

# Climate, Consciousness and Social Change

By [Asoka Bandarage](#)

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*Climate change is a complex phenomenon involving unknown changes in planetary biophysical systems. However, there is now scientific consensus, that climate change is caused by anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions. Fossil fuel combustion is considered the primary cause of carbon emissions and climate change worldwide. Scientists warn that unless we are able to bring down carbon emissions rapidly to below 350 ppm in this century, the effects on planetary life will be catastrophic. We are at [400 ppm](#) (parts per million molecules) of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and are adding 2 ppm of carbon dioxide every year. [NASA](#) (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) reports that last month, April 2016, was the warmest month recorded and that 2016 is likely to be the hottest year ever, surpassing the previous annual record of 2015, by the largest historical margin.*

We are seeing the realities of [climate change](#): rising temperatures, declining Arctic sea ice, extreme weather events, heatwaves wildfires, floods, droughts, stronger storms and hurricanes and so on. The number and range of species on Earth are expected to decline greatly as temperatures continue to rise. Biodiversity is declining at a rate of more than [100 per million species](#) every year with as many as 30 to 50 percent of all species possibly headed toward [extinction](#) by mid-21st century. Due to [rising sea levels](#), five islands in the South Pacific have sunk. The Pacific [islands, Kiribati and Tuvalu](#) and the Maldives in the Indian Ocean are also preparing for extinction seeking to relocate their populations.

Given intimate connection of their livelihoods to their ecosystems, indigenous people and farming communities worldwide are the most [vulnerable](#) to climate change. According to UN estimates, there will be 1 billion '[climate refugees](#)', i.e. victims of disasters induced by climate change in the world by 2050. [India](#) is now experiencing the highest temperatures ever with a heatwave and drought which has left many people with little access to water. Bangladesh got pummeled again by heavy rains leaving two million people homeless. Sri Lanka which has experienced significant [rise in sea levels](#) in recent years just faced unprecedented [floods and landslides](#) which have left some 500,000 people homeless and over [200 families](#) buried in the landslides. Those most affected by climate change are those least responsible: the poor nations and communities of color that have historically provided the natural and human resources for the enrichment of the privileged classes in the industrialized nations. While responsibility for climate change is spread across the global society, the industrialized and rapidly industrializing countries account overwhelmingly for carbon emissions. In 2011, [China, the USA and the EU](#) account for more than 50% of total global carbon emissions: China, 28%, USA 16% and the EU 10%.

## Fossil Fuel Economy

The extraction, refining and distribution of fossil fuels is an enormous industry representing the engine for global economic production and growth. Five of the top six companies in the

Fortune Global 500 including BP, ExxonMobil and Shell are in the petroleum refining industry. As a July 2015 Report by the [Union of Concerned Scientists](#) points out, the fossil fuel industry's concentration is as remarkable as its size. Almost two thirds of the world's industrial carbon emissions over the past two and a half centuries is attributable to just 90 coal, oil, and natural gas companies which have produced and marketed fossil fuels and cement (which has very high carbon intensity). Almost 30 % of all industrial emissions since 1850 is traced to just 20 investor and state owned companies. Even more significantly, the Report by the [Union of Concerned Scientists](#) points out that

“...more than half of all industrial carbon emissions have been released into the atmosphere since 1988, after major fossil fuel companies indisputably knew about the harm their products were causing to the climate”.

Based on an eight month investigation of internal documents of the major fossil fuel corporations, the environmental publication, [Inside Climate News](#) has revealed that the fossil fuel companies, especially Exxon which was doing cutting-edge climate research, were already aware of the connection between fossil fuel combustion and global warming by the late 1970s. [Inside Climate News](#) argues that without revealing what their own scientists confirmed, the world's largest fossil fuel companies sought to ‘[manufacture uncertainty](#)’ and deceive the public about climate change. The companies put in place a massive campaign to fund climate denial scientists and organizations (many fake ‘astroturf’ groups) and lobby Congress to block climate action. Corporate funding, lobbying and the silence of the mainstream media have enabled polluting companies to project an environmentally friendly public image while at the same time contributing to derailing legislation for emissions reduction. Indeed, there is still no comprehensive [U.S. federal policy](#) to address climate change.

