



Critical issues in sustainability

Part II

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Preface

Engaging in critical studies is not just about making axioms visible, questioning assumptions and scrutinizing the thoughts and actions of others. It is also about provoking thought – and in provoking lies the challenge, so to speak. The English word ‘provoke’ is derived from the French word *provochier*, which stems directly from the Latin verb *provocare*, meaning to call forth or to challenge. Employing a critical attitude should hence not be seen as merely revealing assumptions that are hidden from the eye. Beyond exposing, it encompasses debunking.

In addition to these functions of engaging in critical studies, there is another – although oftentimes more hidden – goal to it: engendering some form of change. This goal is as intrinsic to critical studies as any other, since critical theory essentially deals with liberating human beings from the circumstances that enslave them, as the German sociologist Horkheimer has put it. Critical studies imply an engagement to shed light on the values, ideas, culture, and power structures that govern and influence our society and economy as well as to think through the consequences and provide entrances to pathways of action. Thus, beyond debunking, there is eliciting.

Or, to summarize it in a more popular and teleological manner: the word ‘challenge’ carries the word ‘change’ in it for a reason.

Engaging in critical studies is about questioning one’s own assumptions and provoking one’s own thoughts, too. This implies that critical studies provide an indispensable way of learning for anyone. And it is a way of learning that is definitely worthwhile, since it may not only challenge one’s perspective, it may also change one’s perspective. It might not be the most easy way of learning, though. It requires a serious effort to continuously dig deeper. It requires the courage to explore and reveal the defects and even the malice of widely accepted ideas and embraced concepts and to propose new ideas and concepts. And it requires a tenacity to repeat the messages derived from scrutiny and to continue to engage in debate. Still, the ambition is bigger: to change, in any way, albeit modest and local, from our own specific roles, and from our own engagements to make the world a better place.

We decided to label this booklet ‘Critical issues in sustainability – Part II’ since its contents represent a continuation of the work we have embarked on some years ago. Also, with Part II, we hope to have started a series for the years to come. Years in which we aim to both continue to develop the present work and explore new work, following from our new role as Chairs in Management Education for Sustainability.

As was the case for the previous booklet (which we may now call '[Critical issues in sustainability – Part I](#)'), this booklet contains a selection of opinion pieces that we have written over the past year and which were published in national and regional newspapers. These opinion pieces allow us to share our thinking and ideas with the broader public and support the exchange of them through discussion and debate, while they support debates through media that we think are critical to realizing the goals of exposing, debunking, and eliciting.

We hope that you will find the thoughts and ideas that we set forward in this booklet valuable and that you will take some inspiration from it – inspiration to at least keep asking questions and challenge others to do so, too, since that is the seed of change.

Lars and Frans

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Part I.

Sustainability's red herrings

The myth of sustainable growth

Much better than companies' marketing messages or sustainability reports, CEO statements aptly reveal to what extent companies really take their responsibilities to society serious and what role they see for themselves in the sustainability transition. For instance, Shell CEO Ben van Beurden recently lamented at people's desire to eat strawberries during winter time as an important cause for climate change. While 'eating with the seasons' is a good idea for many reasons, coming from a company that is in the top-10 of global carbon emitters, such a statement might strike one as somewhat quasi-whimsical – if not outright hypocritical.

In a similar vein, the statement 'Enjoy, but fly moderately' by KLM CEO Peter Elbers arouses some suspicion. It is an evident version of the alcoholic beverage industry's well-known adage to point at the importance to consume life's spiritual pleasures responsibly – in the present case relating to travelling for discovering other cultures or visiting exclusive all-inclusive resorts. Elbers allegedly wants to start the conversation about sustainable and conscious transportation in this way. He aims to do so because of the fact that KLM and Schiphol aspire to grow further and because, in his words, sustainability requires growth and innovation simply costs a lot of money.

Such statements are part of the growing number of corporate expressions that mythologize the role of companies in climate change, particularly those in the more polluting industries. Researchers from the universities of Cardiff, Edinburgh, and Exeter have investigated this phenomenon by exploring the strategies used by large European oil and gas companies to avoid the tensions between sustainability on the one hand and economic growth on the other. Based on public statements of the CEOs of these companies they have identified three myths that are cultivated by these companies and the defence mechanisms underlying these myths.

The first and most prevalent myth is the 'technofix' myth. With this myth, companies emphasize technological solutions for the climate crisis, including subsurface CO₂ storage, and deny the tensions between sustainability and economic growth or try to refer to these as irrelevant. The underlying defence mechanism here is based on having trust in the ways of working and the deployment of techniques that these companies have since long used.

The second myth is that of the 'Promethean oil man': oil and gas companies consider themselves as the noble guardians of modern civilization. It is them creating the basic conditions for (economic) life – after all, without oil and gas, the world would come to a halt immediately. The defence mechanism that is at work here is a combination of omnipotence and prestige, implying that these companies are not so much causing climate change as they are best positioned and able to formulate viable responses to the climate crisis.

Third, the researchers identify the myth of 'partnership': climate change can only be solved by working together with third parties – stakeholders that are unconnected or not directly connected

to the sector, including non-governmental organizations and governments. Partnering with those stakeholders legitimizes the polluters. It is projection that serves as the defence mechanism, emphasizing the necessity of these other parties' roles. By implication, the failure of interventions made to combat climate change is equally the responsibility of these third parties.

