it possible for the remaining carbon budget to be shared on the basis of equity, thus achieving the 1.5°C or even 2°C target, without a significant contraction of the global economy in the longer term?

This is a question that is not given much credence in mainstream political and academic circles, where the primacy of economic growth is seldom contested. But I agree with the basic assessment of many green economists and environmental think tanks, like the Club of Rome and the UK's former Sustainable Development Commission, that the continued ramping up of global economic activity is at odds with our attempts to avoid dangerous climate change and sustain the planet's ecosystems. There is also the Tyndall Centre research institute in the UK which has addressed this issue from a carbon budget analysis, making a convincing case outlining the need for immediate and planned 'de-growth' strategies of reduced consumption and economic contraction in the Annex I countries.

Their analysis is worth reflecting on, as it demonstrates how meeting the 2°C commitments will require Annex I countries to decarbonise their economies drastically and with immediate effect, not further delaying action until, say, 2020 when the INDC pledges of the Paris Agreement begin. It is only on this basis that developing countries may be enabled to peak in emissions by 2025, and yet still minimally grow their economies while embarking on a rapid transition away from fossil-fuelled development. According to the cumulative emissions budget approach that the Tyndall Centre adopts on the basis of the equity principle, wealthy nations must reduce emissions by 8-10% per annum over coming decades, which is at a rate far below what is considered by most economists to be compatible with a growing economy. There is, in fact, no historical record of any country succeeding in prolonged emissions reductions of even 4% each year without experiencing a deep economic contraction. The Stern report by the UK's Committee on Climate Change memorably observed that annual reductions greater than 1% are historically associated with economic recession or upheaval.

Hence the conclusion from the respected analysts at the Tyndall Centre that a planned period of austerity and rapid decarbonisation is necessary in the US, EU and other wealthy nations, in order to compensate for continued economic growth and increasing emissions in the poorer nations. There is no longer the time for a gradual, evolutionary transition to low-carbon energy supplies, which could take another 2 or 3 decades to completely put in place. So we must deliberately seek an equitable reduction of energy and resource consumption, while adopting more directly redistributive economic strategies in place of the conventional pursuit of economic growth.

This presents a challenge, no doubt, to the failed assumptions of laissez-faire globalisation, and it points to the need for a paradigm shift in economic orthodoxy and a new theory of macro-economics beyond the obsession with GDP measurement, all of which is well discussed in the radical fringes of public debate. I would also add that the Tyndall Centre's analysis is again very conservative in its assumptions, based as it is on a 2°C and not a 1.5°C pathway, and only accounting for a 50% probability which is exceedingly low, as I remarked upon earlier. If we also account for the growth in emissions over the several years since they developed their scenario pathways, then the decarbonisation rates for wealthy nations may need to be significantly higher than even 10% per annum, perhaps in the range of 15% to 20%. The implications are sobering, to say the least.

What are some of these broader implications if continued economic growth worldwide is not viable due to environmental constraints alone, notwithstanding resource constraints and other ecological limits? If you believe in the creation of a world where everyone gets their fair share of the earth's resources, does this not imply some kind of convergence in living standards between and within all countries?

From an economists standpoint, one of the major implications of the research and analysis we've been discussing is that the assumption of most policymakers that carbon intensity can be reduced sufficiently to allow for a continued increase in production, or so-called 'green' or 'sustainable' growth, is highly refutable. The belief that we can decouple greenhouse gas emissions from economic growth in the longer term is by no means held up by the evidence, in which permanent and absolute decoupling has been shown to be rare, if not fictitious. Innumerable studies cite the phenomenon of the rebound effect, whereby efficiency gains tend to be reinvested in more growth and consumption, hence negating the purported benefits in decreasing emissions.

Furthermore, if we consider the fact that wealthy nations effectively export their emissions and production to other countries, then it paints a different picture entirely. Once you take full account of all consumptive-based emissions, including from international and aviation and shipping, then the level of decoupling for most countries is almost insignificant, especially if set against a rapidly shrinking global carbon budget. This altogether points to a highly contentious conclusion, but I think it's obvious to presume that we cannot continue to expand the world economy year on year, or universalise the current levels of affluence that are expected in wealthier industrialised nations, and yet still meet the carbon commitments set out in Paris. Whatever productivity gains are achieved through energy efficiency technologies and renewables, absolute reductions in emissions of the scale required also depends on a dramatic reduction in global energy consumption. And by implication, that depends on governments adopting new macro-economic policy goals that are no longer predicated on continuous GDP growth.