Notwithstanding growing demands for [corporate accountability](#) and government action, the U.S. and other governments are providing massive subsidies to companies for fossil fuel production and exploration. According to July 2014 estimates of the activist group, [Oil Change International](#), the U.S. fossil fuel subsidies were \$37.5 billion annually. Multilateral Banks including the World Bank which is backed by governments also provide billions of dollars each year to oil, gas and coal production internationally. According to the latest 2016 estimates of [Oil Change International](#), global fossil fuel subsidies are between \$775 to \$1 trillion annually. Since 2011 a number of proposals have been made in the U.S. Congress, such as, the ‘Big Oil Tax Subsidies Act’ and the ‘End Polluter Welfare Act’ to cut tax payer handouts to fossil fuel companies, But, none of them have passed.

The U.S. is estimated to spend anywhere from \$10.5 to \$500 billion annually to [militarily defend](#) its oil interests overseas. As US energy experts point out, military activity is a ‘[direct production component](#)’ of the trade and as ‘necessary for imports as are pipelines and supertankers’. Oil is an important driver of U.S. military force in the Persian Gulf, the political destabilization and loss of lives in the region being casualties of the relentless pursuit of oil. Heavy use of jet fuel for military activities is a major source of carbon emissions worldwide. [The Pentagon](#) is estimated to be the “largest institutional user of petroleum products and energy in general,” but is exempt from all international climate agreements.

The short-term costs of ending dependence on fossil fuels are significantly less compared to the staggering long-term environmental and social costs of accelerating climate change.

However, the international policy frameworks in place are far from adequate to address the urgency of the climate crisis.

### International Policy Frameworks

The [Kyoto Protocol](#), linked to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change adopted in 1997, though flawed and never fully implemented, committed parties to internationally binding emission reduction targets. Recognizing that developed countries are principally responsible for the high levels of greenhouse gas emissions, it placed a heavier burden on developed nations based on the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities.”

In the decades following the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol, conflicts intensified between the global North and South. Even minimal efforts to address climate change became derailed by international economic competition. Industrializing countries such as China, India, and Brazil wanted the [“rich, powerful and deeply fossil-fuel addicted”](#) countries in the Global North to take the lead in drastic emissions reductions allowing them room to industrialize and advance economically. Fearing loss of their economic edge, the Global North wanted to move away from the targets and obligations to which they had previously agreed. Lobbied heavily by the fossil fuel industry, The United States government never even ratified the Kyoto Protocol.

Pointing out that the ability of populations to adapt and mitigate against climate change are shaped by political and economic realities, civil society organizations mostly from the global South declared the [Bali Principles](#) of Climate Justice in 2002. It framed the climate crisis as a [political and ethical issue](#), <http://www.corpwatch.org/article.php?id=3748> not simply an environmental and physical phenomenon. The countries of the global South demanded the rich Northern nations to pay their [‘climate debt’](#), that is, compensation for their historically disproportionate emission of greenhouse gases which has contributed to extensive environmental and societal damage in poor countries.

The global South, however, is not a monolithic group. Emissions from developing nations now exceed those of developed countries, with China being the largest contributor of greenhouse gases. Heavy polluters like China and India have refused to take on specific reduction goals while the poorest and most vulnerable countries have demanded them. The lack of a coherent set of tactics and strategy towards climate justice has also created confusion and differences within the global civil society movement over climate action.

Given these on-going [contentions](#), the [U.S. China bilateral Climate Deal](#) of November 2014 has been welcomed as an important achievement by the two most polluting nation states. Unfortunately, however, this Deal is merely a statement of aspirational goals: it has no binding targets, no specific plans to cut emissions and no penalties for non-compliance. According to this Deal, China will not begin reducing emissions until as late as 2030. While the US agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 26%-28% below 2005 levels by 2025 is significant, it is not considered sufficient to reach the target of below 2 C increase in temperature by the end of the century. There is no guarantee that President Obama’s successor who will have to implement the deal will do so. Likewise, the multilateral [Paris Climate Agreement](#) adopted in December 2015 fails to provide the significant changes in energy use required for climate stabilization.

