

Greta says it's all just blah blah blah — why I disagree

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While I'm cautiously optimistic that we can avoid a climate disaster, I also think we all need to think more about the issue of climate change and do more to stop it. Here's my personal take after spending a week at COP26.



By way of brief introduction, COP stands for Conference of the Parties. In this context, it is the parties to the United Nations' Framework Convention on Climate Change. In other words, the official forum where nearly all countries in the world get together to talk about climate change and related issues such as how to solve it, who ought to do what, and how to deal with the physical impacts of climate change itself. "26" because this is the 26th time that these parties have formally met. This one was particularly important because it was initially scheduled to be five years after the landmark Paris Agreement, meaning that countries needed to submit new, equal or more ambitious, targets to limit global warming. (It was postponed a year due to Covid.)

The main forum, where world leaders and the likes of David Attenborough deliver their speeches is known as the Blue Zone. Official delegates, observers, special invitations and some members of the press also get access. No Blue Zone for me, but I'm told that unless you were an official delegate, there was limited access to the interesting bits anyway. Lots of promotional stands, with the largest being that of Saudi Arabia, touting their future green credentials. (Hmmm.) Another part of the official conference was the Green Zone, which was organised by the UK government and which members of the public could attend. A series of interesting workshops and events were held there, some of which I attended. I also spent two

Signatories to the Paris Agreement are required to submit new targets every five years



days at the New York Times Climate Hub. And I have to say that, while the Green Zone was good, and well worth a visit, the New York Times gig was the place to be.

In just two days I saw an incredible number of excellent speakers with compelling stories and messages: Al Gore (former US Vice President); Philipp Hildebrand (Vice-Chair at Blackrock); Laurence Tubiana (who was heavily involved in crafting the Paris Agreement); a senior advisor to John Kerry; Dame Ellen MacArthur; the CEOs and former CEOs of Patagonia, Engine 1 (an activist hedge fund that forced their way onto Exxon Mobil's board), Danone and Siemens Energy; as well as many others. And, last but not least, some inspiring young female climate activists including Malala Yousafzai and Vanessa Nakate. What brave, articulate and clever women, doing a great service to humanity!

Topics included greenwashing (how to spot it, and avoid it), the circular economy, climate data, climate science, challenges with decarbonisation, the media's role in reporting climate change, challenges in EMs (from climate change itself and the transition), girls' education, inequalities brought about by climate change, views from the global south and global north and many more. It was also great to mingle and discuss these things other attendees. Having so many angles and perspectives has really made me think about things and I've come away with greater clarity, new perspectives and new motivation to improve the work I'm doing.

If I had to summarise, I think the most important thing that needs to be done is to spread the message to as many people as possible, which is one of the reasons for this post. There are many interesting things going, many grassroots movements such as the [Global Citizens Assembly](#), a movement where a selection of people, reflecting the demographic breakdown of the world's population discuss climate issues. Grassroots movements are extremely important and I think they have made a big difference in terms of putting climate more firmly on the agenda and getting people in power to listen.

But I also couldn't help but thinking that, in some forums, people were preaching to the converted. Life-threatening climate change is not going to be stopped if only small groups, or even half the world knows about it. And it saddens me that climate change has become a political issue: not just the response to climate change, but the science itself. (One thing I've been told is that "yeah, but the science around covid is uncertain and changing all the time". Yes, that's because covid is less than two years' old - of course it was changing in the early days as people were scrambling to understand what was going on. Covid issues may not have always been presented well by the mainstream media, I agree, but there has been a scientific consensus on climate change for decades!)

Because of all of this, and the urgency of the problem, I think everybody needs to be aware of the issues. And we all have a responsibility to think about what we can do to help solve the problem, even if it's small. So, from my own point of view, I am doing a few things today: a) writing about it here and asking people to think about it and share this message; b) I've bought three web domains in which I will post simple, factual information about climate change, with the intention of depoliticising the issue (if you are conservative and any of this resonates with you, please message me, I'd love to talk); c) do my best to minimise my own carbon footprint by wasting less, flying less and reducing my beef and lamb consumption (not completely, but a bit).

