

## THE COLLAPSE OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY AS THE COLLAPSE OF THE MODERN CIVILIZATION

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**Abstract:** In the light of the latest IPCC panel reports published in October 2018 and August 2019, it is difficult to deny the fact that a radical collapse of the sustainable development strategy has occurred. Within the several decades of its promotion and implementation attempts, not only did it fail to achieve any of the postulated goals – it was not even able to restrain the negative phenomena threatening the future of the humankind on Earth. Instead of talking about any kind of development, we should rather talk about a desperate struggle for survival. The fundamental question of this reversal is whether the forces that have shattered the hopes associated with sustainable development will make it possible to save the sinking ship of the modern civilization.

**Keywords:** climate catastrophe, sustainable development, neoliberalism, clash of interests, breakdown of civilization.

### Introduction.

#### The current climate catastrophe and its significance for thinking about the future

We are in a groundbreaking moment of the human history. On October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018, “An IPCC special report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above the pre-industrial levels and the related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty” (UN, 2018) was published. The report clearly states that the anthropogenic climate warming processes are progressing much faster than it was believed, and they are of much more dangerous nature than assessed before. The most serious consequence of these findings is the conclusion that the commitments resulting from the Paris Agreement adopted in 2015 are not sufficient to halt the climate change catastrophe. This statement was confirmed by the next IPCC special report "Climate Change and Land", presented on August 8, 2019. The analysis of

the published data indicates that the time for implementing the remedial measures against the upcoming catastrophe is very limited, and the actions that have to be taken must be radical.

The publication of the first IPCC Special Report had, first of all, a definite impact on the media and public opinion. Ecology and the issues related to climate catastrophe quickly became and remain the subject of increasing and more widespread attention. Secondly, the report seems to prove the increasingly common experience of a growing part of humanity, for whom the so-called climatic anomalies have become increasingly extreme and dangerous in the recent years.

All of the above allow us to claim that we are dealing with an entirely new global situation. And that makes us raise the question of whether and how the phenomena mentioned above affect the reflection on the current condition of humanity and the prospects for its continued existence.

There are no doubts that the most critical issue is the impact of the current change in the diagnosis of the environmental situation on the planet on the concept of sustainable development, which has been the most serious concept of building humanity's future, undertaken by both, international organizations, and many national governments.

The cited above IPCC reports, created under the aegis of the United Nations, consider sustainable development to be an essential strategy for achieving the pursued objectives, i.e., maintaining the rise of temperature at 1.5 °C compared to the pre-industrial age. Moreover, they stress very strongly that the climate objectives must be integrated with economic and social goals. The question remains whether the objectives pursued by both reports are realistic. Is it possible to achieve, over the next dozen years, a radical reduction that would asymptotically approach the complete elimination of anthropogenic carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere, and then its absorption and storage? Are the current political, social, and economic conditions conducive to carrying out the goals of sustainable development if, so far, there has been no apparent successes in the matter?

Therefore, the subject of these considerations will be an attempt to answer the following question: what effect on the conception of sustainable development will the current change in the assessment of the state of the planet bring? More specifically – do the current prognoses presenting the extremely rapid progress of climate catastrophe also signalize a collapse of sustainable development and an opportunity to work out another solution?

## **The strategy of sustainable development – a problematic success among a series of failures in the struggle against global threats to the modern civilization**

The enormous popularity of the concept of sustainable development in the current public debate and its embodiment in the activities of the entities organizing international relations and the internal life of particular societies stems mainly from its origins. It emerged as a result of a twenty-year-long debate that took place in the UN forums and began in 1969 with the report "Man and His Environment" (UN, 1969) written for the then UN Secretary, U. Thant, and concluded with the report "Our Common Future", prepared under the authority of the chairwoman of the World Commission on Environment and Development, Gro Harlem Brundtland (UN, 1987).