Elbers' statements partly confirm the existence of these myths: he stresses the importance of technological innovation, implies that flying is integral to everyday (economic) life, and abdicates at least a part – if not all – of the responsibility to consumers. By flipping the relationship between sustainability and growth (increased flying does not compromise but enable sustainability), he consciously creates a fourth myth: The Myth of the Growth Logic. This myth revolves around the obsession with economic growth and economies of scale as the single best route towards a more sustainable world. More than being an inauspicious idea that has been refuted by academic research, this myth painfully reveals the intellectual and creative poverty of an economic elite as well as a lack of willingness and courage to make the right, sustainable decisions. Through a perverse way of turning around arguments, companies using this myth try to sell the idea that economic growth benefits and even is a precondition for sustainability. The underlying defence mechanism is a religious belief in an amalgam of unidimensional economic value creation, maximizing stockholder value, and incremental innovation. Or, to put it in more simple terms, it is applying the same logic as a building company that suggests homeowners to turn up the thermostats in their houses so that the insulation of their cavity walls – which the company will install for a reasonable price, of course – can be recouped more quickly.

It should be noted that these four myths actually are arguments that follow a circular logic. Hence, it makes sense to refer to an actual myth: the myth of Cassandra and her gift to predict the future. Predictions of inevitable mischief that are not being believed are called Cassandra predictions. The idea that it is possible to prevent unsustainability and realize sustainability by focussing on economic growth is not only illogical, but also outright dangerous. Already in 1972, the Club of Rome predicted much of the ecological and social degradation that we are now witnessing around us and that still awaits us when we fail to make other choices quickly and radically. Let's pierce through these fake myths as soon as possible in order to not let the predictions of the Club of Rome become Cassandra predictions – and to make sure that we will not be too late to stop all the bad things waiting to happen.

(This column was published on July 29, 2019 by Het Financieele Dagblad.)

Let's not fool ourselves with sustainability's business case

The director of the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP), Kim Putters, recently wrote an extensive op-ed about the importance of citizens' support for the sustainability transition. In order to obtain that support, he argued, the government needs to approach sustainability in a less negative way. As Putters explains: "Usually, the sustainability debate is not very inviting when one realizes it is about doing or having less. But you might look at it from another side: what does it bring us in terms of healthier lives, clean air, or new jobs?" Against this background Putters concludes that the conditions for a successful, supported government policy are simply not in order.

Putters places himself in the popular discourse that emphasizes the benefits of sustainability. Thinking around the problem, as he calls it. And when the people do not consider the sustainability transition as just and have the idea that it requires changes that one should be able to afford oneself, sustainable development indeed becomes a battle characterized by dismay, conflict, and possible even violence. However, a number of critical notes should be made with respect to the issue of support for sustainability – remarks that Putters foregoes in his analysis but should actually be addressed in order to accelerate the transition towards sustainability.

For one, what type of support is needed is an important question to ask: is it about broad support for sustainability or is it better to have a small but deep support base on certain domains, as is proposed by transition theory? Aiming for broad support leads to incorporating adversaries, whereas a small but deep support base of people that can have a fresh look at things, think differently, and can bring about change ensures that there is a focus on willingness to change and experimenting. Moreover, recent research published in *Nature* shows that engaging citizens in the sustainability transition (for example, the recent climate change campaign initiated by the Dutch government) may come at the expense of support for overarching sustainability policy measures (such as a carbon tax). Certainly, gaining support is not a matter of proselytizing as many and as quickly as possible – gaining support has its own complex and even ambiguous dynamics. Finally, and contrary to what Putters seems to suggest, support is not the be-all and end-all criterion for the sustainability transition to succeed. The Dutch nitrogen crisis is a good case in point, just as global warming is: things have to change rather drastically to realize sustainability goals. Support assumes successfully calling upon people's ability to change, while anyone can tell you that that ability is all but a given. Current privileges, especially given that these privileges are usually coupled with power, are perhaps the most clear example of barriers at work that limit our common ability towards making our society and our economy more sustainable.

But Putters especially barks up the wrong tree when he writes about the negative approach towards sustainability. As he argues: "Sustainability debates tend to linger too long on the offers that we should make. There is hardly any discussion about the benefits of the alternatives." Such claims

fit perfectly with the popular discourse that contends that we should emphasize the benefits of investing in sustainability to enthruse people for it and accept the necessary measures. However, this instrumental way of reasoning – also known as the business case for sustainability – is problematic for at least two reasons. First, there often simply isn't a business case for investing in sustainability, let alone that the business case is obvious. If the business case for sustainability was up for grabs, we wouldn't need to have discussions about support in the first place, would we? Second, business case thinking degrades sustainability from an end in itself to a means to an economic end or other forms of short-term self-interest. More than that this type of thinking opens horizons for developing solutions, this instrumental approach is first and foremost part of the problem.

As an extension of the previous point, Putters' arguments stem from a discourse about sustainability that seems to suggest that reality – and reality, as tedious as it may seem, doesn't spark much joy, at least from a sustainability perspective – cannot be perceived as such. The anger of climate activists worldwide (and we consider ourselves part of that group) that recently befell novelist Jonathan Franzen following his essay 'What if we stopped pretending?' published in *The New Yorker*, in which he assumes that the climate apocalypse is unavoidable, speaks volumes. The reality is that the transition towards a society and an economy that is fundamentally sustainable is going to hurt and will be costly (at least to some if not most). It is as simple as that – *that* is reality. The fundamental changes that are needed in our thinking about the relationships between man, nature, and economics, including changes in lifestyle, phasing out fossil fuels, stabilizing population growth, and saying goodbye to GNP and growth as measures of prosperity make that we have no other option. The nitrogen issue in the Netherlands is merely a symptom of the value reorientation that has to guide us in this change process. The honest message is, as we may derive from a recent scientific article in *BioScience* that is supported by more than 11,000 scholars worldwide, that we are dealing with no less than a climate emergency. The article poses that "untold suffering due to the climate crisis" awaits us.

