

FOCUS ON CLIMATE CHANGE IN 2019: WHAT MOTIVATES CLIMATE CHANGE ACTIVISM?

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 Analysis

Mankind has always lived on this planet earth and enjoyed its abundant resources to their hearts' content, but the idea that the earth is a finite planet threatened by our very own activities has only received a proper attention since the late 1960s. Since then efforts have been gradually intensified to ensure that the worst would not come, so that this planet is protected and preserved for future generations. Despite the various campaigns held to raise awareness about the upcoming crisis, results still indicate that we are losing the fight. Global emissions are reaching record levels, evident in the fact that the last four years were the hottest world temperature on record while winter temperatures in the Arctic have risen by 3 degrees since 1990 according to the United Nations Climate Action. The reaction to this dilemma is ironically two-folds; more activists are stepping up their pro-

climate action campaigns while sceptics are also increasingly becoming more cynical and in denial to the crystal clear facts.

On September 20th young climate activists delivered a strong message about how they care about their future and the future of the earth. Inspired by Swedish teen activist Greta Thunberg, the youths staged a global climate strike and threatened world leaders that their inaction on climate change would have grave consequences, beginning with being voted out of Office. Greta Thunberg had started a school strike on climate in August 2018 outside the Swedish Parliament. It galvanized into regular Friday demonstrations by school-going children to show awareness about climate change and to remind the leaders and elders to do more to ameliorate the climate crisis. These children



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believe that they have to take centre stage in this fight because they would be the ones who would suffer more and longer if the environment deteriorates. They fear for what would become of the earth.

But not everyone appears to notice about the strikes or about the reasons behind them. Aside from scepticism about the crisis, there is also the increasing politicization of climate change. Identity and climate change are more intertwined than is covertly expressed. Understanding the course of action on climate change thus necessitates a study of the values and motivations of those campaigning about it. Disagreements on difficult issues like climate change may not be easily allayed and the best outcome may not be winning the debate (for this could be hardly attained, especially where uncertainty reigns) but instituting processes that more people can agree upon to guide all through an outcome that could be welcomed by the majority. This is a challenge, but not impossible to achieve. Studying people's values is a vital effort towards compromise to bear fruit. Some people favour radical solutions for fear that postponing action may lead to devastating and irreversible impacts. On the other hand, taking immediate action might actually harm the even earth more due to lack of studies concerning the actions taken. The best course of action in our midst is continued dialogue and deliberation in order to at least arrive at a middle ground. After all we are beginning to experience that certain agents hitherto considered detrimental might metamorphose into means towards the goal we all seek. One such agent is capitalism.

Capitalism, which at first seemed an enemy of the climate, has changed face, this time being fronted as the planet's best friend. In 2010, coal supplied nearly half of America's power and was estimated to grow even further. Renewable energy was not counted as a reliable option. Yet, just a few years down the road, and in a remarkable turnaround, this year, for the very first time, renewable energy supplied more power to America's grid than coal. Wind and

solar has become the cheapest forms of power in at least two-thirds of the world, Battery prices have fallen 84 % in less than a decade according to a report by Bloomberg. Why? It is because renewable energy is now more profitable in most of the world. From Europe to China, solar and wind plants are getting ahead of unsubsidized fossil-fuel plants. It appears that it is profit, not good-will, that is driving progress that had seemed to be out of range just a decade ago.

In the developing world, coal still dominates. China, despite its investments in renewable energy is still the biggest coal consumer. Indonesia is projected to nearly double its coal usage in the next 25 years. This divide highlights a dilemma that is yet to be effectively resolved. Developed countries can afford to transform their energy sources, but for developing countries their choice is rather limited. The developing world may still see it as their right to harness nature more to spur economic growth and bridge their development gaps. These developed countries, they might say, are already developed, have the capacity to manoeuvre, and are largely to blame for the crisis any way. Why and how can we (developing countries) be expected to forego the same opportunities to harness nature for the benefit of our people?

A solution to this conundrum was devised in form of carbon offsets. The idea is that the developed world, with her wealth resources should subsidize developing countries' efforts to sustain the environment. The objective of carbon offset is to provide extra income to motivate continued sustainability. The developing world provides her untapped resources such as forests with a promise to keep it intact. For this sacrifice, monetary and other resources are extended by the developed countries. This system appears rational, and a win-win solution. Take for instance the arrangement announced at the Climate Action Summit in New York. The Central African Forest Initiative (CAFI) announced last week that Gabon would be paid US\$150 million in international funds to preserve its forests. Norway, the leading country,

will extend the funds over a period of ten years to reduce greenhouse emissions. Gabon boasts of up to 80% of its land mass covered with forests. It is envisaged that the fund will help the country maintain 98% of the forests.

