

THIS IS A CRISIS

FACING UP TO THE AGE OF ENVIRONMENTAL BREAKDOWN

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SUMMARY

Mainstream political and policy debates have failed to recognise that human impacts on the environment have reached a critical stage, potentially eroding the conditions upon which socioeconomic stability is possible. Human-induced environmental change is occurring at an unprecedented scale and pace and the window of opportunity to avoid catastrophic outcomes in societies around the world is rapidly closing. These outcomes include economic instability, large-scale involuntary migration, conflict, famine and the potential collapse of social and economic systems. The historical disregard of environmental considerations in most areas of policy has been a catastrophic mistake.

In response, this paper argues that three shifts in understanding across political and policy communities are required: of the scale and pace of environmental breakdown, the implications for societies, and the subsequent need for transformative change.

1. Scale and pace of environmental change – the age of environmental breakdown

Negative human impacts on the environment go ‘beyond’ climate change to encompass most other natural systems, driving a complex, dynamic process of environmental destabilisation that has reached critical levels. This destabilisation is occurring at speeds unprecedented in human history and, in some cases, over billions of years. For example:

- global vertebrate populations have fallen by 60 per cent since the 1970s
- topsoil is now being lost 10 to 40 times faster than it is being replenished by natural processes, and, since the mid-20th century, 30 per cent of the world’s arable land has become unproductive due to erosion
- the UK is also experiencing environmental destabilisation, and is described as one of the “most nature-depleted countries in the world”.

Though there is uncertainty as to how this process will unfold – ranging from linear change to abrupt, potentially catastrophic non-linear events – the extent, severity, pace and closing window of opportunity to avoid potentially catastrophic outcomes has led many scientists to conclude that we have entered a new era of rapid environmental change. We define this as the ‘age of environmental breakdown’ to better highlight the severity of environmental destabilisation resulting from aggregate human activity.

2. Implications – a new domain of risk facing policymakers

The consequences of the age of environmental breakdown on societies and economies are more serious than is recognised by mainstream political and policy debates. As complex natural systems become more destabilised, the consequences of this destabilisation – from extreme weather to soil infertility – will impact human systems from local to global levels, interacting with existing social and economic trends such as inequality, compounding them. This process is already underway, damaging human health and driving forced migration and conflict around the world, and is set to accelerate as breakdown increases.

All in all, a new, highly complex and destabilised ‘domain of risk’ is emerging – which includes the risk of the collapse of key social and economic systems, at local and potentially even global levels. This new risk domain affects virtually all areas of policy and politics, and

it is doubtful that societies around the world are adequately prepared to manage this risk. Due to the high levels of complexity, the scale of breakdown and systemic nature of the problem, responding to the age of environmental breakdown may be the greatest challenge that humans have faced in their history.

3. A transformational response is required

The consequences of environmental breakdown will fall hardest on the poorest, who are most vulnerable to its effects and least responsible for the problem. It is estimated that the poorest half of the global population are responsible for around 10 per cent of yearly global greenhouse gas emissions, with half of emissions attributed to the richest 10 per cent of people. In the UK, per capita emissions of the wealthiest 10 per cent are up to five times higher than those of the bottom half. In addition, environmental breakdown interacts with other inequalities, such as class, ethnicity and gender. This makes environmental breakdown a fundamental issue of justice.

Environmental breakdown is a result of the structures and dynamics of social and economic systems, which drive unsustainable human impacts on the environment. While providing high living standards to many people, these systems fail to provide for all, and by driving environmental breakdown, these systems are eroding the conditions upon which human needs can be met at all. In response, two overall socioeconomic transformations are needed, to make societies:

- **sustainable and just:** bring human activity to within environmentally sustainable limits while tackling inequalities and providing a high quality life to all
- **prepared:** increased levels of resilience to the impacts of environmental breakdown resulting from past and any future activity, covering all areas of society, including infrastructure, markets, political processes, social cohesion and global cooperation.

RESPONDING TO ENVIRONMENTAL BREAKDOWN

While some progress has been made toward realising these transformations, most efforts have neither adequately focussed on all elements of environmental breakdown, nor sought to fundamentally transform key social and economic systems. Little attention has been given to ensuring societies are robust enough to face the increasingly severe consequences of breakdown. This lack of progress partly results from a lack of agency over the problem experienced by policymakers, resulting from factors including: the difficulties faced by decision-making systems responding to highly complex, system-wide problems; and the power of vested interests, many of which have blocked progress in responding to breakdown. These problems manifest acutely between generations, with millennial and younger generations faced with the daunting twin tasks of preventing environmental breakdown while adequately responding to its growing negative impacts.

IPPR is undertaking a programme of work to better understand and develop solutions to these problems. Over the next year, we will assess what progress has been made toward responding to environmental breakdown, using the UK as a case study within the global context. We will then develop policies that can realise a sustainable, just and prepared world and seek to understand how political and policy communities can develop the sense of agency needed to overcome environmental breakdown.

The progressive policy think tank

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