For sure, an appealing story about the sustainability transition is needed and successful examples on the micro-level can aid us starting the transition, but let's not fool ourselves about what is ahead of us. There is a huge amount of work to be done and it is all but evident whether or not we will be able to reverse the trend on time, if ever. Going through the sustainability transition is going to hurt in any case and we will need to make sacrifices in many, many domains. Not recognizing that will only make the problem bigger. Betting on building support through business case approaches is fooling people. In fact, you can bet that we are going to regret that when the moment arrives that we need (the support of) those same people for implementing the real solutions.

(This column was published on January 9, 2020 on the Sociale Vraagstukken website.)

We should stop cultivating the illusion of individual climate action

In September 2019, the national climate change campaign ‘Iedereen doet wat’ (which translates as ‘Everybody is doing something’) initiated by the Dutch government took off. The goal of the campaign is to provide the Dutch people with a helping hand in a very accessible way with making sustainable choices in and around the house. To put it in the words of the campaign itself: “The question is not whether or not people can do something for the climate, but what they can do.” Against the background of the attention that the Dutch Climate Accord has had and since historical melting patterns of arctic ice and large forest fires are daily news, the necessity to take action will probably not have escaped the eye of most Dutch people.

Strikingly, this national campaign is not so much based on creating awareness about the importance of taking climate action (as many campaigns have been) and is not directive in its communication. The campaign smartly builds on an important psychological insight: that the so-called social norm is a powerful way to get people moving. More powerful, for instance, than just a moral appeal. By emphasizing that others are already taking action – so through showing that it is normal and that you are not alone in the actions you take – people are stimulated to take action more easily. And that is all but a crazy idea: years of academic research into human behavior demonstrates that emphasizing the social norm is an important mechanism for eliciting certain desired behavior.

Especially for a topic such as combatting climate change it is crucial that this is well thought-through, because the sustainable behavior that is needed for that goal simply isn’t the norm yet. This campaign therefore emphasizes the absolute number of Dutch people who have already installed solar panels, which is around 800,000. (It appears that this number actually represents the number of families instead of persons, meaning that more people have solar panels – a strange mistake in the campaign’s communication.) In addition, the campaign uses a blend of a descriptive and prescriptive norm: on the one hand, there are messages on what others are doing in practice, while on the other hand the name of the campaign contains a subtle normative message.

Although it remains to be seen what the impact of the campaign will be and there have been cynical reactions to it (‘Everybody just does something’), the campaign certainly has several ingredients to become a success. Having said that, a number of critical remarks should be made about it.

In the first place, the campaign should have used a more special case of the social norm, namely the local norm. The campaign tries to put a face on climate actions by linking it to the name of a person (‘Jim does something’) or a group of people (‘Solar collective Beek does something’). However, when one tries to find more information about these people, one will only find a short

video, a small number of suggestions for action, and a couple of references to online sources that may serve as an aid in replicating the actions. Besides telling a longer personal story, the campaign could have emphasized which climate actions are being taken in people's neighbourhoods, for example based on postal codes – the local norm.

Secondly, the campaign does not emphasize the two activities that have the biggest climate impacts: eating less meat and flying less. Because of the fact that these two actions can easily be interpreted as prohibitions or limitations, and have a scent of moralizing to them, including these actions probably was difficult, possibly leading people to turn away from this campaign or political parties opposing to it. The campaign is clearly geared towards providing suggestions in a sympathetic way rather than forbidding certain activities. Nevertheless, using leds or radiator foil clearly is of a different order than reducing meat consumption or flying.

Thirdly, the campaign is particularly focused on individual and, to a lesser extent, groupwise climate action instead of the social context in which these actions take place. Changing the social context is one of the critical success factors for changing individual behavior. Research by social and evolutionary psychologists shows that when people consciously and unconsciously take cues from their environments, chances of them changing their own behavior become even bigger. So, instead of stressing just individual actions, the campaign should also pay attention to designing contextual signals. However difficult that may sound, it is actually rather simple. For instance, everybody going to work by bike can place his or her helmet visibly on his or her desk. Also, smart interventions, such as endorsing combination menus in the office canteen that include a vegetarian dish, can have big effects.

A fourth and perhaps most important point of criticism regarding the campaign concerns the fact that it is completely stuck in individualizing the climate crisis. In that sense, the campaign resembles the well-known environmental campaign from the 1990s by the Dutch government called 'A better environment starts with you', with the remark this latter campaign clearly placed a strong moral appeal on people. In the meantime, the consensus is that the climate crisis is a systemic problem that can hardly be solved through individual action. Recent calculations by the Dutch Environmental Planning Agency PBL that demonstrate that the goals in the Dutch Climate Accord and those of the Urgenda verdict will probably not be realized, show once more that building a new foundation for our thinking about prosperity is what is really needed. Apart from the consequences that this insight will have on the actual effects of the climate change campaign, the campaign itself is a repudiation of the nasty, demotivating trap that citizens find themselves in. Putting the responsibility for this complex problem on the shoulders of citizens through a campaign qualifies as being somewhat misguided, to say the least.

