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## **Standing on a Precipice: Change Everything**



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“The ultimate hidden truth of the world is that it is something we make, and could just as easily make differently.”

– David Graeber (1961–2020)

Throughout this publication series, we have discussed the systemic nature of various crises facing humanity. While the challenges before us in public health, ecology, health, militarism, energy, and climate change may seem distinct, they are highly interconnected and share common barriers and solutions.

In this issue, we take a step back and ask what it actually means for a problem to be systemic. What do scientists mean when they say that “systemic collapse” is a possible outcome if we fail to redress social and ecological trends? And what must solutions look like if they are to be capable of bringing about systemic change before time runs out?

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### **When systems collapse: why we should be concerned**

The threat of civilizational collapse may seem distant, impossible even, but it would hardly be unprecedented. Such collapses have occurred an untold number of times throughout history, often correlated with climatic changes, environmental degradation, resource exhaustion, and/or unsustainable levels of inequality.

“Given the momentum in both the Earth and human systems, and the growing difference between the ‘reaction time’ needed to steer humanity towards a more sustainable future, and the ‘intervention time’ left to avert a range of catastrophes in both the physical climate system and the biosphere, we are already deep into the trajectory towards collapse.”

– Professor Will Steffen (June 2020) [Voice of Action](#)

The great danger with any systemic collapse is that it can happen suddenly. Complex systems usually self-regulate, but rapid environmental changes can trigger tipping points where feedback loops speed up the process of collapse. For instance, methane released from thawing permafrost warms the atmosphere, causing more thawing and thus more methane emissions.

[Path dependencies](#) are another major concern regarding the systemic collapse of human systems. An inability to sustainably exploit forests has been suggested as to why civilizations have collapsed in the past. Physicists recently warned that global deforestation, if left unchecked, stood a [worryingly high chance](#) of doing so again.

Today environmental degradation is just one threat that can cause the collapse of human systems. Inequality, if allowed to grow, can quickly get out of control. The cycle of corruption, insider access, and compound interest eats away at institutions, the rule of law, public trust, and ultimately society's capacity to adapt and evolve.

Evidence found throughout history indicates decadence and famine have often appeared side-by-side during periods of civilizational collapse. There's also evidence to show that more equitable societies have historically been more resilient to natural disasters and rapidly changing climates.

In modern Western society history, the exponential growth of inequality during the roaring twenties—following a global pandemic—ended in the Great Depression, the rise of fascism, and World War II. It had been clear to many that the economic, social, and political systems at the dawn of the 20th century were deeply unjust and unsustainable. Yet it took reducing much of Europe and Asia to rubble and the deaths of tens of millions of people for those with power to finally relent and introduce systemic reforms worthy of the name.

The creation of Western welfare states and universal healthcare, the redistribution of wealth through radically progressive taxation, greater emancipation for women and workers, and the resulting emergence of the middle-classes amidst a booming economy all helped to halt the rise of fascism and usher in a post-War II period of relatively equitable growth.

Today, inequality has returned, reaching levels last seen in the 1920s, and fascism is again ascendant around the world. Now with the COVID 19 pandemic, the script of 100 years ago seems to be replaying. Worse though are the destabilized ecological and climatic systems and the existence this time around of omnicidal nuclear arsenals. Progressive policies cannot fix these problems once triggered. If those in power again wait until systems have collapsed before doing what is necessary, it could be the very last time this cycle of hubris plays out for humanity.

We desperately need a rapidly deployed and a managed transition to a new system for humanity that goes far beyond that implemented following the systemic collapses of the early 20th century. It must address damaging ideological doctrines such as artificial scarcity and eternal growth, ensure that consumption is sustainable by regulating manufacturing, not simply blaming individual habits, and codifying mechanisms for ensuring that power and wealth cannot once again concentrate into the hands of a few.

## What does "systemic change" mean?

Systemic change means different things to different people and in different contexts. Fundamentally, systemic change refers to changes that alter how a system functions and, as such, can theoretically refer to anything from a tweak that has significant downstream effects to a wholesale rearrangement of power, culture, and values.

There has been a trend toward acknowledging the need for greater integration and mainstreaming cross-cutting issues such as health, gender, and climate change in government and development policies. Despite their reasonable ambitions, these efforts

continue to appear impossibly aspirational without a coherent theory of change behind them.