## Paris Climate Agreement

The Climate Treaty signed in Paris in December 2015 is hailed as a historic achievement in international consensus and a turning point in climate policy. Practically all countries in the world opted to sign agreeing to hold the increase in the global average temperature increase to 1.5 °C. 175 countries have already signed the Agreement which will go into effect in 2020. US Secretary of State John Kerry signed on behalf of the United States holding his little granddaughter in his arms.

Symbolism and rhetoric aside, the Paris Agreement, unlike the previous Kyoto Protocol, provides no detailed timetables or country-specific goals for emissions reduction. It leaves every country to decide its own cuts in pollution (so-called “Intended Nationally Determined Contributions”) according to its own criteria. It provides no clear, measurable targets, no accountability no legal obligations. Each country that ratifies the agreement will be required to set a target for emission reduction, but the amount will be voluntary. There will be neither a mechanism to force a country to set a target by a specific date nor enforcement measures if a set target is not met.

The Agreement was a victory for the United States given its opposition to mandatory emissions reduction targets and the Kyoto Protocol. It was, however, a failure for the smaller nations most vulnerable to the effects of climate change who wanted to include stricter emissions targets and enforcement mechanisms. Apparently, the U.S. gained their compliance through backdoor diplomacy and offers of international funding for climate adaptation. The United States also succeeded in ensuring that the Agreement was not legally binding and countries were not open to litigation for non-compliance of the Agreement.

[The Paris Agreement](#) will not be binding on its member states until 55 parties who produce over 55% of the world’s greenhouse gases ratify it. Thus far, only 17 countries, overwhelmingly vulnerable small island nations, have [ratified](#) the Agreement. There is doubt that given global economic competitiveness if some countries, especially high polluters, such as, China, the US, India, Brazil, Canada, Russia, Indonesia and Australia will do so. There is also no guarantee that the developed countries will honor the pledge to mobilize \$100 billion per year for climate financing for the poor countries starting in 2020.

The Paris Climate Agreement does not even mention fossil fuels let alone the need to leave 80% of it in the ground which many experts consider a requirement to mitigate climate change. It does not address the need to cut government fossil fuel subsidies, military expenditures, air travel, shipping, etc. as keys to global de-carbonization. Hardly anyone expects countries to do much for climate protection under this arrangement. No wonder fossil fuel companies were the [financial backers](#) of the [Paris Climate Conference](#) which was dominated by market based solutions to climate change, notably emissions trading.

## Carbon Trading

Carbon trading, which constitutes the bulk of emissions trading was introduced as the main mechanism for meeting emissions reduction targets under the Kyoto Protocol. Within this system, a country having more carbon emissions can purchase the ‘right’ to pollute more if it exceeds its cap by purchasing the permits of less polluting countries. As [Carbon Trade Watch](#) explains: “emissions trading partitions and privatizes the atmosphere and institutes the buying and selling of ‘permits to pollute’ just as any other international commodity”.

This strategy for commodification of emissions was pushed by the US in response to heavy corporate lobbying.

Critics argue that there have not been measurable reductions in carbon emissions attributable to the mechanisms established under the Kyoto Protocol. They point out that the two most important [carbon markets](#), the EU Emissions Trading System and the UN's Clean Development Mechanism have essentially failed. They argue that the market-based cap and trade system, designed to reduce carbon emissions has <http://www.carbontradewatch.org/downloads/publications/PathsBeyondParis-EN.pdf> actually [aggravated the problem](#) by giving unfair financial advantages to major polluters to continue polluting while putting the onus of climate protection and maintenance of carbon sinks on the poorer countries and inhibiting their economic development. Moreover, emissions trading takes attention away from the search for less complicated strategies, such as, a straightforward carbon tax on polluters and changes in patterns of economic production and energy use.

Despite these problems, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change still strongly supports carbon trading. International financial interests are now gearing up to expand carbon trading under the new Paris Agreement. They see a huge new market and business opportunity in carbon trading. [The World Bank](#) has established a Carbon Finance Unit to create an international system to price carbon. The World Bank President, Jim Yong Kim recently stated that there is an 'obvious consensus' among World Bank economists studying the problem, and that 'putting a price on carbon pollution is by far the most powerful and efficient way to reduce emissions' Christine Lagarde, the director of the [International Monetary Fund](#) has called carbon pricing the 'crown jewel' of efforts to mitigate climate change.

