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Delivering Maximum Protection

An effective goal for a climate emergency response

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Why is a new climate goal needed now?

The goal of the UN Framework Convention on Climate, adopted in 1992 , was to "prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system". But by 2020, the damaging impacts of climate change (via intensified and more frequent extreme weather events and earth system, ecological and social process changes) are so great that it is now clear that humans have failed to achieve the UN Climate Convention's goal – we are now living in the early stages of catastrophic climate change.

With the failure of the old goal, we now need a new goal to drive our climate action work.

The main options seem to be:

- to accept that humanity has failed on climate change prevention and instead adopt an adaptation-focused response or;
- to combine heavily ramped up adaptation action with a continued effort to stabilise the climate at a higher level – such as the Paris +1.5°C 'goal' or;
- to accept that humanity has made a serious mistake by allowing its activities to change the climate, and we now need to take emergency speed and intensity action to:
- restore a naturally safe climate, and
- reduce the loss and damage suffered during the time it takes to return to a safe climate.

What do we want to protect? And how much protection do we want to aim for?

This is not a scientific question. Instead we principally need to resolve it by considering ethics and interests and our duty of care. Who and what do we, or should we care about? What are their and our needs and enlightened self-interests? And how important is it to deliver full protection?

It is the proposition of this paper that we should commit to "achieving Maximum Protection for all people, other animals, plants, ecosystems, critical earth system elements and civilisation, globally and through time".

The adoption of this goal is not intended to be an identity marker or a virtue signalling device. This is a practical goal that desperately needs to be achieved in the real world – at unprecedented speed.

What key insights and principles are needed to underpin the achievement of the maximum protection goal?

A careful review of ethics and interests, climate and earth system science, impact science, threat and emergency management, and the history of human responses to crises has highlighted the following key insights and principles:

1. We have a critical problem NOW – People, other animals, plants, species, ecosystems and civilisation are harmed by an unsafe climate and are experiencing an 'exponentially' worsening climate crisis.
2. We need to be clear about what we are aiming to protect and how serious we are about delivering that protection in full – It is one thing to know what damage climate change is doing or could do in the future. But before an effective protection program can be framed we need to know what it is that we want to protect and whether we are committed to achieving that protection. Decisions on these questions are driven by the ethical/interest positions of each person and organisation that cares about climate impacts.
3. We should aim for Maximum Protection – For ethical reasons, including our duty of care, and to protect people's interests we want to protect all people, other animals, plants, ecosystems, critical earth system elements and civilisation, globally and through time. It is critical to an effective action program to know what outcome we are aiming for.
4. Effective action must be taken to stop, prevent and, where possible, undo harm – Knowing about a problem and being distressed about it is not enough, effective action must be taken – that is fast enough and strong enough.
5. The restoration of a safe climate is essential – The climate is already unacceptably dangerous. This means that the world is too hot, there is too much greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, and there is no budget of acceptable further emissions. The Paris+1.5°C goal is not safe or acceptable. A safe climate needs to be restored by stopping emissions immediately and by taking the excess greenhouse gases out of the atmosphere as fast as possible.
6. Maximum Protection must provide a safe passage through the transition to a safe climate – It is essential that we maximise the number of people, other animals, plants, species and ecosystems that

can survive long enough to benefit from the restoration of a safe climate. To minimise the loss, damage and suffering caused during the transition to a safe climate, it is necessary to apply action strategies to:

- shorten the transition period,
- ameliorate the climate and environmental conditions and
- prevent tipping points and cascading disasters to the maximum extent possible.

This will involve localised disaster prevention, response and recovery (localised adaptation measures) but, if it can be done with net protection benefit, would also involve temporary protection measures at an earth system level.

7. Action at a massive scale and speed is essential – To achieve the restoration of a safe climate with a 'safe passage' transition, in the face of the 'exponentially' worsening climate crisis, we need to act extremely fast and at extremely large scale.

8. Emergency mode is now the only feasible approach – Historically, when reform-as-usual cannot deliver essential change at great enough scale, fast enough, then societies switch to emergency mode long enough to correct the problem.

9. The climate emergency response needs to be framed to achieve Maximum Protection – To achieve a Maximum Protection safe climate outcome requires an appropriate climate emergency response. The climate crisis is a threat unlike anything that global human civilisation has faced in the past. This unique threat will require a unique climate emergency response that addresses the specific issues raised by the climate crisis.

10. A chain of custodial responsibility is needed, from ethics/interests to delivered protection – We need to consciously and actively ensure that Maximum Protection informs our decisions from the ethics and interests that determine what we committed to protecting, through the policy-action chain to the delivery of real protection.

11. Organisations and individuals need to take responsibility for the 'whole problem' – We each need to be concerned about the whole collection of problems facing us. If we see a vital gap in the actions that need to occur, even if they are outside our normal responsibilities, we must take action to ensure the gap is addressed. This might mean addressing the gap directly ourselves or finding others who are able to address it.

A thought exercise – this is not a drill!

If there is a flood or bushfire we come together as a community and act swiftly to achieve Maximum Protection of people, animals and property. This is a great example of one type of emergency response.

Despite recognising the climate emergency, the overwhelming majority of governments, companies and people are not taking on an effective emergency response.

Many believe we need a physical disaster to bring home the reality of the climate crisis so people will 'wake up', but climate related disasters have been happening with increasing severity and frequency for the last 20 years.

The climate crisis needs to be recognised as a suite of disastrous changes being intensified by global warming. Addressing each disaster in isolation, ignoring the deeper causes, will not lead to an effective climate rescue and safe climate restoration.

Imagine the current climate emergency situation as the combination of climate disasters that we are experiencing around the world, linked by common causes. You know that this year alone many millions, if not billions, will be severely impacted and many killed by this super disaster. How should we act in the face of this emergency situation? How can we pull off a desperately needed climate rescue?

THE AUTHORS

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