Hopefully, these criticisms are seen as suggestions for improving the next climate change campaign that builds on the current one. A focus on the individual will not suffice – the social context also deserves a place in such a campaign and the government, also taking into account the credibility of such a campaign, needs to ensure that it also takes initiative to contribute to a system change. Only then will the campaign stand a fighting chance to not become the proverbial drop in the Earth’s acidifying oceans.

(This column was published on November 16, 2019 by Het Parool.)

Part II.

Reflecting on value(s)

Rethinking value – and how to do it

The report of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) shocked the world. The IPBES report shows that the Anthropocene not only leaves its devastating trail on climate, but also on Earth's biodiversity. Forests are disappearing at an alarming rate, oceans are being overfished and acidify, and land and water are getting more and more polluted by the day. And more than a million animal and plant species are on the brink of extinction. And while we may jeopardize our own existence with that, it remains to be seen if the IPBES report will have the effect it should.

Like climate change, for many people biodiversity is a distant, abstract topic. Psychology tells us that such doom messages can easily backfire and have an adverse effect. The effect of doom messages is that it leads to habituation ("yeah, yeah, we know things are bad by now"), avoidance ("just bring me good news, right!"), and stereotyping ("isn't it terrible to see all these polar bears drifting on small sheets of ice?").

Even more problematic is that those who are thinking about and trying to implement solutions often do this based on the same logic that created the problems in the first place. The British government, for instance, has asked Cambridge University to conduct a study into the economic effects of biodiversity loss. Anticipating a corporate CO₂ tax in the Netherlands, politicians will probably be hoarding to participate in all kinds of talkshows to emphasize the need to keep measures to combat climate change affordable for citizens, to point at the risks that companies will leave the country when taxed for CO₂, and paint dark pictures of potential job losses. Climate change and biodiversity loss are very important, but solutions simply may not come at the cost of our economy or the income of the electorate.

At the same time the IPBES report came out, scientific research was published that sought empirical evidence for the assumption that we can at the same time protect the biodiversity and liveability of our planet as well as realize economic growth. Guess what? There is no such evidence and any suggestion to unify these aims is based more on hope than facts.

Against the background of this green growth *fata morgana* alarm bells such as the IPBES report should urge us to finally begin to distinguish between cause and effect. The tendency to express climate change and biodiversity in economic terms, as is the idea behind thinking about ecosystem services and true cost accounting, reveals a deeper poverty: a moral poverty in our thinking about our common future and possible solutions to keep that liveable and equitable. The real challenge lies in developing a new conception of value that leads to a social-economic system that enables life on Earth rather than compromises it – and make that conception central to our actions.

We see at least the following three strategies to come to a development of such a revised conception of value. First of all: a strategy of limitation. Regulating economic activity is inevitable against the background of the biodiversity and climate crisis. Regulation is also desirable, because the rule of law is a reflection of the values that should function as a compass for development. At the same time, there should be room for more radical and original experiments. A nice example in this regard is the DO Black credit card of the Swedish startup Doconomy, that enables you to do purchases within your personal CO2 budget. A second strategy is imagination. Nature offers billions of years in research and development and is a source of inspiration for new modes of production that respect human, animal, and botanic life. The 'factory as a forest' concept of carpet tile maker and sustainability leader Interface shows that companies can even help in developing local ecosystems. A third strategy is contagion. Research has shown that sustainable behavior in one domain (e.g., driving electric) can lead to sustainable behavior in other domains (e.g., vegetarianism). Such spillover effects demonstrate that subsidies and fiscal incentive arrangements for sustainability purposes are anything but bad ideas.

As long as we continue to see value as a synonym for economic prosperity, economic prosperity continues to be defined as growth and exploitation of humans and nature remains its starting point, the most probable outcome is actually poverty, hunger and air pollution. Will there then still be politicians falling over themselves to claim their seats in talkshows to state that equality, food, and oxygen are very important, but that it should be affordable?

(This column was published on May 9, 2019 by Het Parool.)

The Friedman doctrine is alive and kicking

Good ideas survive their originators and stand the test of time. Most good ideas, at least. There are also many bad ideas that outlive the people who came up with them. The interpretation of the social responsibility of business as developed by late Nobel prize winner Milton Friedman clearly falls within the latter category. Friedman argued that the only social responsibility of business was to maximize their profits and subsequently distribute these profits among their shareholders. Especially since his infamous article in the New York Times in 1970 on this proposition, the concept of shareholder primacy has taken root everywhere in the world, especially in the United States. In 2016, The Economist declared this theory, which revolves around the separation of ownership and management, shareholder value, competition, and market logic, the most important idea in the history of business and management thinking.

This week, various US media reported that companies of which the CEOs have gathered in the Business Roundtable, have waved Friedman's theory goodbye. The tenet of a new declaration that this corporate association has issued (the so-called 'Statement on the Purpose of a Corporation') is that these companies hold a deep commitment to all stakeholders – not just to their shareholders. Judging on the tone of the media reports and the various commentators it appeared that this statement was received as a rather positive surprise. In fact, it was considered to be no less than a paradigm change that would have Milton Friedman turn over in his grave.

The opposite, however, appears to be the case, as several aspects of this declaration clearly show.

First of all, stakeholder thinking, if only for the fact that stakeholder interests, demands, and expectations are oftentimes irreconcilable, inevitably leads to dilemmas. The statement does not say a single word about this, whereas exactly this represents the most important challenge when companies are serious about leaving behind the idea of shareholder primacy. Interestingly, a number of companies seems to have already experienced a dilemma with this statement, since not all members of the Business Roundtable have signed the statement. We are guessing, but it might well be the case that these companies' shareholders have urged the CEOs to withhold their support.

