

Climate change crisis brings home the capitalist cul-de-sac facing humanity

Saturday 23 October 2010, by [TANURO Daniel](#) (Date first published: May 2010).

Thirty per cent of animal and vegetable species could disappear in a few decades, due to rapid changes in rainfall, temperature, acidity, etc. Hundreds of millions of people live under the threat of rising sea-levels, droughts, floods and disease. Billions more could suffer water scarcity. The poor are the most exposed, especially in Africa, where the productivity of non-irrigated agriculture could decline by as much as 50%, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Can a catastrophe be avoided? It depends on where you're living. The people of Tuvalu, (a Pacific Ocean island half-way between Hawaii and Australia), for instance, will probably have to move before the end of this century. Climate change is a reality, affecting millions of people on Earth. It must be mitigated, but some adaptation to its effects is unavoidable and necessary. The more quickly and radically we address the basic causes of global warming to mitigate it, the less we will have to adapt. On the other hand, the less we mitigate, the more we will have to adapt, and the more the poor will suffer the negative consequences. At a certain point, though, adaptation will become practically impossible.

The IPCC 4th Assessment Report proposes six climate stabilisation scenarios. The most radical requires a cut in global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 50 to 85% before 2050, with a peak before 2015. Because the 'developed world' is historically responsible for more than 70% of global warming, it should reduce its own emissions by 80 to 95%, if it follows the IPCC. But this is not enough: the situation is so serious now that no escape can be found without the participation of countries like Brazil, India, China, South Africa and Mexico.

The main GHG is carbon dioxide (CO₂); the main cause of its accumulation in the atmosphere is the burning of fossil fuels (coal, oil, natural gas) and this burning provides the world with 80% of its energy. As a consequence, a radical reduction in GHG emissions in 40 years would require a herculean effort, with ominous social, technical and economic implication. But there is simply no alternative: even the most radical IPCC scenario foresees a temperature rise of between 2° and 2.4°C. This is above the threshold where climate change is thought to have dangerous human and environmental consequences.

Can we make that effort? From a scientific point of view, the answer is: 'Yes, we can.' We can stop burning finite supplies of fossil fuels and use renewable, mostly solar, energy sources (wind energy, energy of the oceans, biomass, solar thermal, solar photovoltaic, geothermal power, etc.). The technical potential of these sources is 17 times the global energy demand in 2001. By the way, this potential could improve very quickly if a clear political priority was given to the research on renewable energy, instead of nuclear or even fossil energy. In other words, humanity is not doomed to energy scarcity and the societies in the South are not doomed to poverty and underdevelopment.

How could we make this effort? The answer is mainly social and political, not technological, for three reasons:

1. Renewable sources are still more expensive than fossil sources and this situation will prevail for 25 to 30 years.
2. The global distribution of wealth has to be dealt with in order to provide poor countries, and the poor in general, with the considerable means necessary for the clean development and adaptation of these resources.
3. The energy transition is complex. It doesn't boil down to the replacement of one fuel with another in the same energy system: a different energy system is necessary, with different infrastructure and equipment. There will be a transitional period in which the building of new infrastructure will require an increase in conventional energy consumption. This will necessitate reductions in consumption elsewhere. However, a new system in place would be one in which there is a new way to satisfy human needs, even another view of these needs and another way to determine them. In short, another society.

To clarify this point, let us take the example of the transportation sector. The easiest and cheapest way to replace petrol is to produce agrofuels. But agrofuels compete with crop production, and therefore with the satisfaction of fundamental human needs. As we have experienced over the last few years, we risk seeing the poor starving because wheat, maize, cassava, palm oil and other crops fundamental to people's lives are used to produce 'green petrol'. Massive agrofuel production for export intensifies speculative pressure on the land (at the expense of traditional communities) and has very negative environmental impacts in terms of pollution and biodiversity.

From this we can conclude:

1. The need for personal mobility can no longer be satisfied by producing individual cars.
2. The way that commodities are transported must be questioned radically (the 'just in time' delivery by planes and trucks on global competitive markets is nothing less than criminal).
3. We have to ask whether we really need all these commodities; what purpose they serve.

On the one hand, billions of people want essential goods and services to fulfil very basic human needs. The capitalist system cannot satisfy them because it permanently needs masses of unemployed people – 'an industrial reserve army', as Marx called them – in order to exert permanent pressure on wages, thus maximising its profits. On the other hand, the capitalist way of satisfying needs – the production of commodities for profit by competitive businesses, the tendency always to sell more goods and services to those who can afford them – entails the constant creation of new artificial needs, on a mass scale. Overproduction and consumption, mass poverty and massive waste, unfulfilled needs and permanent frustration, exploitation of labour and the destruction of natural resources are indivisible aspects of this system. The burning of cheap fossil fuels is a key condition for its functioning. Of course, fossil fuel stocks are limited, but the reserves are more than sufficient to provoke catastrophic climate change. It is highly unlikely that capitalism will decide not to use these reserves, especially in the present context of world depression and fierce competition. It is even more unlikely that it will end its addiction to fossil fuels in time to respect the physical constraints that are necessary for climate stabilisation.

As a result of 200 years of capitalism, humanity is deep inside a very dangerous cul-de-sac which could result in barbarism on an unprecedented scale. The escape route is clear. Globally, we must use less energy, produce less material goods, and transfer clean technologies to the South: these are key conditions in order to make the transition to renewable sources possible within 40 years. Simultaneously, we must satisfy fundamental human needs, especially in the developing world. The

problem is that none of these objectives can be achieved within the framework of a system which, because its objective is profit, can only consider avoiding a catastrophe if the investment is 'cost effective'. The achievement of these objectives requires an anti-capitalist perspective, translated into concrete measures such as an economic plan, reduction of working time without loss of income, nationalisation of the energy sector, and nationalisation of the bank and credit sector. The fight against climate change is a matter for the class struggle. It is more than that: it is a question of civilisation.

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P.S.

* From Amandla!:

<http://www.amandlapublishers.co.za/special-features/68-climate-change/94-climate-change-crisis-brings-home-the-capitalist-cul-de-sac-facing-humanity>

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