

Our environmental deficit is now beyond nature's ability to regenerate

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We are heading fast in the wrong direction despite the world gearing up to approve new sustainable development goals and a new climate accord

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16 months and counting

The world enters ecological 'overshoot' this year on 13 August, six days earlier than last year. All the world's production and consumption for the rest of the year, this suggests, then runs up an environmental deficit beyond nature's ability to regenerate itself and safely absorb our economic waste. It's a highly conservative estimate, based on the best data available.

It means we still seem to be heading fast in the wrong direction with the world gearing up to approve new sustainable development goals in New York, and a new climate accord in Paris.

In a classic example of locked-in, yet perverse economics, recent research from the Judge Business School at Cambridge University confirmed earlier analysis suggesting that the costs generated by the fossil fuel industries far outweigh their revenues.

These costs, which are not yet formally recognised in a company's accounts, are what the IMF has termed 'the \$5.3tn energy subsidy problem.'

Nasa climate scientist James Hansen recently warned graphically that without radical and fast emission reductions, many of the world's major cities including New York, Miami, and Los Angeles would, sooner or later, share the fate of Atlantis.

But a counsel of complete despair right now would be very wrong. Presidential hopeful, Hillary Clinton, set a new tone in America's divisive energy debate by pledging, within 10 years of being elected, to install enough renewable energy to power all US homes. Fortune magazine glowingly called her 'solar power's new best friend.' And, much more, with far further-reaching ambition, is happening globally.

Businesses are pushing governments like never before, nearly 130 of which have committed to implementing plans to keep the world below the 2C limit temperature, with many also talking about what it means to do so with a high level of certainty, and debating calls for a more realistically safe limit of 1.5C.

In September, the Wales-based Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT) will pull together over 100 examples of deep decarbonisation scenarios from around the globe in a new

comprehensive report, 'Who is Getting Ready for Zero'.

These are not marginal case studies, but include a large number of the world's biggest emitters representing the great majority of global emissions. It means that with scientific agreement, the technology and contingency plans in place, we are now on the cusp of being able to achieve a dramatic energy transition.

Of course, it won't just happen without political shifts, and politicians tend always to lead from behind. In this light, whatever Clinton's pledge lacks in comprehensiveness and overall policy coherence regarding continuing support for fossil fuels, it adds in validating large scale action for renewables as a mainstream political platform.

"Picture a huge sponge with different coloured layers. The top layer is the science. That is now sorted with as much consensus as you will get," says Paul Allen of CAT. "The next layer down is the technology. Is it there to meet the science, and the answer is yes. In this sense climate is not the problem. The problem is how we live. To change that we now need to look at all the other layers of the cake to achieve the transition like law, psychology and economics."

This understanding that meeting climate targets is not just a techno-fix, means that next year the project will take the insights gathered from the growing global range of low carbon energy technology scenarios and complement them with work from a range of other disciplines.

Of course, they're not alone. The Transition Network, which is active now in over 40 countries, will be publishing innovative international examples of transition in action on a daily basis in the run-up to Paris. The tricky pathways to change are also becoming the subject of increasingly applied and practical academic work. Also, far from these issues being 'out there', there are more and more opportunities for people to engage directly, with both the Transition Network and the Zero Carbon project organising open opportunities to do more than demonstrate, by learning and participating on making change happen.

It may seem a paradox, but this moment of our greatest peril, may also see the flourishing of our greatest potential.

This is not a problem that will be solved by 'them', it will be our greatest collective endeavour and adventure for decades to come. We will know we are succeeding when the day of our ecological overshoot starts moving back in the calendar until we once again start living well, within our environmental means.

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