Politicians and economic leaders around the world acknowledge that there is a need for systemic change because of climatic threats to supply chains, national security, and the growing risks of social injustice. However, what corporations and politicians mean by “systemic change” is a change *to a part of* the system, not a change *of* the system.

This incrementalist approach fails to grasp the extent to which systemic problems like climate change, poverty, violence, and poor health are interrelated and compound one another. Without effective integration among different services and sectors, pieces of the puzzle do not come together in a coordinated and holistic way.

Tackling systemic issues in this political, symptom-driven, piecemeal way becomes a costly and ineffective game of whack-a-mole, with decision-makers proposing policies that inevitably fall short of anything approaching broad systemic change. Police body-cameras and money for extra police training, the Affordable Care Act, tax credits for low-earners are Band-Aids offered in place of more fundamental change that, while necessary, is politically unfeasible given the political and economic power of those who so greatly benefit from the status quo.

Thus, talk of “systemic change” by those in positions of power should be treated with skepticism at best and at worst as a warning. It is exceedingly rare for powerful people and institutions even to acknowledge the need for comprehensive systemic change, much less step aside where necessary. Instead, it is far more common for powerful people and institutions to become consumed in a concerted effort to *save* the system rather than change it.

Current trends in warming, species extinction, and inequality all constitute existential risks on their own. All must be tackled simultaneously in an integrated fashion, not simply due to time constraints, but because it is the only way “[wicked problems](#)” *can* be solved. Systemic change is needed that fundamentally alters power relations, wealth and resource distribution, ownership, and our institutions. Systemic change that brings about social, civic, political, and economic emancipation empowers us all consciously to change our shared system for the better. We need a change of values, of how we see ourselves, each other, and our place within, not above, nature.

*This* is the scale of the discussion we should be having right now if we are to deal with the real threat of systemic collapse, be it economic, political, social, climatic, and/or ecological. Ultimately, if one collapses, the rest could quickly follow.

Thus far, no modern socio-economic system has ever been implemented at a scale that ticks all the boxes we need to survive and thrive as a species. Certainly, there are ideas and examples to draw from history and lessons to learn from existing cultures. The potential for creating just and sustainable systems has never been greater.

## Inspiration for the future

The 20th century featured some catastrophic lessons in systems collapse, but there were also many examples of historically unprecedented human development. The social democratic wave across the developed world in the '30s and '40s, the rapid strides made by former colonial states prior to the rise of neocolonialism, and the astonishing levels of poverty reduction seen in Latin America and China in the last few decades all point to what is possible when human systems are guided by social priorities.