Yet, this system has its own limitations. It is difficult to have an accurate valuation of the forestry resources and the sacrifice that is endured by the fund recipient countries. Secondly, there is debate on whether it is enough for the industrialised countries to continue their emissions as long as they offset the greenhouse gasses somewhere else on the planet.

At the same summit the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres identified priority areas to curb greenhouse gas emissions and increase global action on adaptation and resilience. These included mobilizing resources from public and private sources to foster decarbonisation, accelerating the shift away from fossil fuels towards renewable energy, transforming industries such as oil and gas, advancing mitigation at urban and local levels, advancing global efforts to manage impacts of climate change, to generate momentum for the Paris Agreement, to mobilize people especially the youths worldwide to take action on climate change, and to advance commitments made to protect vulnerable people. The summit was to later witness a litany of promises and pledges from world leaders except most noticeably, US President Donald Trump.

Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan informed delegates that the country had planted 4 billion trees in the past 17 years and is set to plant 11 million trees in a day on November 11. He further revealed that Turkey had reduced plastic bag consumption by 75 %, and initiated a zero-waste campaign that has so far been taken on by 18,750 public institutions. The president

acknowledged, “Turkey is well aware that fighting climate change requires taking local action,” but “Climate change is a global issue whose solutions require regional, international cooperation”. Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro was not convinced that global action, embodied by fervent commentary around the world is the way to go and chastised leaders who blamed him over the country’s management of the Amazon forest fires. “It is a fallacy to say that the Amazon

is a heritage of humankind, and it is a misconception, as scientists claim, to say that our forest is the lungs of the world”. For the Brazilian president, the forest is a matter of Brazil, not the whole world.

This debate indicates the larger involvement of political Identity in climate change. Over the recent past, the majority of environmental activists identify themselves as progressive liberals. On the other hand, conservatives especially Republicans in the United States have also generally galvanized themselves as sceptics, fighting to protect their interests against the

environmentalists whom they see as imposing their identity beliefs on others and radicalism. Climate change in thus becomes entangled in the divisive partisan politics. This could partly explain Trump’s unilateral withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and the United States’ absence on the climate change action front. Trump decided not to take part at the UN Climate Action Summit as other world leaders made pledges and action plans to solve the climate change crisis.

At an individual level, apart from the broader identity that one attaches him/herself, there are two main motivations that guide their practical considerations on the environment. These are endogenous motivations and exogenous motivations.

*Countries
in Western
Europe have
shown that
it is possible
to protect the
environment
without
sacrificing
the economic
gains entirely.*

Endogenous motivations

Some people are motivated to act on climate change because of reasons that can best be described as endogenous. They are inspired to act because of reasons such as personal interest in the field, fear for what the future could be and love for their family among others. These are often independent motivations forged not from the outside but from within the person's interests.

Many of them studied courses related to energy and the environment and realized that in order to do justice to their education they had to work in the sector. Some did this because they hold the knowledge they acquired in high esteem while others found it easier to join the climate field. Nonetheless, here education is seen as the main motivating factor. In our research conducted to study the motivations of climate actors, respondents from both Portugal and Turkey often mentioned education as a reason for their involvement in the issue of climate change when asked to give a background of their participation.¹ In other cases, however, people choose to go beyond what they were taught in school and become motivated by other factors. Some value the principle of deliberation on the climate issues, and are even ready to drop convictions they had acquired from education. This deliberation has lately centered about whom to blame for the environmental crisis. A sizeable number of people think that humans are responsible for climate change, while the 'Anthropocene', contrasted by others, believe that the role of humans is very limited or

negligible in the broader sense. The proponents of the theory of the Anthropocene say that recent actions of human have worsened the environment and fear that if things continue the future will be bleak.

Exogenous motivations

The source of motivation in this category is external to the actor or her immediate others like children and relatives. It does not mean however that the strength of motivation is questioned, far from it. An externally generated motivation can still be the key reason for action surpassing all others in value attached.

Developments in the European Union and its policies have been a major guiding principle for climate change actions. Many respondents looked at other countries in Europe such as Germany as inspiration. There is a general belief that these countries have achieved tremendously in respect to streamlining action necessary to ensure a low carbon economy. Countries in Western Europe have shown that it is possible to protect the environment without sacrificing the economic gains entirely.

This is crucial because in most countries wealth accumulation is still very important as a factor that very few countries can be willing to sacrifice. Thus, when the actors see how Western Europe manages to sustain the balance between ecology and economics, they may feel attracted and tempted to emulate the same. Or perhaps they may be cajoled into emulation. Either way, climate and the question of what to do about it linger to the fore of the agenda.

Endnotes

¹ "Değişen Değerler ve öncelikler: Portekiz ve Türkiye'deki Sanayicilerde Ekolojik Akıl Yürütme ve Karar Verme," Unpublished TUBITAK Project, ARDEB, SOBAG. 115K370.