Many environmental justice activists, however, are deeply concerned about the possible effects of this approach motivated by profit. As scholar-activist Patrick Bond from South Africa states, carbon trading will lead to increasing '[financialization of nature](#)', the commodification of everything that can be seen as a carbon sink, especially forests but also agricultural land and even the ocean's capacity to sequester carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) for photosynthesis via algae'. [The Pope's June 2015 Encyclical](#) also voices the grave concerns that many people have over the status-quo's push for carbon trading:

"The strategy of buying and selling carbon credits can lead to a new form of speculation which would not help reduce the emission of polluting gases worldwide. This system seems to provide a quick and easy solution under the guise of a certain commitment to the environment, but in no way does it allow for the radical change which present circumstances require. Rather it may simply be a ploy which permits maintaining the excessive consumption of some countries and sectors."

The limits and failures of the dominant neoliberal approach requires that we look beyond the climate crisis at the broader trajectory of global political and economic development and its underpinning consciousness and values.

## Global Political Economy

The capitalist economy has advanced since the Industrial Revolution integrating the entire world within one interconnected market and technological system. Driven by private

accumulation and modern technology this economic system has now become a monolithic global “market fundamentalism.” Trade liberalization in the last few decades has led to a consolidation of corporate control in every sector of the global economy contributing to deepening economic inequality. A few large [transnational corporations](#) control greater shares of global wealth and resources and wield more power over people’s lives and the environment than most nation states. So-called, ‘world empires of the 21<sup>st</sup> century’, they have increasingly ‘captured’ governments and multilateral institutions compelling governments to adjust their policies to suit corporate interests, as in the case of the fossil fuel industry.

The capitalist system has brought forth tremendous advances in material development but without balanced human inner development. When corporate profit prevails over social, environmental and ethical criteria, production and marketing of goods and services with negative use values become common. Thus, defense has become the biggest sector of the global economy and fossil fuel extraction continues despite overwhelming evidence of its harm to life on the planet. Even when solutions are sought to problems created by market expansion, economic growth and the profit motive prevail as evident from the trade in carbon pollution poised to become a highly profitable financial sector.

As the market values seep into all areas of life, the environment and humanity increasingly become mere resources and outlets for production and consumption. (Figure 1.1 in Bandarage, [Sustainability and Well-Being](#)). The modern economy disrupts and dissects the natural integration of planetary life seeking instead to reintegrate, recreate and control human society and the environment through modern science, technology, and the market. The extension of this approach is clearly evident in current technological and market developments to redesign life and to create, what some scientists call a [‘post-nature’, ‘post-human’ world](#).

[Genetic modification](#) is projected to become the norm as more and more bioengineered transgenic fruits, vegetables, trees, and animals are released into the environment. According to some scientists, in 50 years there could be more lab-created forms of plant and animal life on the planet than those identified in nature. Is this, then, the technological and market based solution to species extinction resulting from climate change, deforestation and other human induced changes to the environment? Likewise, as earth-based indigenous people and communities in low lying coastal areas are extinguished from the face of the Earth, genetic engineering, robotics, artificial intelligence and other new types of cognitive tools are being utilized by some scientists to design a new human species increasingly [merged with technology](#) and more and more divorced from nature.

As the environment and humanity become mere resources and appendages of technology and the economy, we face an existential crisis of what it means to be human in nature. The visions of technological domination over nature fail to recognize that if the climate is not stabilized, we will unleash long term planetary forces far beyond our capacity to control. Human induced natural forces, such as droughts, wildfires and floods will once again come to dominate and radically curtail our activities, as they appear to be doing already. As [Karl Polyani](#) warned in *The Great Transformation*: “ To allow the market mechanism to be the sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment...would result in the demolition of society.”

The contemporary global crisis, however, is more than a crisis of capitalism, a competition

between capitalism and socialism, or a clash between modernity and tradition. Our challenge today is not merely political, but human and ecological—how we see and conduct ourselves personally and collectively toward both the environment and each other.

