

## The 'Tipping Point'

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Humankind is about to throw Earth's ecological systems off balance. For this reason, Paul Crutzen, who discovered and explained the hole in the ozone layer and won the Nobel Prize in chemistry, no longer calls our geological age Holocene, but rather 'Anthropocene' - the era shaped by people. It is worth noting that he is dealing with geological, not human history.

Because of technical civilisation, our species has become a determining factor of Earth systems over the past 200 years. For example, by using fossil fuels, humankind is influencing the Earth's carbon cycle. For 300,000 years, the carbon dioxide content of the atmosphere was never as high as it is today. Nobody knows exactly how the climate system will react. To put things in perspective: human beings have only been around for about 50,000 years.

Climate experts are using increasingly graphic terms to warn of the changes we are heading towards. It seems that we are nearing the 'tipping point', from which there will be no return. It is more and more probable that Greenland's ice will melt and the sea level rise by up to 7 metres as a result. The large rainforests of the Congo and Amazon are on the brink of collapse.

We cannot predict the consequences for the Earth's water balance. Humankind's supply would suffer considerably - including food - even if some places may get a little more water. All efforts to conserve biological diversity will have been in vain.

Can we trust on chances of salvation arising as the danger grows? So far, the mechanisms and instruments of environmental policy-making are not up to the challenges. Climate protection provides a telling example.

We have the United Nations' Framework Convention on Climate Change, which promotes political and technological cooperation. Furthermore, the Kyoto Protocol, which was passed back in 1997, finally came into force in 2005. In the protocol, industrialised nations have committed to reduce their greenhouse-gas emissions by around 5% altogether.

The Kyoto Protocol is without doubt a historic milestone. For the first time, countries have agreed to limit CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Negotiations have also started on clarifying what to do after 2012 when first-generation obligations expire for industrialised nations.

Nonetheless, one cannot ignore the fact that the Kyoto Protocol only amounts to a *tiny* step. The 5% reduction industrialised nations promised is equivalent to

only 2% of world emissions. But by 2050, half of all greenhouse gases will have to be avoided if the climate is to be stabilised. Furthermore, neither the USA nor Australia are taking part in the Kyoto Protocol - and large emerging markets such as China, India, Brazil and South Africa are also still offside.

So far, many economists and politicians simply cannot imagine what economic growth might look like without oil, gas and coal. On top of that, the large corporations that dominate the fossil energy system resist change with all their might, and the institutions and processes of the climate regime are weak.

Depressingly, the entire arena for global policy-making on the environment is just as inadequate. There is, of course, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), based in Nairobi. But this organisation is small and not independent. It has little operational authority and its funding is instable.

Time and again, there have been initiatives to strengthen international environmental bodies and policy-making as a whole, but these have not been successful so far. Therefore, there are no global counterparts to the influential agencies dealing with trade and finance (World Trade Organisation, World Bank and International Monetary Fund).

Rather, international environmental policy-making takes place in the context of over 100 global and 140 regional multilateral agreements ([www.unep.org/DPDL/law/Law\\_instruments/index.asp](http://www.unep.org/DPDL/law/Law_instruments/index.asp)). What is more, they each deal with highly specific topics (such as marine protection, climate and ozone protection, protection of species and many others). The institutional diversity is astounding.

Many agreements have succeeded in regulating or even resolving individual problems. Examples are the hole in the ozone layer (Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer) and the protection of endangered species (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species).

This structure, which has evolved over time more or less chaotically, has serious drawbacks, however. The policy-arena is fragmented, consisting of many independent units which are not coordinated sufficiently. Moreover, most have only scant funds at their disposal. In addition, the secretariats of the agreements are scattered all around the world - Bangkok, Bonn, Geneva, Montreal and Nairobi. This dispersion generates costs, makes synergies unlikely, and does not help them to recruit qualified staff.

International environmental affairs also suffer from ineffective decision-making procedures, since as a general rule, consensus among all parties is needed. Most importantly, sanctions for non-compliance with international obligations are often not provided for. In other cases, there are no means to enforce such sanctions. In short, both the global legislation machinery and global law enforcement are deficient.

Ideas abound on how to reform the international setting, but, they are probably still too piecemeal. Perhaps one should consider fundamentally re-organising the international system. After all, the environment is not its only blind spot. Social policy is also hardly made at the global level.

While the global policy-arena is systematically geared to international peacekeeping (UNO) as well as to dealing with matters of finance, monetary flows and trade (World Bank, IMF, WTO), creating a fair and just world is largely left to the efforts of international markets and the initiative of each individual. It is essential to start here, to create institutions to protect the Earth and its people before technical civilisation does irreparable damage to ecological systems.

Geological and biological systems do not wait for humankind. From a certain point in time - we don't know when, but we know it is drawing nearer - the climate system will tip into a different, more dangerous state. It is not exaggerated to compare our time to the one before the Second World War. This time, humankind should act before foreseeable catastrophes run their course.☞☞

—*Third World Network Features*