Second, the wording of the statement gives it a somewhat patriotic character. While such a panache is not uncommon for US companies, the perspective of upcoming presidential elections may suggest that companies are anticipating on tax reforms that might be ahead. Issuing the statement can then be seen as an example of 'meestribbelen'.¹

¹ While this word is rather hard to translate, it may be described as 'sabotaging things while participating in a way that suggests cooperative efforts'.

Third, as a professor of the University of Chicago spuriously noted in *The Washington Post*, the signatories of the statement are the same CEOs that have willingly allowed selling dubious mortgages, have aggressively marketed addictive drugs, have dumped toxic waste in urban areas, have taken any opportunity to avoid and evade paying taxes, and that are not particularly transparent about their companies' climate-unfriendly lobbying activities. In short, they have been doing everything to maximize profits and keep their shareholders satisfied. Against that background, the occurrence of numerous scandals, and the news that US CEOs have seen their pay cheques increase with over 1000 per cent since 1978 (for employees this has been barely 12 per cent) and currently earn over 278 times more than the average salary in their companies, the statement is, at best, a incredulous attempt to polish their reputations.

Fourth, every CEO knows that in this day and age stakeholder value is the decisive factor for creating shareholder value – that is the essence of sustainable business. The fact that long-term shareholder value only is fifth in the list of corporate commitments in the statement, does not impinge on the dominant importance that companies attribute to shareholder value in practice. That leads the statement to become even more incredulous, because everyone that looks into the sustainability commitments of these companies can easily see that these companies are well aware of this.

Fifth, and most striking about this statement, is that it is only now – 2019 – that it has been issued. The type of stakeholder thinking that is now being propagated by the Business Roundtable was already pioneered in the 1930s (!) and, in fact, it was the Business Roundtable itself that placed this idea on record in the early 1980s. The statement hence is a sad anachronism that shows how much such companies are detached from the social reality that they are part and parcel of.

The inescapable conclusion is that the Friedman doctrine about the social responsibilities of business is all but dead. In fact, it is alive and kicking, irrespective of what these companies want us to believe.

(This column was published on August 28, 2019 by BN De Stem.)

Decency's pricetag

Early April 2019, Shell attracted a lot of the media attention for sustainability with new commercials saying that their customers would be able to fill up their cars with fossil fuels in a CO2 neutral way. Clearly, you don't need a lot of technical expertise to feel, let's say, a certain kind of skepticism when you read such a message. And those who are experts on the subject matter were quick to respond to it in ways that clearly demonstrated that Shell's claims were outright nonsense.

The question, then, is why the smart men and women working at Shell launched this lamentable PR stunt. To show that Shell is maybe somewhat serious about the sustainability transition and climate change? Because Shell knows perfectly well that there still are a lot of ignorant people that consider such initiatives as being sympathetic and well-intended? To keep fossil fuels mainstream through CO2 compensation? Or to show that there are alternatives for that nasty CO2 tax?

In the shadowy slipstream of this typical and, above all, greenwashed example of what the Dutch call 'meestribbelen', a much more interesting message saw the light, coming from no less than 17 large companies from the steel and chemical sector. The works council of industry giants such as Shell, Esso, BP, Tata Steel and Dow sent a letter to the Dutch government and parliament which expressed their apparent aversion to the implementation of a one-sided CO2 tax in the Netherlands. According to a recent report, such a CO2 tax would lead companies to leave the Netherlands and would cannibalize on the 'necessary investments in innovation, efficiency, and sustainability'. In addition, these companies write that they think it is unfair that they are seen as the large polluters in society. However, these self-proclaimed representatives of The Netherlands, Inc. admit that they are aware of the motivations for a CO2 tax and that they think that this administration should deliver on the climate goals.

This letter provides a good inside look into how big corporations see this world and their roles in it. It is a perspective that, in a shocking way, is detached from reality and demonstrates a total lack of self-reflection and respect for society.

For purposes of convenience, it seems that these big polluters tend to 'forget' that sustainability – or better: the lack thereof – has a historical context. We can all marvel at the inspiring perspectives that these fossil fueled engines of The Netherlands, Inc. present us with based on the Sustainable Development Goals. However, this illusory future ignores the problem's root causes – which, not entirely accidentally, coincide with the activities of these companies, their expansion, and the development of the social-economic system that they have been feeding on. For example, according to a 2017 report of the Carbon Disclosure Project, ExxonMobil Corp, Shell and BP are together responsible for more than 5 percent of total worldwide (!) industry CO2 emissions. Sustainability is just as much a matter of giving respect to future generations as it is about being

accountable for the developments that these companies have gone through in the past, the paths they have taken and the decisions that they have made – and still take. This doesn't even include questions regarding who is to blame, but with arguments that the economy cannot exist without their products, any discussion about a transition towards a sustainable economy and society is held in a headlock.

A recent quote by the director of Tata Steel The Netherlands provides a poignant illustration for this type of attitude: a CO2 tax would lead his company to go bankrupt, he said. A better description of what is fundamentally wrong with these companies could hardly be given. The main reason that these companies make a profit in the first place, lies in the fact that they socialize costs and privatize profits. Puma is an illuminating example in this regard. This producer of sports clothing and accessories published the world's first so-called environmental profit and loss account (EPL). From this EPL, it appeared that, when the assumed costs of the environmental harm that the company created that year would be integrated into its regular profit and loss account, some 70 percent of corporate profits would at once evaporate. What this shows, is that it is high time to fundamentally reconsider the very idea of what constitutes a successful company.

