Tackling the climate emergency

Simon Maxwell
Simon Maxwell is a development economist, who has worked internationally since 1970. He worked for ten years overseas, in Kenya, India and Bolivia, then for fifteen years at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, latterly as Programme Manager for Poverty, Food Security and the Environment. In 1997, Simon became Director of the Overseas Development Institute, the UK's leading independent think-tank on international development and humanitarian issues. In 2009, he became a Senior Research Associate of the ODI. Since leaving ODI, he has been, inter alia, Executive Chair of the Climate and Development Knowledge Network, Chair of the European Think Tanks Group and a Specialist Adviser to the Select Committee on International Development of the UK Parliament. From 2001 to 2005, Simon was President of the Development Studies Association of the UK and Ireland. In 2007, he was made a CBE, for services to international development.

'Für Mensch und Umwelt'

It is easy to be pessimistic about the slow pace of action to tackle climate change: had emission reductions begun in 2010, a reduction of 2% a year would have been enough to limit warming to 2 degrees; because they did not, reductions of 3% p.a. are now required, or an unprecedented 7% p.a. if the 1.5 degree warming target is to be reached. Meanwhile, the World Meteorological Organisation documents rising concentrations of greenhouse gases, temperatures and sea levels, and a proliferation of extreme weather events, including floods, drought, heatwaves, wild fires and cyclones.[1]

On the other hand, the public mood has shifted. A Eurobarometer survey in the 27 Member States of the EU shows that climate change was ranked top in a list of the biggest problems facing the world, with three quarters of respondents saying that climate change is a 'very serious problem'. In the UK, similarly, eight in ten people (80%) in March 2021 were either very concerned (33%) or fairly concerned (47%) about climate

1 For an overview of climate issues, see the annual UN Environment Emissions Gap Report.

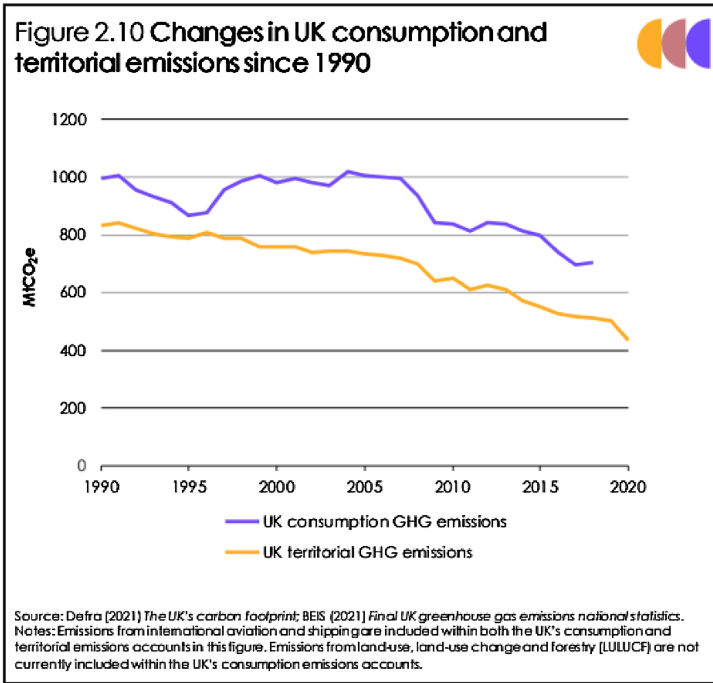
https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748930099-101, am 08.08.2024, 12:10:41
Open Access – BY-SA - https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/agb

change. In the US, two thirds believe that climate change is an urgent problem.

Climate pledges and plans are also multiplying. Over 130 countries have committed to reaching net zero by mid-century, or are considering doing so, alongside non-state actors like cities and private sector actors making similar commitments. Most countries issued new pledges for 2030 in the run-up to the Glasgow Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in November 2021, including the EU (a 55% cut compared to 1990) and the UK (a 78% cut compared to 1990, to be achieved by 2035). Action lags behind pledges in many cases (e.g. in the UK), but it is being ramped up, for example in the EU by the 'fit-for-55' package.

Decarbonisation is evident in some advanced economies. Careful analysis of UK data shows, for example, that both territorial and consumption emissions are now falling (Figure 1).

Figure 1: UK territorial and consumption emissions



Source: Climate Change Committee, 2021: 85.