Technology and the market per se are not the problems. It is the underlying consciousness and the intention that determine their advancement. Is the motivation, profit for a few or the sustainability and well-being of all? At the root of the crisis we face is the disjuncture between the exponential growth of the profit-driven economy and the lack of an equivalent development in human consciousness, ethics and morality, compassion, generosity and wisdom.

### Psycho-Social Change

The environment—planet Earth—encompasses human society and the economy within its fold. The economy, the production and distribution of the material means of existence, is only one subsystem of society (Figure 1.3 in Bandarage, [Sustainability and Well-Being](#)). The environment has primacy over the human-created spheres of society and the economy. The natural world does not need humanity for its survival, but humanity cannot survive without the natural environment, the soil, water, air, sunlight, etc. The central idea of the ecological approach is that we are part of the Earth, not apart and separate from it. This does not negate the fact that in the process of adaptation and evolution humanity has made a great impact on the environment.

Today, “ego consciousness” and its ethics of individualism, domination, and competition is the driving force at the personal level as well as at the societal levels of nations, ethno-religious groups, and in how humans relate toward other animal and life forms. This myopic consciousness is leading to massive destruction of the environment, widening economic disparities and social conflicts. The alternative to ego consciousness, rooted in the psychology of fear and ‘self vs. other’ mentality, is a [universal consciousness](#) grounded in the truth of unity within diversity. This higher consciousness sees the other as an extension of the self and the well-being of the self and the other as inherently interdependent. It contributes to an ethic of partnership.

The challenge today is not to tear apart the dominant social and economic system through left or right political extremism but to shift to an ethical, balanced and sustainable path that upholds genuine climate protection, environmental sustainability, social justice and democracy. We need to shift to a path of socio-economic development grounded on compassion, courage and generosity instead of fear, anger and hatred. The dominant egoistic consciousness overlooks the capacity of the human mind for conscious transformation. Even [Charles Darwin](#) who popularized the idea of the survival of the fittest, paid homage to the importance of empathy and altruism in human evolution.

Instead of attempting to dominate and subsume society and the environment within the logic of unbridled economic growth (Figure 1.1 in Bandarage, [Sustainability and Well-Being](#)), the components of the economy—technology, property relations, the market, and finance—must be redesigned to serve the needs of environmental sustainability and human well-being. Rather than upholding and extending the extremist growth oriented system through new strategies, such as, carbon trading, the world’s economic structures must be transformed so that the exploitation of people and plunder of the Earth and the relentless pumping of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere are replaced by systems that honor environmental sustainability and social justice. The [Green Party](#) of the United States

succinctly sums up the kinds of changes required for a transition to renewable energy:

'...a complete reorientation of our national energy priorities, beginning with the elimination of subsidies for petroleum and coal energy, divestment from fossil-fuel companies, enactment of carbon fees and dividends to reflect the true cost of fossil fuel extraction, and phasing out of off-shore drilling, mountaintop removal mining, hydrofracking, and new pipeline construction. Ending dependence on fossil fuels requires massive investment in hybrid and electric vehicles, low-cost public transportation and new ecologically sound electricity transmission infrastructure. We must develop safe and clean energy technologies — excluding nuclear power, which has its own risks — and retrofit homes and buildings for energy efficiency...

There is plenty of evidence that [the shift](#) to solar, wind and other renewable sources of energy can be achieved soon. Leading scientists and organizations have put forward plans for transforming the United States from dependence on fossil fuels to [100 percent renewable energy](#) by 2050. [Germany](#), which is the fourth largest economy in the world has a plan in place to obtain 45% of its energy from renewable sources by 2030, showing that other countries too can make the shift.

Such changes do not come by themselves but through increased citizen participation. It is only by building social movements and strengthening political will that the required qualitative changes can be achieved. As the climate reporter and activist, [Johann Hari](#) puts it:

“At least we know now: scientific evidence and rationality are not going to be enough to persuade our leaders ...Nobody is going to sort this out – unless we, the population of the warming-gas countries, make them...The time for changing light bulbs and hoping for the best is over. It is time to take collective action....The cost of trashing the climate needs to be raised.’

