Defeating our hypocrisies in climate change

By Woon Xin Hui

What is a key concern that your generation faces? How would you like your idea to be implemented?

The key concern – I will not hesitate to accord the situation its fitting criticality – my generation faces is climate change. Its catastrophic effects have been documented ad nauseum: rising temperatures, disappearing islands, exacerbation of diseases – including the most recent cause for concern, the Zika virus. If I may offer an original perspective, however, a key concern my generation faces in relation to the phenomenon is in fact, incredible hypocrisy. I shall quickly expound this by detailing the three injustices we have inflicted: international, intergenerational, and interspecies.
 Farbotko's paper entitled, "Wishful sinking: Disappearing islands, climate refugees and cosmopolitan experimentation" (2010) explains how the island of Tuvalu can, unfortunately, be read as a laboratory for concretizing the effects of climate change. In other words, low-lying islands such as Tuvalu are often seen as a means to an ends: their fate, rather than being considered from the perspective of the inhabitants of the island, is often used simply to ascertain the severity of climate change and accuracy of predictions.

Is this not the case in our world today? More often than not, when we label the problem as a global problem, we erase the heterogeneity that makes humanity so colourful. Unfortunately, this harmfully obscures the power structures at work in our society – a paradigm that can helpfully inform the uneven impacts of climate change today. Notwithstanding the disadvantaged natural circumstances that makes Tuvalu and other low-lying countries especially vulnerable, more pertinently, the disparities in economies and technology produce the most pronounced differentiation of impacts with regards to climate change. Poorer countries are bound to suffer more from the impacts of climate change that they cannot pay to alleviate, and our hypocrisy lies in labelling the problem "global" but caring to mitigate it only locally, inevitably forcing less privileged people to bear our burden.

Secondly, when Jane Goodall came to Singapore for a talk, she said, "Someone said we do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children." It is not difficult to grasp what intergenerational injustice means. But when I speak to my peers about climate change, it is not uncommon to hear: "We won't be here anyway, I'm just going to live my good life and disappear." In fact – are you thinking this right now? To be perfectly honest, there is nothing I can do about such a mindset. I cannot denounce your self-interest and convincing you to subscribe to my morality delves into a whole other realm of ethics, which this essay quite simply has no space for.
Yet, I would just like to make a case for our future generations. Humans have only ever had one home, and all human endeavour – art, music and history – have occurred here. I firmly believe that we owe it not only to our descendants – but our forefathers, who literally spent their lives building humanity. We cannot stand for humanity, yet simultaneously destroy human civilisation's only home – therein lies our paradox. If we are truly the most intelligent species – why would self-preservation not logically include preservation of humanity?

Finally, diverging from anthropocentrism – a fancy word for focussing on humans – I wish to lend a voice to those who cannot speak for themselves. As we arrive at a burgeoning 7 billion in world

population, other species are on the verge of the Sixth Extinction. In the face of inclusivity becoming an emerging theme, officially endorsed by the UN and increasingly on the agenda of nation-states, how have we forgotten to extend this inclusivity to other species sharing our biosphere?
 How, then, may we then tackle such an extensive challenge? I propose two solutions: education, which works from the bottom-up, and governance, which I will explain is a necessary condition for and complement to the former.

My favourite author Antoine de Saint Exupéry said, "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood...teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea." On the day that I decided everything I do from here on out must be in pursuit of my goal of protecting our natural environment, I sat down to give the problem some thought to try and identify potential root causes. One of which I traced back to logically, was the problem of alienation.

I love nature, animals, plants, and volunteer at animal shelters because my mother disapproves of pets – but it is easy to see how the everyday urbanite might not share the same appreciation. Despite the documented benefits of nature on our well-being, fact is, our world today is literally structured in a way that necessarily alienates us from 'nature'. While protecting us from external elements, it has also kept out flora and fauna, and designated them spaces while human spaces are at best decorated by manicured, fragmented pieces of nature.

I feel that this feeds an apathy that has given rise to the lack of empathy for the problem. Thus, the solution looks to reducing this apathy: beginning with personal experience. I live in Toa Payoh, a neighbourhood in Singapore that teems with the generation that built my nation. Among them, every Sunday morning or during weekday dinners at nearby coffeeshops, old men gather and hang their bird cages at designated spots, before engaging in conversation. Outside my flat is a mini-garden my late grandmother and neighbouring auntie tend to, which I occasionally help out at. I do believe that such seemingly trivial exposure to nature sowed the seeds of my love for the environment, and implementing similar initiatives through schools or public housing can be crucial starting steps for stamping out apathy towards the natural environment.
Additionally, we have to start young. This is why I labelled this solution education: first, teaching the appreciation of nature; second, teaching values such as respect and responsibility, and finally encouraging creativity. Drawing from the experience of Japanese primary school education – students are made to ensure the cleanliness of their classrooms and this has cultivated in their culture a habit of cleaning up after themselves. In Singapore, the encouragement of classroom cleanliness is sometimes tampered by the efficacy of cleaners in schools. Thus, I think that the hired school janitors can be in charge of public school spaces – but that there must be spaces allocated solely to students' responsibility, so that we may draw from the experience of the Japanese to cultivate similar paramount values in students across Asia.

Finally, I believe that creativity can and should be encouraged in education systems. Oftentimes we are stuck when we consider how to proceed with sustainable development – because we often trap ourselves in existing ways of thinking that pit current lifestyles against sustainable development. However, a TEDxVancouver talk entitled, "Love, Laughter, Sushi: World Housing and Climate Change" by Michael Green showed how using wood to build has been an idea knocked down for years by architects due to inherited knowledge, but can actually solve many of today's climate – as well as housing – issues!

Our education must reflect what we want our future generations to be. We need education that will cultivate an appreciation for the environment that sustains humanity, we need education that will build values, and we need education that will harness creativity essential for future problems.

However, education focusses on building individuals who will fight the hypocrisies of my generation – this seems almost antithetical to the global scale of climate change. Especially when irresponsibility on the part of companies or governments make headlines, individuals are often bombarded with media that convince them of their insignificance in Going Green. This is particularly damaging to An Inconvenient Truth, as accountability is easily pushed to politics, and the people that, by definition, companies and governments service, are disempowered; immense people power remains unharnessed, not unlike alternative energy.

Thus, I believe that, to stamp out helplessness, we must move in tandem with political and economic giants to reinforce the notion of shared responsibility. Club of Rome's The Limits to Growth was a watershed publication that established the doxa that economic growth must damage the environment. However, research has increasingly shown otherwise: for instance, evidence has surfaced that resource-poor countries have been superior in economic development due to rapid diversification upping competitive industrialisation – the necessity of environmental devastation for economic development inevitably falls. Rather than continuing to subscribe to meaningless dichotomies, Asia could use leadership that dares to stand for the environment, so that education can be embedded in an enabling context and thoroughly empower the individuals to fight our climate change hypocrisies.

We must have judicious leadership that no longer pits national development imperatives against the needs of the natural environment – but rather, considers solutions that can achieve win-win solutions. Taking these ideas into consideration, Asia can approach my generation's hypocrisies in climate change, and implement initiatives to become a global leader in addressing a key problem facing my generation.

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