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748930099-101, am 08.08.2024, 12:10:41
Open Access – BY-SA – https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/agb

It is best not to become over-excited. But what is it that drives system change? That question was explored by the German Advisory Council on Global Change, in a report entitled ‘World in Transition: A Social Contract for Sustainability’ (WBGU 2011). The report was published in 2011, at which time Dirk Messner was Vice-Chair. It ranged widely in history and theory, far beyond the confines of climate policy, drawing lessons from the Neolithic and the Industrial Revolution, from thinkers like Kant and Polanyi and from all regions of the world. A key conclusion:

> “Historical analyses show that a ‘concurrence of multiple change’ … can trigger historic waves and comprehensive transformations. The social dynamics for a change in the direction of climate protection must therefore be created through a combination of measures at different levels:
>
> - It is knowledge-based, based on a joint vision and guided by the precautionary principle.
> - It relies heavily on the change agents, who can test and advance the options for leaving behind an economy reliant on the use of fossil resources …
> - It needs a proactive state to allow the transformation process to develop into a certain direction by providing the relevant framework, by setting the course for structural change and by guaranteeing the implementation of climate-friendly innovations …
> - It also counts on the cooperation of the international community and the establishment of global governance structures as the indispensable driving force …” (WBGU 2011: 5–6).

The last chapter of the report deals specifically with the role of the knowledge society in transformation. It describes a research and education agenda in great detail and concludes with this call to arms:

> ‘“A comprehensive transformation towards a low-carbon, sustainable society places great demands on the development, diffusion, legitimation and application of knowledge …” (WBGU 2011: 357).

Put these elements together, and a light is thrown on Dirk Messner’s exceptional career: as a researcher, communicator, educator, policy adviser and network-builder of global renown, a change-maker outside the state apparatus, but also as Director of the German Environment Agency, an agent of the participatory, proactive state. A decade on from the WBGU report, he can be seen as an embodiment of its practical philosophy –

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748930099-101, am 08.08.2024, 12:10:41
Open Access – (cc) BY-SA – https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/agb

and of the mission of the German Environment Agency, 'Für Mensch und Umwelt', for people and the environment.

What's next: A (global) green new deal

The WBGU report was written before the signature of the Paris Agreement and the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals, both in 2015. Its later reports have made those connections. Dirk Messner was a member until the end of 2019. He also contributed to practical work on the climate agenda, at the German Development Institute, at the United Nations University and through his involvement with the UN's Sustainable Development Solutions Network.

A frequent framing of an inclusive, people-focused approach to tackling climate change has been a Green New Deal; and when developing countries are included, a Global Green New Deal. The term 'Green New Deal' goes back to the publication of a report by the New Economics Foundation in 2008. The term 'Global Green New Deal' has been in use since early 2009, when UNEP published a report by Edward Barbier entitled 'Re-thinking the Economic Recovery: a Global Green New Deal'.

Recent books on a Green New Deal include those by Ann Pettifor (2019) and Naomi Klein (2019). The EU has adopted the idea of a 'Green Deal', with three overarching objectives: no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050; economic growth decoupled from resource use; and no person and no place left behind.

The idea of a Global Green New Deal has been promoted recently, for example by Joseph Stiglitz in an article in 2019 and as the main theme of UNCTAD's Trade and Development Report for 2019. The Global Green New Deal is also a chapter heading in Gordon Brown's new book (Brown 2021). The core ideas are common currency among a group of activist think tanks committed to research about and advocacy for a 'new economy'.

This sounds promising, but there are three issues, with Global Green New Deal and wider new deal proposals.

First, the term 'New Deal' is used advisedly by the authors cited, laying claim to the stardust associated with President Roosevelt's wide-ranging New Deal in the 1930s – but sometimes failing to acknowledge the difficulties involved in delivering that package. There is an element of virtue signalling involved.

Second, closer examination reveals that 'Green New Deal' proposals are far from consistent in their content. Sometimes, this reflects circumstances

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748930099-101, am 08.08.2024, 12:10:41
Open Access – BY-SA – https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/agb

of time or place, but there are also ideological differences. For example, a comparison of the proposals submitted to Congress by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez with those adopted by the UK Labour Party showed quite big differences on issues like nationalisation of public utilities, guaranteed minimum income and trade policy.

The third issue is the treatment of the 'global'. The emphasis is often on transfer of technology to developing countries, along with the resources to spread access to renewable energy, among other things. Funding for adaptation is also seen as critical.

In our work with the Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN), we tried to expand the optic, to focus not just on mitigation and adaptation but more widely on 'climate compatible development'. We defined this as development that "minimises the harm caused by climate impacts, while maximising the many human development opportunities presented by a low emissions, more resilient, future" (Mitchell & Maxwell 2010: 1). This meant countries having a single, climate-compatible and (we would now say) SDG-compliant development plan, linking economic, social and environmental issues.

