

EDITORIAL

Following a recent panel discussion on climate issues, a participant asked a question that was clearly not intended to be a confrontation: What specific actions should we take now to avoid the much-trumpeted future dangers? Our attempt to answer that question in the same non-confrontational way raised three primary points:

First, discussions on addressing the climate-change issue are rarely specific – more often than not, they merely amount to a call on legislators and officials (*i.e.*, someone else) to “do something about climate” or on occasion to “keep warming below 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels”. Relatively few call for particular action, identify a pathway or even define factors that can serve as current targets or as indicators that we are headed in the right or wrong direction. There is a great need for answers to basic questions such as: How is the 1.5°C measured? and What was the baseline temperature – that is, the global temperature at “pre-industrial levels”? We have seen weather charts that show that the actual global temperature by year or by month fluctuates wildly on both broad and narrow scales from year to year, and has done so for many thousands of years. Despite this, and the evidence of our own recent memory, the news media often tend to re-characterise every major weather or ecosystemic event or reading as the hottest, coldest or most dramatic of its kind on record. Thus, determining whether a climate change catastrophe is coming is clearly not a simple matter of checking the barometer.

The second point relates to linking actions to their intended effects. Most commonly, when pressed to name an action to avert climate change disaster, the offered answer involves a call for the elimination (or a drastic reduction) of all use of fossil fuels. Although a specific action, this is one with potentially huge, but currently non-specific costs, no clear plan for implementation and an unconfirmed link to the benefits that are supposed to result. What we know for certain is that we can reduce emissions from mechanisms that burn fossil fuels. Since the 1970s, we have been able to develop emission-control legislation, regulatory frameworks, and implementation programmes which, when properly enforced, have a direct and proven impact on controlling low-altitude air pollution (urban smog). Recalling these benefits, which we environmentalists achieved in the late 20th century, we cannot help noting that they are declining as air pollution regulations are relaxed and their enforcement declines. This causes us to wonder why we are spending so much time crusading against climate change, while not undertaking (or even naming) a concrete action with clear targets that we believe will help.

This leads inevitably to a third point – Shouldn't we be pressuring our governments to reinstitute those air pollution control measures that we know are effective and to increase their effectiveness, and to take added steps to increase their effectiveness and further reducing air emissions? Unlike elimination of all use of fossil fuels at a time when alternatives are limited and the costs of such a decision astronomical, expending our efforts to return to strictly enforced rational emission controls is specific, measurable, achievable and rational action to which a clear time-limit could be attached. That is, it is SMART. Will it alone achieve the climate-change goals? Maybe not, but it will probably help, while also provably enhancing atmospheric conditions and improving human and animal health. Moreover, it is a concrete action we can take now, without waiting for a resolution to the international wrangling over what “climate change” means and what can be done about it; or waiting until an alternative to fossil fuels is within practical and economically sound reach

It is clearly time for environmental and social action. Around the world, the topic of climate change has galvanised at least one generation. At present, this effort bears all the earmarks of a crusade – a highly motivated army inspired to take action, but not focused on specific targets – rather on the need to prove their commitment. Collectively, we are an enormous global mob with this mind-set and a desire to acquire the kind of scars that can prove our heroism in support of an undefined commitment to alleviating climate change. As such we are just like the soldiers in the crusades – almost literally *begging* to be manipulated. So long as we don't know what action to take, anyone with an ulterior motive can steer us to virtually any particular target, claiming it must be conquered to avert climate change disaster.

It's time to get specific. If we cannot know with certainty how the global climate will react to a particular change, let's focus on some immediate and known beneficial action that we believe can make a difference. The future depends not on how well we harangue our leaders (most of whom have no more climate knowledge than we do), but on action. Don't tweet, start a blog, click "like" or post a comment. Learn about the issue, then find something that you know can make a difference and work to make it happen.

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