Perhaps the worst of it all is that climate change, as the single biggest and overarching challenge of our time, has taken center stage in a nasty political joust in which electoral gain and representing vested economic interests have become the dominant motives. The Dutch comedian Hans Sibbel asked himself the question in his theatre show 'De Bovengrens' (Eng. The Upper Limit) if there is a line that you just should not cross. A border after which you have passed it, you just have gone too far. Climate change forces us to identify a lower limit – for a CO2 tax and for when one can speak of doing business in a decent way.

(This column was published on April 20, 2019 by Het Parool.)

Part III.

Changing climate, changing perspective?

The Dutch Climate Accord lacks a compelling story

There was no shortage of ruffling and trumpets when the Dutch government finally presented its own Climate Accord, almost four years after the Paris Climate Accords. The contents of the 240-page long document should ensure that the Netherlands will be emitting 49 percent less CO₂ in 2030 when compared to 1990 – and 95 percent less in 2050.

Reactions to the Climate Accord vary widely. On the one hand, the Dutch administration is applauded for it, simply because there is now an agreement on a thorny political issue and because, in any case, there is potential for making some much-needed progress. The fact that there is now such an accord, demonstrates that the so-called ‘polder’ is not only still alive, but may also enable such deals between institutional stakeholders. In addition, there will be a more serious CO₂ tax, road pricing has become a viable option, and the Netherlands will make sure to invest in sector transitions. The ensemble of the recently passed Climate Law in the Netherlands and the Climate Accord indeed suggests that there at least is some solid ground in developing the country towards a fossil-poor economy.

There is harsh critique, too, however: the Climate Accord is too little, too late. The Dutch government has ignored court orders in a lawsuit started by the activist organization Urgenda to force the Netherlands to take additional measures to cut CO₂ emissions and, in doing so, still denies the urgency of the climate change issue. Also, many stakeholders participated in negotiating the Climate Accord, which has led to the more drastic interventions and measures, which we cannot wait for to take much longer, being deleted from the final text. In fact, several of the most important decisions have been postponed and effectively passed on to next administrations. Others, in turn, even call the Climate Accord a traditional smokescreen, purposefully created to create more complexity on the issue.

While these criticisms mainly focus on the ambition level of what actually is *in* the Climate Accord, it is equally important and interesting to take a look at what is *not in* it to gauge its problems.

First of all, if there is anything lacking in the Climate Accord, it is a narrative. Above all, it is a collection of goals, objectives, and measures. At best, it offers some kind of gradual roadmap for a development towards a CO₂ neutral economy, but an inspirational vision or an appealing perspective on a sustainable future is conspicuously missing. To be clear, this doesn’t have to be just one storyline – it can be many storylines, with many stories, within an overarching narrative. Why? Because imagination is crucial in making such a transition happen, through connecting people, political identities, and ideological beliefs. Perhaps it is even worse to observe that not only is there no engaging narrative in the Climate Accord, the necessity of such a sensemaking frame is not even recognized.

Second, there seems to be a lack of ideas about how to get support for the climate goals. The Climate Accord reflects the wish of the Dutch administration ‘to not go too fast’, because this speed will come at the price of the support of people and organizations in the Netherlands. Mind you, the administration itself has contributed to compromising measures to combat climate change and the effects thereof by increasing energy bills and employing stereotypes such as ‘prosecco-sipping Tesla drivers’ (that together will bear a large part of the costs of the creation and maintenance of roads, judging on some of the proposed policy measures). Bizarrely, this political lingo will make the necessary policies only more draconic. On the one hand, the effects of this administration’s wish is that support among leaders and frontrunners (including organizations, consumers, and in particular younger generations) may well decrease, because their enthusiasm, voice, and efforts are not being valued in the way they should be. On the other hand, future support among a larger part of industry and the Dutch population is jeopardized. This cabinet has narrowed support down to affordability, which suggests a poignant lack of vision.

Third of all, the Climate Accord shows no sign of any solid knowledge of human behavior. At various points in the document the importance of human and organizational behavior change is mentioned, but it should come as no surprise that the administration effectively only relies on public communication campaigns. Recent research has shown that cultivating the illusion that climate change can best be curbed through small, profitable efforts in the private domain, carries the risk of diminishing the support for necessary, broader policy measures. Also, there is an identity aspect to climate change: several years ago scholars demonstrated how beliefs about climate change are dependent on people’s worldviews. The urgency of the climate change problem that the world faces hence requires thought-through behavioral strategies – it is not a matter of putting a record on and hoping that this just leads us somewhere.

Meanwhile, a heatwave at the Californian coast is literally boiling mussels in the seawater, the thermometer in France reached a record-high 45.1 degrees Celsius, and climate adaptation has become a huge market opportunity. Against this background, the Dutch Climate Accord misses the point. Each and every ministry, province, water authority, and municipality should take the above points to heart in order to finally let effective initiatives surface and prevent that climate policies will result in disaster.

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Seeing the forest for the trees of climate change

In the search for effective solutions to combatting climate change, a remarkable suggestion was made a couple of weeks ago. Swiss scholars, reporting on their research in the renowned scientific journal *Science*, calculated that planting 900 million hectares of forest worldwide would be the best way to prevent Earth's average temperature from getting any higher – at least in theory. Considering the severity of the climate change issue that we are facing and against the background of the impotence of politicians, governments, and businesses to implement the necessary policies, this 'rooftop strategy' sounds rather appealing. Last week demonstrated exactly that: the research results spread like – to use an appropriately cynical metaphor – an Amazonian fire through various media.