A genuine 'global' green new deal would embed support for climate compatible development plans using all the instruments available: aid and private sector finance, research and technology partnerships, favourable trade rules, migration and security support, and so on. The best way to think this through would be if developing countries were to produce ambitious conditional and unconditional pledges or Nationally Determined Contributions to the UNFCCC.

Lessons

It is commonly said that change happens when three things come together: first, leadership; second, civil society action; and third, the power of a good idea. Take those in reverse order.

A first lesson is that knowledge workers need to roll their sleeves up. There are very active debates on all the topics listed above, and also others: a universal basic income; a shorter working week; wealth taxes; border carbon adjustments, reform of monetary policy; degrowth …

Sometimes debates are designed to shift the 'Overton Window', creating a conversation and political possibilities, which gives politicians permission to pursue new agendas. However, these are serious topics which require serious analysis, including experimentation with and evaluation of ideas

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748930099-101, am 08.08.2024, 12:10:41
Open Access – (cc) BY-SA – https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/agb

like a basic minimum income and a shorter working week. A key task for researchers is to examine the sequencing and financing of proposals.

A second lesson is the importance of engaging with, and perhaps hoping to influence, the increasingly active and professional civil society movement. This is about talking to movements like the Fridays for Future and the School Strike Movement or Extinction Rebellion, especially about the work they do to shift the Overton Window, but also their allies in new civil society alliances, covering multiple issues. An example of the latter is Crack the Crises, an alliance supported by over 70 organisations in the UK and focused on the COVID injustice, climate and nature crises as inextricably linked.

It is also necessary to understand the methods and approaches of campaigners. Duncan Green has written a playbook for social activists, exploring the interaction between systems and power. Ben Jackson and Harriet Lamb have drawn lessons from the experience of social activists around the world. Ed Miliband has explored the role of community organising as a way to bring about change, the role of trade unions in mobilising change across a sector, the importance of localism and the power of divestment. “You only”, he says, “get the justice you have the power to compel” (Miliband 2021: chapter 16).

All these draw directly or indirectly on the Alinsky rules for radicals, originally published in 1971. Probably think tanks interested in policy development should also understand these.

Finally, the third lesson is about leadership in a time of a climate emergency. From contributions by a number of climate leaders, I have proposed a model of “Motivate. Mobilise. Manage. Repeat” (Maxwell 2020). Consistent with a large literature on leadership, leaders must do four things. First, make the case for action. Second, build a coalition to deliver change. Third, engage with the complexity of policy-making. And fourth, learn and adapt.

There is plenty to say on all of these, but the main message now is twofold: climate leaders need to build wide coalitions, not sectarian tabernacles; and they need to plan for a marathon change process, not a sprint.

Conclusion

This short paper began with the climate crisis and the drivers of transformation. It examined the current agenda, especially as it is linked to the idea of a ‘new economy’ and a Global Green New Deal. And it explored the lessons for knowledge workers, social activists and leaders. Dirk Mess-

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748930099-101, am 08.08.2024, 12:10:41
Open Access – (cc) BY-SA – https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/agb

ner, unusually, belongs in all those categories. We are lucky to be able to work with him.

References

Brown, Gordon, 2021: Seven ways to Change the World: How to Fix the Most Pressing Problems we Face. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Climate Change Committee, 2021: Progress in reducing emissions. 2021 Report to Parliament, accessible online: https://www.theccc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Progress-in-reducing-emissions-2021-Report-to-Parliament.pdf.

Klein, Naomi, 2019: On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Maxwell, Simon, 2020: Motivate. Mobilise. Manage. Repeat. Further thoughts on leadership, accessible online: https://simonmaxwell.net/blog/motivate-mobilise-manage-repeat-further-thoughts.html.

Miliband, Ed, 2021: Go Big. How to fix our world. London: Penguin.

Mitchell, Tom, Simon Maxwell, 2010: Defining climate compatible development. CDKN Policy Brief, accessible online: https://cdkn.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/CDKN-CCD-Planning_english.pdf.

Pettifor, Ann, 2019: The case for the green new deal. London, New York: Verso.

WBGU, 2011: World in Transition: A Social Contract for Sustainability, 2011 Flagship Report. Berlin: WBGU, accessible online: https://www.wbgu.de/fileadmin/user_upload/wbgu/publikationen/hauptgutachten/hg2011/pdf/wbgu_jg2011_en.pdf.

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748930099-101, am 08.08.2024, 12:10:41
Open Access – (cc) BY-SA – https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/agb

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748930099-101, am 08.08.2024, 12:10:41
Open Access – BY-SA - https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/agb