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COMMENTARY

Reimagining Climate Resilient Futures

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> "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking
> we used when we created them."
>
> — Albert Einstein

1. INTRODUCTION

We are at a critical juncture in the history of our life on Earth. On the one hand, we are witnessing the ramifications of an operating system that has defined the norms of our society, polity, and economy for the last three centuries. On the other hand, new patterns and structures are emerging, which are oriented towards a more promising future for the planet and its people (Scharmer and Kaufer 2013). As we traverse this critical juncture, one of the puzzles that diverse actors across sectors and scales are trying to solve is that of climate change.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has pioneered scientific assessments of climate change, supporting research-based decision-making. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has provided a platform for negotiations among world leaders and joint commitments to mitigate the effects of climate change. However, despite more than three decades of action at the international, national, and sub-national levels, we have fallen short of the rate, scale, or depth required to address the climate emergency (Wamsler *et al.* 2020).

There is clear evidence that the challenges of the current operating system cannot be addressed using the same logic that led to these problems. There are three fundamental questions that we need to delve into at this juncture:

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- What are the explicit and implicit conditions (including relationships, power dynamics, and mental models) perpetuating the climate crisis?
- What kinds of structures, processes, and resources are required to inspire innovation and co-creation and to build collective leadership capacity for addressing the interrelated challenges of climate change, environmental degradation, and widening social and economic inequalities?
- How do we reimagine our relationship with self, society, and nature?

As the IPCC pursues its seventh assessment cycle, this article attempts to identify critical areas requiring attention and highlights some principles that may help make these assessments more meaningful for people and nature.

2. CRITICAL AREAS THAT NEED ATTENTION IN THE ASSESSMENT PROCESSES

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was created in 1988 to provide policymakers with regular scientific assessments of climate change, its implications, and potential future risks as well as to develop adaptation and mitigation plans. Over the years, the IPCC has issued six assessment reports that synthesize thousands of scientific papers into a comprehensive overview of our state of knowledge on climate change, its causes, potential impacts, and response options (IPCC 2025).

The IPCC assessment reports have contributed significantly to improving awareness and increasing the sense of urgency around the climate crisis. They have been instrumental in defining the contours of the deliberations and negotiations among world leaders at the UNFCCC and in shaping climate policies and the larger public discourse. At the same time, there are critical gaps in the assessments and associated deliberations that require attention to create more meaningful impact:

- The assessments suffer from a dearth of epistemic plurality (Asayama 2022). Trapped within the disciplinary boundaries of the natural sciences and quantitative modelling, they tilt towards impersonal approaches that neglect relational aspects and the inner dimensions of people's emotions, beliefs, and worldviews that shape human–nature interactions (Wamsler *et al.* 2020).

- As the reports rely heavily on "scientific" papers, the place-based knowledge systems that are embedded in the lived experiences of local communities across geographies (often expressed through folklore, songs, cultural norms, and practices) are ignored (Bavel *et al.* 2022). This has implications not only for how climate change and its impacts are defined in policy circles but also for response mechanisms, as the voices, priorities, and knowledge systems of the people closest to the problem go unnoticed and undocumented.
- While adaptation features more prominently in recent assessments, it is often limited to technological and top-down solutions that are far removed from the local context and may diverge from local adaptation strategies.
- Institutional and governance dimensions have routinely escaped attention in the assessment reports. The focus of the discussions is often on models and estimations, while engagement with relational issues and deeper questions of social and economic inequities, as well as mental models, remains very limited.

3. PRINCIPLES FOR REIMAGINING CLIMATE RESILIENT FUTURES

3.1 Systems Thinking

Climate change is a complex problem that necessitates an approach focused on the whole system and the interactions between its components, rather than just parts. There are multiple (often conflicting) perspectives on the nature of the problem, and multiple pathways and opportunities for addressing the climate crisis, with no fixed solutions, only better or worse approaches. There is no fixed endpoint, as the system is continuously in flux due to its inherent dynamism, embedded interdependencies, and feedback loops as well as external pulls and pressures. Addressing complex problems such as climate change requires fundamental shifts in the way we *see* and *act*—a shift from seeing just the symptoms to seeing the underlying structures and mental models; from isolated to collaborative action; and from responding to the crisis to redesigning the system through shared purpose, mutual trust, diversity, and inclusive decision-making (Kish 2025).

3.2 Commoning and Collaborative Action

In an era of polycrisis, we need new ways of understanding, living in, and caring for our landscapes (Enqvist *et al.* 2018). 'Commoning'—social practices through which communities come together to manage and sustain

their resources—offers a promising lens for shaping futures that are just, inclusive, and sustainable. This approach is rooted in age-old wisdom and worldviews that see humans as part of the larger cosmos and value nature as a gift (rather than a commodity) for all life forms, present and future. Commoning can help regenerate social connections among humans and with nature; build new aspirations, identities, and social roles that embody wholesome cultural values; and encourage a sense of both shared responsibility and entitlement (Bollier 2016). Applying the commoning lens to assessments and deliberations on climate change is essential to deepening trust, fostering a shared purpose, strengthening collective stewardship, and inspiring experimentation and innovation.

3.3 Centering Commons-based Property Rights and Community Stewardship

Our current economic model hinges on the myth that only two forms of property rights are economically viable—private and public (Barnes 2006). This has led to the control, use, and management of hitherto common resources by individuals or the state, thereby eroding the shared knowledge, memories, and identities of the communities that stewarded these resources. Evidence from across the globe establishes that secure property rights provide incentives for communities to conserve and sustain their resources, thereby improving the carbon-trapping potential of shared ecosystems (BenYishay *et al.* 2017, Griscom *et al.* 2017). Commons-based property rights strengthen community agency around resource conservation and stewardship practices embedded in experiential knowledge, emerging from a deep sense of care. Deeper conversations and deliberations on the structures, processes, and resources required to strengthen commons-based property rights and community stewardship are foundational to a climate-resilient future.

3.4 Pluralism

There are many ways of knowing, expressing, and making sense of the world. Opening our hearts and minds to alternative perspectives and cultivating processes that bring together diverse actors—especially those not typically aligned—is important. The rate, scale, and depth of effort required to address the climate crisis calls for unprecedented collaboration and for leadership to break down sectoral, disciplinary, and organizational siloes. Embracing complexity and interweaving different knowledge systems, values, and perspectives is crucial to understanding climate change and designing pathways for systemic change to mitigate its impact. Pluralism can induce inclusion and inspire the emergence of multiple leadership nodes across the ecosystem, working with a shared purpose.

4. CONCLUSION

As we traverse the third millennium, it is more evident than ever that we need new ways of meaning-making that help us reconnect with self, society, and nature. We need to cultivate processes that enable shifts from short-term efficiency to long-term health; from control to trust and shared direction; from producing outputs to growing capacity and resilience; and from silos to interdependent relationships. This article is a modest effort towards initiating dialogue around key principles that may shape our shared futures by building strength through relationships, trust, and shared purpose.

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