Still, this suggestion is somewhat remarkable for several reasons – and not only because of the technical and practical problems of the three-decade day-in-day-out planting activity that it would take to add 900 square kilometres of forest, the surface necessary to reach the goals of the Paris Climate Accords.

In the first place it is remarkable because, in the early days of sustainable business in the Netherlands, planting trees was seen as the contemporary equivalent of Catholic indulgence. In that way, industry could compensate for its carbon emissions to its heart's contents, without implementing any real changes to its business processes and model. It is clear that this 'climate indulgence' has never been a very credible option – at its best, one could see it as an admission of guilt. In the course of time, the idea of compensating for harmful emissions has continued to exist, but mainly as an option to compensate for inevitable CO₂ emissions – emissions that remain after all possible measures to reduce them have been taken.

A second reason to consider the idea to drastically increase the world's forest area remarkable has to do with the solutions' credibility. In times when the speed of global deforestation outpaces that of the proposed planting, this is – through the process of erosion that accompanies it – literally and figuratively speaking throwing water into the sea. With ultra-conservative administrations in power, such as those of the Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, deforestation is on the increase. Based on the article in *Science*, the parodic Dutch news channel *De Speld* aptly reported that ever larger parts of Brazil are becoming available to plant all those trees. No matter how many of such factors you take into account in research, cynicism among citizens for solutions like this will not recede. And if there is one ingredient that is indispensable for truly effective climate change solutions, it is the people's support.

Third, and more fundamental: planting new forests is a relatively simple and, in its simplicity, even charming solution for the intricate problems of climate change that we face. In itself there is nothing wrong with simple solutions, but planting trees on such a large scale may well be suggested because the measures that should be taken, aren't being taken. That may also suggest that this

solution is suspiciously similar to throwing in the towel. It sends the signal that this may be the only feasible solutions left to keep us on a trajectory of limited global warming.

On a matter that literally is about life and death of people, animals, and nature, one could pose that with such messages science is subjugating itself to the political reality, little by little – and that would be a very sad observation. Science should have the role of supporting politicians with knowledge and ideas that enable and stimulate effective action on climate change. In addition, planting trees is something that basically anyone can do and this sort of solution may suggest that anyone of us can contribute to solving the climate crisis, giving in – probably unintendedly – to the perverted idea of individualizing the systemic crisis that climate change is.

Make no mistake: of course this does not mean that the large-scale planting of trees is a bad idea. It can definitely be part and parcel of a broader set of climate change policies and actions. Doing so would enable storing over 200 gigaton of historically emitted CO₂. At the same time, other experts have observed that the suggestion of the Swiss research team would be insufficient in any scenario, precisely because it focuses on storing already emitted CO₂ and this means that we would still require a big reduction in future CO₂ emissions.

Against the background of the fact that 70 percent of global CO₂ emissions is caused by 100 companies alone, we should make sure that we see the forest for the trees when it comes to effective and appropriate measures to tackle climate change.

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How the Dutch really feel about climate change

The panel research project 'Citizens' Perspectives', conducted by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP), reports on the overall mood among people in the Netherlands and the public opinion. With this research project, jokingly referred to as the National Headache Index, the SCP has kept a finger on the pulse for more than 12 years regarding issues such as integration, income, the distribution of wealth, and politics. Together, these reports paint a current picture about how the Dutch people think about their society.

Interestingly, the media has highlighted one specific result from the latest report the past few weeks: concerns about climate change and pollution had risen to the number two spot in the list of problems that are on people's minds. For the first time, the Dutch appear more worried about these issues than about the issues of immigration and integration. Over the past three months, one in three people spontaneously mentioned one or more concerns they had about the climate and the environment, compared to 22 percent the previous trimester. From the nitrogen crisis and the attention for poly- and perfluoralkyl substances (more commonly known as PFAS) to climate protests and the enormous fires that are ravaging the planet – the media have undoubtedly had an effect on the public opinion, too.

However, when we take a good look at the results of the latest research report, a more nuanced picture emerges. For instance, the percentage of citizens that agrees with the statement that 'The Netherlands need to contribute more to resolving international climate change than it does now' has been going down for years, according to the SCP. Compared to the third quarter of 2019 the percentage of Dutch citizens that agrees or strongly agrees with this statement fell from 42 to 33 percent. Among the political goals that the Dutch want to spend more money on, improving the protection against water from rivers and the sea can only be found on a meager eighth place. Higher spending on international environmental problems and climate change can only count on a net support of just 17 percent (net support here is the percentage in percentage points of people that want to spend (much) more public money reduced with the share of people that wants to spend (way) less). For improving animal wellbeing we find a net support of just 10 percent, whereas the issue 'contributing to the development of poor countries' even has a negative and the lowest net support: minus 28 percent.

These are percentages that contrast starkly with the support among people for spending on improving education (81 percent), combatting poverty in the Netherlands (76 percent), increasing employment (58 percent), and preventing and countering terrorism in the Netherlands (49 percent). An earlier SCP research report from 2019 showed that 53 percent of the Dutch people thinks that the world must act as soon as possible to combat climate change, while 38 percent said that the Netherlands should do more.

