

# A New ethics for a sustainable planet

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Viewing the transnational challenge of climate change through the narrow lens of nationalism will only spell disaster

Brazil's Amazon forests are ablaze with dozens of fires, most of them set intentionally by loggers and others seeking greater access to forest land. How long the fires can continue is unclear. But at this scale, they are paving the way for a global climate catastrophe. While European leaders and civil society in many places are organising protests to oppose policies that encourage the fires, the Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has stated that they are an internal matter and that they were actually started by the very non-governmental organisations who are now shouting "fire".

The American President Donald Trump has withdrawn from the Paris Climate Agreement stating that it is against the national interests of the U.S. Across the Atlantic, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, a vocal critic of European integration, has spoken from both sides of his mouth on climate change, receiving funding from climate science denial groups while saying that he would lobby the U.S. to take climate change more seriously. Meanwhile, many cities in Europe and elsewhere have seen high temperatures never before experienced. Heat waves have also accelerated melting of glaciers in Greenland at a rate that was not anticipated by scientific models until much later this century.

The burning of the world's largest forest reserves, the withdrawal of the world's leading polluter from a major international treaty and the U.K.'s isolationist policies may appear to be the triumph of nationalist ideology. But these actions have consequences that far transcend national boundaries and impact all creatures that share life on the planet.

While energy and transport are mainly responsible for the accumulation of greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the atmosphere, changes in land use patterns too have made significant contributions. Deforestation, industrial agricultural systems and desertification are major drivers of climate change. Agriculture, forestry and other land use activities accounted for a little less than a quarter (23%) of the total net anthropogenic emissions of GHGs between 2007-2016.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recently brought out a special report on Climate Change and Land that covers desertification, land degradation, sustainable land management, food security and greenhouse gas fluxes in terrestrial ecosystems. Very wide in its scope, the report makes it clear that unless land is managed in a sustainable manner, the diminishing chance that humanity will survive climate change will become smaller still.

## *Land management*

Land is part and parcel of people's lives. It provides food, water, livelihoods, biodiversity and a range of other benefits from its ecosystems. Land use is indeed interlocked with several aspects of life on earth. For example, decades of poor land management in the agricultural system are coming back to haunt us. Soils have become depleted with heavy use of chemicals, farms have few or no friendly insects, monoculture has led to a reduction in the use of indigenous crop varieties with useful characteristics, groundwater is depleted and polluted farm runoffs are contributing to contaminated water bodies while destroying biodiversity. We have created a system that no longer supports agricultural households, and the stresses have led to farmer suicides.

Managing land better for farming would entail implementing more sustainable agricultural practices. It would mean, for instance, reducing chemical input drastically, and taking the practice of food production closer to natural methods of agroecology, as these would reduce emissions and enhance resilience to warming. The report calls for avoiding conversion of grassland to cropland, bringing in equitable management of water in agriculture, crop diversification, agroforestry and investment in local and indigenous seed varieties that can withstand higher temperatures. It also recommends practices that increase soil carbon and reduce salinisation.

Establishing sustainable food systems means reducing food waste, which is estimated to be a quarter of the food produced. It also necessitates eating locally grown food and cutting meat consumption. Alongside these changes, it is important to put an end to deforestation, while conserving mangroves, peatland and other wetlands.

To make these significant changes and reduce inequality and poverty, land use policy should incorporate better access to markets for small and marginal farmers, empower women farmers, expand agricultural services and strengthen land tenure systems. Sustainable land management can reduce multiple stressors on ecosystems and societies. It will also help societies adapt better to warmer climates and reduce their greenhouse gas emissions.

**Fresh template needed**

In thinking about how to address the transnational challenges of climate change and land, the narrow lens of nationalism is no longer serving us. We need a new planetary ethics that supports alternative systems for the future, for a sustainable earth. It is one that cultivates the growth of ecological sensibilities, supports pluralism, enhances quality of life, shifts values away from consumerism and creates new identities and cultures that transcend conventional boundaries.

A plea for such values is not new, and there have been successful civil society movements that have transcended borders, for example, La Via Campesina, The Transition Network, and Ecoregionalism. More recently, Fridays for Future and Fossil Fuel Divestment are part of such evolving sensibilities. How we move forward with these successes to create a sense of solidarity across boundaries, instead of building fortress worlds, will contribute to the path we build.

In the Great Transition Initiative, Paul Raskin has said that seeing our place as part of the web of life, instead of at its centre, requires a Copernican shift in world views. Just as Copernicus changed the perception of the earth from the centre of the universe to being one among many planets, so too will our sensibilities have to shift. If we fail to see our place as being part of the planet, we may well go down with it.

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