While there is still a much greater sense of urgency needed to address this problem, I am optimistic that things are going in the right direction. One thing that has stood out for me over these last few weeks is that just how much has changed since the 2015 Paris Agreement. Previously, moral and scientific arguments were made to prevent dangerous climate change, and they were strong. But now the moral and scientific reasons for decarbonisation are being backed up by political, corporate, financial and economic support. Economics and self-interest are now on the same side as the moral arguments which is powerful. Things are aligning in

There was a great list of speakers at the New York Times Climate Hub in Glasgow

So many important conversations and takeaways – but is the message reaching the right people?

My three-point checklist to personally do something about the problem

My reason for optimism: economics and self-interest have started to align with the moral and scientific arguments



the right way. Net zero by mid-century-ish is not guaranteed, far from it: but things are changing.

On the economic case, think about these price changes since Paris: lithium-ion batteries - 60%, solar panels -50%, wind turbines -40%, Tesla +>1000%, the world renewable energy index +>200%. Renewable electricity is now cheaper than electricity from fossil fuels. I explained some of these things on a recent webinar — to sign up to our second COP26 webinar and get access to a recording of the first [follow this link](#) or send me a message.

The climate science has become scarier and more accurate. Climate change is unfolding in front of our eyes. Net zero commitments are stacking up (most of the world's largest polluters now have net zero targets compared with none two years ago). If met, global temperatures would probably rise 1.8°C above pre-industrial levels, according to the IEA. Still not 1.5°C, the level that scientists say we must keep it to, but this is a lot closer now than it was less than two years ago, when warming would have been more than 3.0°C under commitments made at that time. Many corporations now have net zero targets and I think many firms are taking this seriously. It was barely on the radar five years ago. Something similar can be said of the finance industry: trillions of dollars are being pledged towards climate change by the world's leading financial institutions under the [Glasgow Financial Alliance for Net Zero initiative](#).

Greta says greenwash blah blah. I disagree with her. Of course, greenwashing is a serious issue — countries and companies are doing this no doubt — and people can be rightly sceptical about whether promises will be met. But such promises are an important first step on the journey of doing what needs to be done. How does it get done? How do you measure this? Huge questions, and the answers aren't entirely clear — but they are becoming clearer over time and lots of people are working on it, including Fathom. When John Kennedy said in 1961 that he wanted the US to land someone on the moon, he didn't have all the details as to how, yet eight years later they achieved their goal. Time will tell which companies and countries are greenwashing, but Kennedy wasn't *spacewashing* when he set out this plan.

What I really want to stress from a personal perspective is that while I think there are reasons to be optimistic, there should be no complacency either. Climate change is incredibly complex and the solutions will take a big effort, with huge amounts of cash needed and there will be winners and losers. Policy needs to be clever. Businesses need to be clever. Society needs to be clever. But the world is in a climate emergency. The COP conferences are important to raise awareness about these issues and can also prompt us to think about these problems and what we can do.

The most sobering moment of my week at COP26 came when I was listening to the climate scientist Johan Rockström, whose clear articulation of what will happen if we fail to limit warming to 1.5°C or close was a timely reminder of what is at stake. There is uncertainty about certain scientific climatic predictions. In the past these have been pounced on by climate change deniers and special interest lobby groups to downplay the problem and to discredit the science. But there should be no doubt: warming beyond 1.5°C will be catastrophic. And the further beyond 1.5°C it goes, the more catastrophic things get.

1.5°C might not sound too much and the difference between 1.5°C and 2.0°C might sound trivial, but it is huge, in fact: these are global average temperatures, and because the world's climate and weather systems are so delicate and interrelated, global average temperature differences should be compared to body temperatures, rather than the weather outside on any given day. The reason that relatively small differences in average global temperatures are such a big deal is that they have knock-on effects, which disrupt the balance of nature. Sea-level rise is the huge long-term problem with climate change, but more immediate effects come from changes to rainfall patterns, which changes the ability to grow food and access to drinking water and affects the frequency and intensity of storms, floods and droughts.