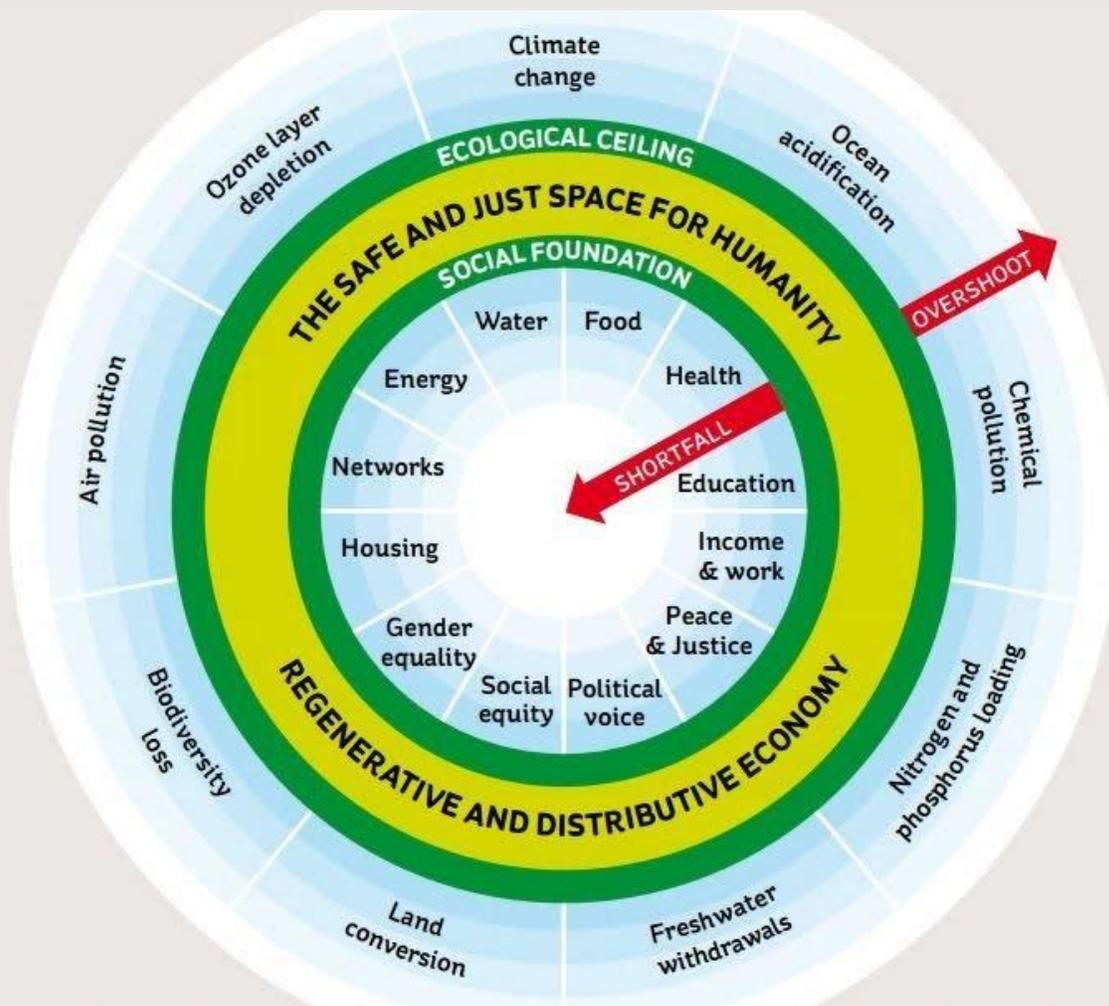
Today, we have no choice but to add ecological priorities to whatever systems next emerge. There will also be demands to include race, gender, sexuality, class, internationalism, anti-imperialism, and other sources of systemic injustice. This is an urgent, epoch-defining

moment in history as necessity and the desire for justice directs the next turn in our collective journey. That direction is being charted right now, all over the world, by artists, philosophers, activists, and even children.

When Greta Thunberg started her school strike, there was no way she or anyone could have imagined it spawning a global movement in which the youth of the world led demands for systemic change. When protestors occupied wall Street in 2011, few anticipated it spreading to over 90 countries within two weeks. Communication technology has enabled capacities we have yet to explore fully and unleashed potential limited only by our imagination. Solidarity, lessons, and mutual aid can be shared anywhere, at the click of a button, by a majority of the world's population. The capacity and potential *are* there, but what about the vision?

To incorporate ecological and social priorities into our economic systems, the British economist, Kate Raworth, has proposed something she calls "Donut Economics." In Raworth's model, economic activity and purpose are confined between a comprehensive social foundation and an ecological ceiling. Basic human needs and rights are enshrined, and nine core environmental, ecological, and climatic systems of concern are prioritized. The idea is catching on, too, with [Amsterdam taking inspiration](#) in their efforts to rebuild in new ways post-pandemic and an ["action lab"](#) helping to turn the idea into a reality.

### The "Donut" – Economist Kate Raworth's Model of a Just Economy



Other visions seem more like science-fiction. But maybe that's what we need to expand our imagination. [The Venus Project](#) has inspired millions worldwide to think about human systems in radically new ways, such as moving beyond a monetary system and to a resource-based economy where "work" is a thing of the past. More near-term in vision

is [DiEM25](#), a bottom-up social and political movement across Europe whose decisions and initiatives are decided by direct democracy inclusive of all members. Currently focused on pushing for a [European Green New Deal](#), DiEM25 aims to restore democratic sovereignty to the people and undo the damage caused by decades of free-market ideology and austerity.

"Sovereignty" is a word that comes up often when considering models for systemic change. Whether regarding access to food, water, land, or politics, Sovereignty gets right to the very heart of what systemic change is all about. Sovereignty is about having the power to guide and manage all aspects of essential, life-giving systems in the interests of those who depend on them. Sovereignty is a universal issue.

Not only would food, land, and water sovereignty for indigenous peoples represent just systemic change, it would also represent the pragmatic approach to avoiding ecological collapse. It is not enough for existing systems to pick and choose which sustainable indigenous practice to renormalize; it's their *values* we need, a fundamental shift in how we view and respect nature. No one is better placed to *lead* that transition back to a regenerative ecology than those who know it the best.

