

Time for transformation

Commemorating the environmental movement matters, but fulfilling its goals matters more.

Upon checking the official dates for international action for the environment this month, environmentalists should feel content by the level of commitment from the global community. On 5 June is World Environment Day, on 8 June is World Ocean Day and on 17 June is World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought. That's a busy agenda. In addition, this June we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the United Nations (UN) Conference on the Human Environment — the iconic event held in Stockholm in June 1972, and which was the first global conference to put the environment high on the agenda of world leaders. Although the anniversary is being remembered in many ways, earlier this month, the government of Sweden hosted Stockholm +50, an international meeting convened by the UN General Assembly reflecting on Stockholm 1972 with the aim of revamping the commitment of the international community to the environmental cause.

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Five decades have past since the first global environment conference and many have reported on the scant political progress to tackle the global environmental crisis to date, with a *Nature* editorial, for example, asking why politicians are ignoring the issue (*Nature* 606, 225; 2022). *Nature Sustainability* also reflects on why things have not gone so well.

Let's first take a step back. At the end of the 1972 conference, participants proclaimed that preserving the human environment was fundamental as it affects the well-being of people and economic development throughout the world. As the precursor to the idea of sustainable development, the final declaration of the 1972 Stockholm conference, with its 26 principles, set the scene for international and national engagement with environmental issues. We note that principle 17 required that national institutions should be entrusted with planning, managing and controlling

environmental resources, whereas principle 24 required that international protection and improvement of the environment should be handled in a cooperative spirit by all countries. In other words, it was clear then that both a strong institutional basis and full international cooperation would be needed to preserve the natural world. Scholars and practitioners have constantly lamented the lack of strong commitment by institutions and the unambitious cooperation efforts across the world on issues such as climate change, decline in biodiversity and ocean pollution, to name a few.

What's new today? At Stockholm +50, participants called for urgent environmental and economic transformation. The narrative about 'transformation' and 'transformative change' as part of the solution to our growing environmental problems has emerged more strongly over the past decade. Let's look at the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), for example. Since their launch in 2015, research on how to progress towards the SDGs has grown, and, increasingly, experts have called for transformations, such as *The World in 2050 initiative*, with its first report launched in 2018 that focused on transformations for the SDGs. Again, it doesn't look like fundamental transformations are on the way. Certainly, we see no strong evidence of political transformations to achieve the SDGs. Even more worryingly, there seems to be no evidence of the political effectiveness of the SDGs. In an article recently published in *Nature Sustainability*, Biermann and colleagues analysed more than 3,000 policy documents published over the period 2016–2021 and found no evidence of transformative impact on political systems as a result of the SDGs (F. Biermann et al. *Nat. Sustain.* <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-022-00909-5>; 2022).

Why are societies not progressing in the quest for a more sustainable path to prosperity, despite so many years of commitment? Many academics and thought leaders grappling with this question have traced the problem back to our capitalist socioeconomic model. Most economies nowadays are to some degree capitalist.

A capitalist system builds on the principle that individuals should be free to choose what is best for them, whether this refers to buying goods and services, choosing jobs or pursuing more lucrative ventures. So it

builds on individual freedom and rewards ingenuity. Such a system assumes that self-interest is the best driver of economic transactions, provided many transactions take place at the same time with each individual acting independently. Thus, it needs a market mechanism. And, of course, the market self-regulates if clear rules on private ownership are set and enforced, usually by the government. Therefore, it requires the government to oversee market functioning to a degree. This way of organizing society and the economy is appealing, it proposes that individuals are the master of their own destiny. And indeed, over time it has stimulated innovations, and generated a lot of cumulative wealth and enhanced well-being across cities, regions and nations worldwide. However, the same system has utterly failed on at least two major counts: wealth distribution, and accounting for most of the natural world and the extent to which we depend on it. Hence, socioeconomic inequalities and environmental crises have proliferated. There is no appeal in poverty and environmental degradation that results from our own actions, because ultimately the consequences of poverty and environmental degradation will be borne by all of us. Some are calling for a new socioeconomic order, others are proposing that capitalism can and should be fixed. And there are many more positions on this matter. This is an important debate and we at *Nature Sustainability* are ready to highlight it further through our pages.

Capitalism is the result of evolving Western values, culture and history, including Europe's colonial past, and it is a shared understanding of such context, beyond academia, that will help pave the way for transformation. Whether it is changing capitalism or ditching it, it is an awareness of its roots and its social and environmental implications that needs to be at the fore. Such an awareness will help us to transform our future by asking different things of politicians and holding them to account, by aspiring to achieve betterment and satisfaction without waste, and by accepting that we are a part of nature, allowing future generations to enjoy a good life, one that is really worth living. □

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