

On the road to (no)where? The SDGs at half-time

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In 2015 the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 but real change demands a green social contract.

‘I wanted to write a song that presented a resigned, even joyful look at doom,’ the Talking Heads singer David Byrne once [confessed](#) about the song in the title. Looking at [the many reports](#) on the unsatisfactory progress being made in addressing a raft of global mega-problems, the world is facing the emerging existential threats with an odd sense of calmness. This is despite a crisis dynamic [intensifying](#) year by year, including heatwaves, flood disasters and record droughts, as well as interrelated problems such as growing migration pressures, political conflicts and humanitarian emergencies.

[Surveys](#) indicate that citizens consider issues such as the climate crisis, increasing inequality and the fight against poverty and hunger to be urgent, and they generally support measures to address them. Political leaders in the global north and south seem however unwilling or unable finally to adopt the measures [demanded by countless scientists](#).

There is an accelerating summit carousel: in June it was climate finance in Paris, in August the ‘BRICS’ in South Africa, in September the G20 in India and the Sustainable Development Goals in New York ahead of the United Nations General Assembly. Yet the sincere efforts of individual politicians, such as the UN secretary-general, [António Guterres](#), to increase pressure on governments have yielded few tangible results. The coming summits—COP28 in December in Dubai and the UN Summit of the Future planned for September 2024—are unlikely to change this.

Political inertia

The contrast between the survey evidence of public concern and the stagnation in international politics suggests that the system disregards the interests of citizens and the evidence. This view is also conveyed by many scientists engaged in climate policy. The power of organised veto coalitions to hinder progress is often emphasised. Those familiar with contemporary politics will find it hard to disagree.

A further explanation of political inertia comes from research, particularly by [Lucas Chancel](#), showing that the wealthiest are [disproportionately responsible](#) for environmental and climate pollution. Since the rich also are in a better position to cope with the effects of the climate catastrophe in the future, their interest in climate protection is correspondingly low. [Excessive wealth](#) thus obstructs the necessary social-ecological transformation.

Both explanations are plausible but they do not tell the whole truth. Despite the fact that citizens are constantly exposed to what is known to spin-doctors as '[strategically necessary nonsense](#)'—mediatised distractions from real problems—one would ultimately expect that governments neglecting climate policies would eventually be voted out of power and replaced by more committed ones, at least in enlightened democratic societies.

This is however not what we observe. On the contrary, in many democracies political forces have come to power in recent years [attaching](#) little or no priority to climate issues or related matters, such as addressing inequality.

Time preference

In the scientific discussion, it is pointed out that—in addition to free-rider effects and co-ordination problems among countries—the temporality of the climate crisis prevents the necessary measures being taken. Because the consequences of today's inaction are only manifest in the long term, while election cycles are four to five years, less than what would be necessary gets done now. Procrastination rules and measures are postponed until further delay becomes directly life-threatening.

Such gloomy predictions are based on the assumption that people have a positive time preference, valuing consumption in the present more than in the future. Since populations consist of cohorts of different ages, the urgency of climate policy is perceived differently. Younger cohorts tend to prioritise the issue, as they will likely face the consequences given their statistical life expectancy. Older cohorts will however no longer experience the increasingly dramatic effects and therefore have little incentive to change lifestyles to which they have become attached. Rising social inequality exacerbates this.

Time preference can ultimately be attributed to the human condition: humans have finite existence and do not know when they will die. But it increases when people are primarily concerned with the daily struggle for survival and their future prospects are anyway poor. This can be challenged through social policies providing a [safety net](#) against existential threats but inequality, precarity and poverty have worsened over the last four decades. For the increasing number of people without a future, supporting changes in their lifestyle and consumption associated with progressive climate policies can seem much less rational than securing what little they already have.

Arguably, this is an important cause of the slowness of the [social-ecological transformation](#). Given the recent surge of populist and other climate-sceptical political forces, even [setbacks](#) have become more likely in the near future.

Attractive vision

With these geopolitical power dynamics and deepening polarisation, political conflicts will only intensify, crises will deepen and democratic systems will face significant challenges. We simply do not know where the road ahead will lead.

We can say that the social-ecological transition will not be enforced in time through enlightened technocracy. The turnaround will thus have to come from below, through social mobilisation and pressure. This can however only succeed if broad alliances among actors from different social groups can be forged, national and internationally.

The cement for such alliances can only be an attractive vision of a sustainable future society, based on a green social contract. To engage citizens in the necessary transformation, opportunities for democratic participation and co-decision are key. This includes experimenting with new forms of [deliberative democracy](#), such as citizens' assemblies or participatory urban planning.

Consolidated institutional innovations, such as strengthening the rights of nature and of future generations, should also be embraced. A UN '[Ministry for the Future](#)' is currently science fiction, but sooner rather than later we shall need to consider such innovations seriously, to address the crisis of political representation.