A lot of theoretical and modelling work has now been done around the concept of a steady state economy, but as you point out in the question, the real issue is how to achieve and manage the transition to equitable global sustainability. It's not only a question of how to fairly share the global emissions budget, or how to distribute the rights to pollute the atmosphere; there are also far larger, and even more difficult considerations around how the natural world should be used and shared. How can we create a world in which everyone gets their fair share of resources while we are already pushing against several key planetary boundaries, and the world population is rapidly growing? Ecological footprint analysis has made some interesting findings in this field, demonstrating how our combined demand for resources already exceeds the bio-capacity of the planet by 50 percent. We also know that it is the richest 20 percent of consumers who are appropriating the vast majority of global resources, and contributing by far the most to environmental degradation.

The ideal of the 'fair earth-share' may be rather quixotic in this regard, but it brings to life a very inconvenient truth -- that high-income countries may have to reduce their per capita ecological footprints by up to 80 percent, if anything close to a convergence in material living standards is to be achieved across the world without breaching environmental limits. Right now, of course, this visionary concept of a converging world is mainly the preserve of high-minded social scientists, considering that the world continues to diverge in terms of most indicators of wealth and inequality.

It appears that as an international community we do not want to face up to the immense implications of achieving a balanced distribution of world resources within the biophysical reality, particularly with regards to our national governance systems that were never built to manage trans-boundary problems on the basis of genuine cooperation and sharing. I would say it's clear that both the climate and broader ecological crises are compelling nations to rethink the entire model of ever-expanding global trade based on endless economic growth and our high impact, energy intensive and consumer-driven lifestyles. But the real question concerns how to actually initiate a voluntary transition towards more equal, participatory and ecologically resilient societies, regardless of all the thinking that's been done on the policies and tools needed for this enormous societal shift.

Let's return to this question in more depth later, and for now taking the discussion back to the Paris climate talks, what do you see as the main obstacles to achieving the kind of fair and ambitious multilateral regime that you outlined earlier?

The main obstacle is surely self-evident for any campaigner within the climate justice movement, in that the COP negotiations are dominated by powerful vested interests, while rich governments are politically captured by the fossil fuel lobby and corporate class. In December last year the Paris summit boasted an unprecedented level of corporate sponsorship, which was reflected within the conference halls by the renewed focus on market-based and technology-driven solutions like biomass energy carbon capture and storage. Carbon markets are now back on the table in a big way it seems, suggesting that governments still believe they can trade their way out of the climate crisis instead of committing to a drastic reduction in emissions in the short-term. The real solutions were never going to be part of the agreement, like immediately ending fossil fuel subsidies, transitioning to diversified agroecological food systems, relocalising our economies and planning a global shift to 100 percent renewable energies.

I think the contradiction at the heart of the Paris Agreement is apparent to most observers, in that the Convention employs a lot of nice language around 'deep reductions in global emissions' or 'sustainable patterns of consumption and production', yet it basically ignores the systemic political and economic roots of the environmental crisis. So while governments were negotiating a climate accord and pledging to accelerate the reduction of their country's emissions, they were also continuing to negotiate environmentally harmful trade deals, like the dark and devious Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). According to leaked documents, the European Union blocked all discussion in the Paris talks of any measures that may restrict international trade, and as we know the many plurilateral agreements being negotiated behind closed doors are geared towards a significant increase in fossil fuel imports and exports.

There is also a clear contradiction in that the UN climate process focusses only on the demand side of fossil fuel consumption, but pays no attention to its production. So it was unsurprising that the Paris Agreement said nothing about the immense spending on fossil fuel subsidies each year, which is now in the realm of $5 trillion. Nor is it a surprise that the whole idea of keeping fossil fuels in the ground was not even acknowledged in the final agreement, despite the huge amount of campaigning and public support around this issue. Pollution from international transportation is also entirely excluded from the agreement, which is inconceivable in light of how much the shipping and aviation industries are expected to contribute to global emissions in coming decades.

For the ordinary person of goodwill who tries to make sense of these byzantine climate negotiations, the one obvious conclusion should be that we cannot trust our heads of state whose agenda is overshadowed by what I describe as the forces of commercialisation. Just as we don't know what happens behind the closed doors of secretive trade deals like the TTIP, no-one on the street knows what is really discussed amid the corporate circus of the COP process. I often call these government leaders our politico-accountants, for as soon as they go home they will immediately sign more contracts for major polluting corporations whose interests they are invariably uphold.