The results of this panel research demonstrate that the Dutch have a rather ambiguous attitude towards climate change and that it is less the big theme that it appears to be at first sight. It seems that there is only little awareness of the fact that it is climate change that will play an increasingly important role as a cause of other concerns, such as the state of our economy, terrorism, migration, worldwide conflicts, and animal wellbeing. In addition, scientific research has long showed that economic growth and high levels of human development simply cannot be reconciled with improving climate and the environment – and that implies that economic growth cannot be paired with sustainability in the long run. For that, it is way too much a systemic crisis instead of ‘just’ an environmental crisis.

Isn't there any silver lining? There is. Apparently, the Dutch are eager to invest more in education. Let's do that, but in a way that ensures that a lot of attention is given to knowledge about climate change, the environment, and how these topics connect to all previously mentioned issues. This will enable us to let the insight take root that climate change is the biggest crisis of our time and affects most if not all of our other concerns. That, in turn, will lead to a deep awareness in more and more Dutch people of how we are connected to the rest of the world. And that the Netherlands, as one of the richest country in the world, bears a large responsibility to do something about it, also because it is in our self-interest. In that way, we will be better able to take one of the last chances to prevent the climate crisis becoming a climate catastrophe.

(This column was published on January 17, 2020 by Het Financieele Dagblad.)

Epilogue

Now climate summits have failed, global citizens need to rise

What started in 1995 as a groundbreaking initiative in Berlin has become a failure of historical proportions. The 25th climate summit (or COP, which is an abbreviation of Conference of Parties) in Madrid is the umpteenth link in a chain that has been tying together low points in our joint, orchestrated response to worldwide climate change and its consequences.

COP25 took place against the background of fires ravaging a seethingly hot Australia, reports on the acceleration of melting ice on Greenland, an increasing pace of Amazonian deforestation, and the announcement of one of the world's largest polluters, the US, to retract from the Paris Climate Accords. If it would not already be the case, one would be inclined to think that a certain level of urgency or momentum has presented itself.

Still, countries have not been able to come to any meaningful and relevant agreement about how to limit the average global warming to a maximum of two degrees Celsius in Madrid over the past couple of weeks. The goals that had been set by the Paris climate summit of 2015 can largely be thrown out with the trash by now. No new deals have been struck on the topic of financing climate policy measures in developing countries. Among other things, CO2 rights appeared to be an important stumbling block to enable parties to agree on issues such as reducing carbon emissions. The same goes, believe it or not, for de facto recognizing state-of-the-art scientific knowledge and consensus about climate change.

Meanwhile, we are on track for a global average temperature rise of almost four degrees Celsius. Some predictions paint an even more dire picture. If the situation would not have been this grave, one could almost say that it is quite a performance to turn up the heat on planet Earth in such a short period of time. But grave it is. As an illustration, it is good to know – and this might come as a surprise – that the average difference in temperature between the current geological era and the most recent ice age is just four degrees Celsius. Put differently: four degrees makes all the difference in the world, in its most literal sense.

Renowned and widely respected climate scientist Johan Rockström recently said that, by now, it is becoming impossible for scientists to predict what this will mean for life on Earth. In May 2019, in an interview with *The Guardian*, he said: "It's difficult to see how we could accommodate a billion people or even half of that. There will be a rich minority of people who survive with modern lifestyles, no doubt, but it will be a turbulent, conflict-ridden world." What scientists do know, is that we have arrived at a point in time in which Earth's natural systems are no longer able to absorb the harmful effects of human activity and will actually reinforce each other. From permafrost to coral reefs and from gulfstream to glaciers, these natural systems have become severely affected – and, making things worse, they interact.

It is important to realize that the problem of climate change is not so much a problem of individual action, but in its essence is a systemic problem. In fact, individualization of the problem puts societal challenges in the headlock of a perverted ideology in which the developed world, through privilege and power, sustains the status quo. A status quo that revolves around a short-term orientation on profit maximization, that revolves around the dominance of economic growth, and that revolves around caring for people, animals, and nature as a secondary goal. Tellingly in this regard was the observation that during COP25 activists that demanded more attention for gender issues and indigenous people were quickly removed from the venue, whereas large, polluting companies had ample opportunity to put their lobbyists at the negotiating table.

Sadly, we have to conclude that climate summits have become part of the problem that they set out to solve. That is why other approaches and solutions are needed. We see an important role for activism, juridification, and developing new narratives. When governments and business are not able to effectively combat climate change, citizens will have to rise to the challenge to enforce the drastic measures that are desperately needed, in a non-violent way. When, for instance, farmers and builders realize that they are mangled by the same systems and same interests as their fellow citizens, this may result in a phenomenal power. Also, citizens will need to bring authorities and companies to court, supported by the national and international laws and declarations that govern our societies in order to realize their demands and represent their interests. This is already being illustrated by the infamous Urgenda verdict and the recent nitrogen and PFAS verdicts in the Netherlands that directly got the political and economic reality in deep trouble. Finally, we will need to come up with new, realistic stories about how we can work our way towards a better world together, in a way that unites instead of divides us. Between climate catastrophe and green growth utopia there is a world of imagination that we need to discover and create.

Climate change should not be a problem that exacerbates differences between people, but should offer a perspective on a common future for all of us on our planet – whoever you are, wherever you are. There may be some discussion about the specific solutions we should opt for, the problem has long been beyond any dispute. We should act now.

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“Love is paradigmatic of the truly human relationship, in that it is based entirely on the expression of what the individual is as a human being and the calling forth reciprocally of love in the other individual as a manifestation of their being. If economic life was truly human, then love would be an aspect of production and exchange.”

Charles Thorpe