Many countries have improved their climate targets over the last two years

Hearing the latest climate science was the most sobering moment of my week



There are also “tipping points” and “feedback loops”. A tipping point is when something cannot be reversed — such as a huge part of the Antarctic iceshelf breaking off and ultimately melting. There will come a point where this becomes unstoppable, irreversible, where we lock in a really bad outcome for the planet and our future. The exact temperature or level of carbon in the atmosphere that will trigger the tipping point is impossible to predict; it’s a bit like predicting which straw will break a camel’s back.

I’m not a scientist, but I trust the science. For more on this, read the IPCC’s press release from its AR6 report, which [explains the latest scientific findings](#). Or listen to Johan Rockström himself at the New York Times Climate Hub ([see from minute 6:49 onwards](#)).

A feedback loop is when one aspect of global warming causes more global warming. Three examples spring to mind. First, melting polar ice caps are creating large, blue pools of water. These pools absorb heat (due to their colour), causing further warming. Normally, the white ice would reflect light (and heat) back into space. Second, more heating melts permafrost, which has been keeping methane tucked under ground. As the methane gets released, the world warms even more quickly. Third, changing rainfall patterns change vegetation, which changes the planet’s ability to absorb carbon. For example, the scientists say that as the world gets warmer, it will rain less in the Amazon region, drying out the forest. As the forest dries or gets burned, not only does that release more CO₂ into the atmosphere, but it also means there are fewer trees to absorb CO₂. These feedback loops are getting worse as the temperature rises and we are getting dangerously close to these irreversible tipping points. This is why Greta is alarmed. And on this, she is right.

One major obstacle to tackle climate change is the difference between the time of the polluting activity and the consequences of that activity. An excess of greenhouse gases being pumped into the atmosphere is what is causing the warming. CO₂ is the main one of those gases, with the main source of this the burning of fossil fuels such as coal, oil and gas. But other gases are potent and cause even more warming, especially methane. When CO₂ gets pumped into the atmosphere it sticks around for more than a hundred years: so the warming we are feeling now is the result of actions taken over the last hundred years. The issue right now is that things are getting worse, faster. (In economist language, the stock of emissions has been increasing at an exponential rate.) This needs to be reversed, fast. Methane is more potent (in terms of causing warming) but it evaporates faster than CO₂ – and only sticks around in the atmosphere causing warming for 20 or 30 years. The bottom line is that the world will continue to warm for years to come, but also that the consequences of people’s actions will be felt by future generations.

There is also the issue of 8 billion people in the world, so people feel individually that their actions do not count. But the solution is for change to happen at all levels. It needs to come from the top, but from the bottom up too. Given how important the issue is, I really ask everybody to take it seriously. Do what you can to prevent the world’s climate system from tipping over the edge. Failing to do it will literally consign your sons and daughters and their sons and daughters to a world in which sea levels will continue rising and literally consign some countries to history as they disappear under water, a world in which rainfall patterns change significantly, storms keep getting more severe and more frequent. Expect more famine, drought, wars, mass migration, unbearable living conditions in parts of the world. This isn’t the kind of world I want my daughter to live in.

It pains me how this has become a political issue and how many people think it is nonsense, left-wing, green BS. It also pains me how many well-intentioned people stick their head in the sand on this issue. Climate science and global warming needs to be taught in schools, to adults, to politicians, to anyone thinking of running for office, to business leaders, to workers. The fake news, echo chambers of social media are not helping as [highlighted by this article](#).

Feedback loops and tipping points — not our friends

Action to tackle climate change has been too slow, partly due to timing issues

Individuals often feel their actions do not make a difference — I beg to differ



The stakes couldn't be higher. It's a challenge, but it's the biggest challenge of our time, so if you are smart, if you have influence, if you care about this, then please think about the science, and do what you can. Don't just wait for others to act. And I would also say, the wealthier you are (myself included compared to the global average), the more you are likely to have contributed and be contributing to the problem. Do what you can to change this, big or small.

For more information about our climate-related economic services check out the [climate page of our website](#) or [get in touch](#) (details below). We will also be hosting a post-COP climate webinar with a panel discussion on 19 November at 2pm GMT. Register [here](#).

While I'm optimistic we can solve this, I think we all have a responsibility to do a little more



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