To take our own government in the UK as an example, they signed up to the Paris Agreement with much fanfare, and on the very next day they announced sweeping cuts to renewable energy subsidies, and committed a U-turn by opening up new areas of the country to fracking, even under national parks and wildlife protection zones. President Obama also signed off an end to a 40-year ban on crude oil exports just days after the Paris climate accord was agreed, which was a massive give-away to the oil industry that will further exacerbate carbon emissions. So who can deny that these politico-accountants in our governments are completely overshadowed by the ideology of unbridled market forces, and hence they cannot be blithely trusted to act on our behalf with an issue as important as saving the planet?

In the face of these entrenched corporate forces and powerful vested interests, what can ordinary people do to try and steer government policy in the right direction?

This is the time when activists and engaged citizens must again, again and again organise massive demonstrations and direct actions to compel governments to shift towards zero carbon economies as an overriding priority. We need the public to come in as a whole and embrace the necessity of rapid social transformation, almost like a huge boycott of consumerism, of the very idea of business-as-usual. The inspiring protest activities we saw in Paris during the climate talks, regardless of President Holland's opportunistic ban on peaceful demonstrations, is exactly what we need to see -- although on a far, far larger scale in every city.

We should now be protesting continuously around the world, not just once or twice each year or only during the Conference of the Parties. Total cumulative emissions have risen at an unparalleled rate in the new millennium, and as just discussed it is naïve or foolish to believe that world leaders will take effective mitigation action without immense pressure from the global public. Let's also not forget what happened after the international stock market crash in 2008, when governments immediately put environmental issues on the shelf in order to bail out collapsing banks and resurrect the economy. What do we think will happen if there's another serious global financial crisis, as many leading analysts are predicting?

If we look holistically at the scale of environmental problems we face, it is clear that huge and constant demonstrations around the world are the only solution for reordering governmental priorities. It's not that we as the public are dependent on our governments -- actually the opposite is true, as governments are dependent on the present lack of public engagement so that they can continue to prioritise major corporate and financial interests. From another perspective, world leaders have actually played their part by coming together and agreeing the headline goal of a 1.5°C temperature limit; now it's up to the public to continue demonstrating every night and day until commensurate action is taken to achieve the necessary social, political, economic and technological transformations.

It's also notable that every big demonstration about the environment not only makes a noise that is heard by governments, but they help to inform the general public and create a wider awareness of the environmental emergency. It has a powerful effect. The media has an important role to play in educating the public in this regard, and if they were to constantly talk about the need for social transformation to avert a climate catastrophe, then we may see demonstrations around the world becoming monumental in the face of government inaction. Of course the mainstream media outlets rarely act in this way, with few exceptions -- such as the ground-breaking action by newspapers around the world to speak with a common voice prior to the Copenhagen conference in 2009, many printing a front page editorial that called upon governments to share the burden of fighting climate change on a more equitable basis.[1]

In general, however, the mainstream media has failed to fulfil its vital role by educating people about the very real extent and urgency of addressing the climate crisis. On the contrary, most of the media are too busy spreading false propaganda on behalf of their corporate and political benefactors, if they don't ignore the issue entirely. Again in the UK, for example, none of the tabloid newspapers -- those read by the majority of the public -- led with a front page story about the 'historic' climate deal in Paris on the day after it was agreed. Yet this is an issue that may determine the future survival of humanity, requiring fundamental systemic and lifestyle changes that will eventually require the cooperation and participation of everyone.

Over recent months and years, tens of thousands of people have participated in a global wave of actions to keep fossil fuels in the ground, with a concerted call for a just transition to a clean energy era. Do you see this resurgence of rallies, protests and civil disobedience as a sign that the public is waking up to the reality of the climate crisis, or is there a long way to go before we see the kind of broad-based social movements that you are envisioning?

Indeed on one hand, we have a climate deal that isn't truly ambitious enough. But on the other hand, we have a global public that isn't ambitious enough. For example, in September 2014 around 400,000 people gathered in the streets of New York City calling for bold action from governments to address the climate crisis, which was the largest climate march in US history. But there are more than 300 million people in America. So you might say that while 400,000 people were busy protesting, at the same time there were hundreds of millions of people who were busy consuming. The same can be said of the dozens of other countries where big climate marches have recently taken place, which remain relatively tiny in proportion to the population as a whole. In truth, the greatest danger for the environment is not only the polluting corporations or their beholden governments; it's also the complacency or sheer indifference of the public at large.

To be sure, there are many committed activists who campaign with maturity and intelligence about the need to keep fossil fuels in the ground, to switch to decentralised and renewable energy sources, to develop a more localised and ecologically-resilient economy, to protect the commons from corporate enclosures, and so on. But they are a comparatively small number of people trying to do a job that requires the backing of the whole population. They're effectively on their own trying to do the job for everyone else, which doesn't make any sense when you listen to the warnings from scientists who say we're heading for a climate catastrophe.