It must be emphasized that while the shift to renewable energy is most urgent, it will not suffice for addressing the interrelated environmental and social crises. Ecological worldviews and environmentally progressive legislation have coexisted with social class, ethnic and gender oppression in modern times including in Nazi Germany. We have to be careful that eco-fascist views and movements do not gain ground as economic conditions deteriorate and social and environmental dislocations worsen around the world. Changes towards renewable energy has to be accompanied with changes in the control over resources and production and access of wider groups of people to economic opportunities. Bioregionalism, local entrepreneurship and other approaches to economic decentralization, economic diversity and democracy carry within them a critique of corporate monopoly capitalism and unsustainable technological growth. However, the strategies for broader social and economic restructuring require much greater exploration from a climate justice perspective.

## Social Movements

There is growing fear, anger, despair among people about the political and economic realities and the future of our planet. Some of it is undoubtedly misplaced and expressed in violent and destructive ways as ethno-religious fundamentalism and hatred towards others. There is also climate denial, climate fatigue, emotional paralysis and escapist behavior on the part of some people who are numbed by excessive exposure to the combined effects of



consumerism, technology and the modern media.

Still, there are also thousands of organizations and people all around the world engaged in positive nonviolent and collective action. [Indigenous people](#) have been at the forefront of struggles to protect Mother Earth from the very beginning of their encounter with European colonization. There are hundreds of indigenous environmental struggles around the world, from the US and Canada to Central and South America and Asia and Africa, resisting fossil fuel and other corporations from building pipelines, mining terminals and other controversial projects. Indigenous people have faced and continue to face backlash, often violent reprisals, in protecting their land and natural resources. For example, there has been a spate of killings of environmental activists in [Honduras](#) following the U.S. backed regime change there in 2009, which calls for international attention.

Climate consciousness and the global movement for climate protection have expanded greatly since the historic People's Climate March which brought hundreds of thousands of people to New York City in September 2014. President Obama's rejection of the [Keystone XL Pipeline](#) in November 2015 was a historic [victory](#) for the climate movement. One of the most catalytic global movements today is [350.org](#) which is focused on solving the climate crisis by reducing the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere to the 350 ppm threshold. The movement uses online campaigns, grassroots organizing, and mass public actions in nearly every country in the world to bring bottom-up pressure to cut down fossil fuel usage.

In the face of dramatic recent acceleration in the warming of the planet, the failure of the Paris Agreement to address divesting from fossil fuel and the support of governments for new fossil fuel projects, climate action is intensifying around the world. The small Himalayan kingdom of [Bhutan](#) has committed itself to a carbon neutral policy in its constitution setting an important global precedent. The largest global civil disobedience on behalf of the climate justice concluded in May 2016 after 12 days of action in six continents. Under the banner of ['Break Free from Fossil Fuel'](#),

'Tens of thousands of activists took to the streets, occupied mines, blocked rail lines, paddled in kayaks and held community meetings in 13 countries, pushing the boundaries of conventional protest to find new ways to demand coal, oil and gas stay in the ground'

As a Nigerian activist from the Health of Mother Earth Foundation put it, "Breaking free from fossil fuels is a vote for life and for the planet". The fossil fuel industry is being 'weakened by financial and political uncertainty' and the revelations that it knowingly hid the scientific evidence linking fossil fuels and global warming from the public for many decades. Currently, there are [investigations](#) underway in the US by the Attorney Generals of 17 states including [New York](#), California, Massachusetts and the Virgin Islands on Exxon's role in the alleged climate deception. The [US Department of Justice](#) has also requested the Federal Bureau of Investigation to determine if ExxonMobil violated federal laws by publicly denying climate change for decades.

Activists are confident that just as the struggle against the tobacco industry, which hid the connection between smoking and health from the public, was won, the people's struggle against the fossil fuel industry can also be victorious. We must believe that the larger goals of environmental sustainability and social justice can be achieved and that 'Another World is Possible' if we work together to 'Change the System, not the Climate'.

*Asoka Bandarage, Ph.D. is the author of Sustainability and Well-Being: The Middle Path to*

Environment, Society and the Economy (*Palgrave MacMillan, 2013*) and many other publications. She serves on the Board of the Interfaith Moral Action on Climate. This article is based on her presentation at the Embrace the Earth Conference in San Francisco in May 2016. [www.bandarage.com](http://www.bandarage.com)

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