Where we decide sovereignty rests will determine both what emerges next and how. Should the institutions and values that got us here be allowed to determine the response to climate change, the risk is that we slide into ecofascism, with authoritarian restrictions on civil liberties that don't extend to the rich and powerful. On the other hand, if we reaffirm the idea that people have sovereignty vis-à-vis self-governance and that through the state, the people *can* dictate limits on private enterprise and greed, anything is possible.

"Understanding environmental destruction as a systemic problem of capitalism is a starting point for a different way to deal with the climate crisis. It can underpin campaigning for things like a just transition to a sustainable infrastructure, for accessible and affordable public transport, for improved housing stock to reduce domestic emissions. Importantly, these sorts of demands would improve working people's lives now."

– Elaine Graham-Leigh, [The Ecologist](#) (June 2020)

Our current systems are failing. Neoliberal capitalism has been a planetary disaster for this planet, and despite having such little time left to radically change course, the majority of those in power still seem convinced it represents the best we can achieve. We must hope they are wrong because if capitalism and the money of billionaires could fix these problems, they would have done so by now instead of playing a game of chicken with civilizational collapse.

In the very near-term, it seems that China is destined to lead the way, but while the creation of an "[Ecological Civilization](#)" has been made a pillar of their current governance paradigm, they have so much still to do. It remains to be seen whether the huge investments into renewables and pollution reduction can evolve into a sustainable system capable of scaling to a global level.

All of us stand upon a precipice, together. We must be brave, both as individuals and institutions, and not shy away from pressuring those in power into accepting that fundamental systemic change, scary as it is, is the only viable option available to us. The alternative will still be systemic change, simply via disorganized chaos that will cause immeasurable suffering and waste precious time we do not have.

## Steps we can take

This section would usually suggest particular actions you can take or timely notice about events and protests. In this edition, we would like to encourage you to reflect on

what *systemic* changes are required in your own lives to better reflect and embody your principles?

Calls for systemic change are often met with cynicism and accusations of hypocrisy. While it's unfair to dismiss people's opinions entirely simply because they fall short of living ethically in a deeply unethical system, it's nonetheless true that people who visibly practice what they preach are more persuasive in their arguments.

Being the change we want to see is inevitably going to be a struggle, but it is the best thing you can do, as an individual, to inspire others and push for systemic change. Once enough of us embrace that mindset and join forces, we can create our own tipping point that overcomes systemic barriers and ushers in a new day.

**"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."**

– Margaret Mead

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## Learn more

[How systemic change, circular economies and climate action are key to achieving green goals](#) (January 28, 2021) by Anmar Frangoul, *CNBC*

[SCMP: China's Power to "Marshal" Private Savings into Climate Mega Projects will Leave the West Behind](#) (December 2020) by Eric Worrall, *Watts up with that?*

[How Do You Know When Society Is About to Fall Apart? Meet the scholars who study civilizational collapse.](#) (November 4, 2020) by Ben Ehrenreich, *New York Times*

[Green giants: the massive projects that could make Australia a clean energy superpower](#) (November 13, 2020) by Adam Morton, *The Guardian*

[Physicists find deforestation has 90% chance of causing irreparable catastrophic societal collapse.](#) (July 30, 2020) *Daily Kos*

[Addressing Climate as a Systemic Risk: A Call to Action for Financial Regulators](#) (June 28, 2020) by Veena Ramani, *Harvard Law School Forum on Corporate Governance*

['Collapse of civilisation is the most likely outcome': top climate scientists](#) (June 5, 2020) by Asher Moses, *Voice of Action*

[Climate change requires system change](#) (June 2, 2020) by Elaine Graham-Leigh, *The Ecologist*

[After Coronavirus Triggers 17% Emissions Drop, Experts Say Only 'Fundamental Structural Change' Can Save Humanity's Future](#) (May 20, 2020) by Jessica Corbett, *Common Dreams*

[Amsterdam to embrace 'doughnut' model to mend post-coronavirus economy](#) (April 8, 2020) by Daniel Boffey, *The Guardian*

[Greta Is Right: Study Shows Individual Lifestyle Change Boosts Systemic Climate Action](#) (November 19, 2019) by Jeff McMahon, *Forbes*

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