Those very few activists are doing what they can to save the world -- the rest are best described as consumer-citizens who leave the world's problems to other people and their governments. So we may observe that the government is overshadowed by the forces of commercialisation, while the consumer-citizen is overshadowed by their own complacency and indifference. Within this tiresome and depressing reality, it is understandable that many active people of goodwill feel jaded and overwhelmed in trying to fight for the greater good of all.

Environmental campaigners should be aware of another fact, however: it was in large part their activities and worldwide demonstrations that compelled world leaders to achieve a universal agreement in Paris, especially in light of the public outrage that arose after the failed climate deal in Copenhagen. Pope Francis's strong critique of inequality and overconsumption is also an important factor that has urged world leaders to acknowledge the people's voice. The Pope's counsel on the environment issue should be heeded very carefully by believers and agnostics alike, as reflected in his recent Encyclical letter which makes an effective case for sharing the world's resources in order to resolve the environmental crisis.

What the Pope essentially recognises is that we cannot combat our ecological problems unless we also combat the enormous discrepancies in living standards throughout the world, which calls for a sense of global solidarity and interdependency that is sadly lacking in human affairs. His teaching makes clear that the responsibility for transforming society lies not only with establishment politicians, who tend to be driven by powerful financial interests and generally lack a breadth of vision. The real responsibility lies with us all to overcome our social conditioning that sustains a profligate consumerist lifestyle, and instead to develop new attitudes to life that reject the materialistic mindset and the prevalent 'techno-economic paradigm'.[2] That can begin, I suggest, by joining with the millions of other people out there who stand for a simpler, saner and more equal world.

During the talks in Paris, many activists remarked on the immense gap between the urgent demands of civil society, and the reality of those 'politico-accountants', as you call them, who consistently put the interests of the rich and powerful before the interests of the most vulnerable, or indeed all of humanity. How do you see this gap lessening if we are going to successfully transition to a sustainable economy -- are you saying that civil society groups must unite with a single voice in order to generate the political will needed for a complete transition to renewable energy?

The broad vision we outlined for a fair climate deal is never going to succeed so long as those politico-accountants are holding the reigns in governments, and even if they do eventually accept such commonsensical proposals it will take a very long period of time. And time is what we do not have if we need to maintain a 350 parts per million [ppm] greenhouse gas concentration in the atmosphere, when we've already exceeded an alarming 400 ppm. It's clear from climate scientists that the next decade is critical for taking decisive action to limit global warming, but it appears that we've reached an impasse when you look at that seemingly unbridgeable gap between political 'realism' and the need for rapid systemic transformation.

A lot of people believe the way forward is for social movements, environmental and development NGOs, and all progressive civil society organisations to join together in a combined front to challenge governments to take the necessary action, and we've seen a lot of initiatives and manifestos towards that end, all of which come and go and generally amount to very little. Unfortunately, those initiatives will never work unless a huge majority of the public is backing these groups through massive protests and peaceful direct actions that are attended by people in literally their hundreds of millions, which is currently far from the case.

It may even be detrimental to the work of many NGOs if they were to pour all their energies into the fight for government action on tackling climate change, as there is so much injustice and suffering throughout the world that the divergent causes of these many organisations are critically needed at this time. As I see it, their work is on the same line of energy as the governments and multinational corporations, where one is exacerbating the wrong trends towards further commercialisation, social division and environmental destruction, while the NGOs pull in the other direction and attempt to ameliorate the resultant harms. It is verily one fight, but a fight which takes many different directions, so much so that all the NGOs cannot harmonise their collective efforts when they are too busy fighting in their own ways, and for their own particular causes.

So it is wrong thinking to believe that NGOs and civil society groups must collectively lead the way in the present context of widespread public apathy and inertia. It is even a complacent way for the ordinary citizen to look at the problem, when what we need is for the public as a whole to realise the gravity of the situation of global injustice and environmental degradation. Then the public will empower the NGOs until their collected voice becomes so loud that governments will be compelled to heed their advice, in which sense the backing of the public will symbolically represent the fact that NGOs are united in their diverse aims.

Footnotes:

[1] "At the deal's heart must be a settlement between the rich world and the developing world covering how the burden of fighting climate change will be divided -- and how we will share a newly precious resource: the trillion or so tonnes of carbon that we can emit before the mercury rises to dangerous levels." See the full editorial: Copenhagen climate change conference: 'Fourteen days to seal history's judgment on this generation', The Guardian, 7th December 2009.

[2] Encylical letter, Laudato si': On care for our common home, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, May 2015.

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