The almost twenty-year-long period between the publishing of the U. Thant report and the Brundtland report was a period of intense discussions on the differences of interests and conflicts that could arise in the process of sharing the costs of Earth protection policy. The starting point was the question of fair distribution of burdens in the process of the eradication of threats to humanity and the natural environment. The latter perils were created, of course, by the most developed countries. An equal distribution of the costs would mean that the poor would have to pay for the wealthy, and that the underdeveloped countries would have no possibility to develop the way the rich countries did. Subsequent conferences and discussions led to the creation of the concept of sustainable development, which included and synchronized all the integrative elements of a worthy and responsible life (Ciążela, 2006).

The theoretical maturity of the sustainable development concept was the reason it became the official concept of both the United Nations and the European Union, and was included in the legislation and policies of many member states. Undoubtedly, sustainable development became the most popular and widely accepted concept in global relations, debates, and imaginations. However, it should be noted that, despite its popularity, sustainable development did not root deeply in the practices of social life, including its economic sphere, and became an ideology rather than a conception. These ideological factors have determined its current collapse.

Searching for the reasons for the current collapse, we need to note that the concept of sustainable development did not mature all by itself. Its emergence was influenced by the buzzing intellectual movement of the 1960s that formulated catastrophic predictions concerning further development of the technological civilization that posed a threat to the biological life of the planet, and the radical demands to transform or entirely reject that civilization, which would secure the future of life on Earth. These phenomena were of a very diverse nature. Serious analyses were accompanied by slogans and concepts, which were not entirely rational and responsible, for example Deep Ecology or the New Age movement. In general, however,

scientific trends represented by such intellectualists as Barbara Ward (1966; 1976), Barry Commoner (1971), Paul Ehrlich (1968) or Aurelio Peccei (1981), a manager with sincere care for the future, who belonged to the top-level management of the Fiat Group, came to the fore. At the initiative of Peccei, the Rome Club was founded (Ciężela, 2006). He was also the one to initiate the establishment of a group of professionals, who carried out research followed by pioneering computer simulations, which constituted the report entitled "The Limits to Growth" (Meadows et al., 1972); in the first half of the 1970s the report opened the most famous debate on the future of the civilization on a global scale.

A common premise for these searches was the concept of "spaceship Earth," proposed by Barbara Ward i.e., treating Earth as a closed system with a finite pool of resources and limited regeneration capabilities (Ward, 1966). It gave the fight for the future a concrete shape of political ruling over the use of resources and their implicit rationing. The factor that justified that strategy was the conviction that a collapse of the civilization, resulting from humanity's strategy of spontaneous and uncontrolled development, was approaching.

The proponents of the free-market economic model spoke out against the concepts proclaimed by the circles predicting a catastrophe, which made the fight against the "spaceship Earth" policy part of a global offensive against the post-war economic rationing, which in highly developed countries resulted in the post-war "welfare society". The victorious struggle of neoliberalism against the catastrophists, welfare society and central planning, became a maturing environment for the conception of sustainable development. Although the tradition of the catastrophists suggested that it was necessary to do something, and do it fast, the neoliberal propaganda strongly suggested that one should refrain from acting, and if there was a need for action, one should do it by adhering to the rules of the free market because it is the most perfect tool for defining the social problems and the methods of solving them (Simon, 1981).

This internal tension permanently entered the thinking in terms of sustainable development. The factor that complicated the situation further was the excessive radicalism of the "catastrophists." "The Limits to Growth" indicated that the beginning of the crisis was the year 1980. Most forecasts, inaccuracies, and simplifications of the very primitive mechanism of the computer models of the period were not confirmed, and became the basis for acknowledging that the catastrophe was an actual possibility, however, if it arrived, it would be in a distant future (Ciężela, 2006). In such circumstances, it was believed that sustainable development was associated with a distant, undefined future, and that we would always have enough time to do what has to be done and, therefore, there was no need to hurry or worry.

Thinking about sustainable development in these categories did not foster serious efforts to implement it in large-scale solutions that would have a significant impact on the reality. Just as it was in the area of the destruction of the welfare state, the discussions concerning socially sustainable development were accompanied by a dynamic increase in the discrepancy between

wealth and misery. Optimistic projects and declarations were accompanied by the increasingly disturbing results of research observations.

The data published by the IPCC in October 2018 showed the real scale of environmental devastation as well as the need for radical measures in order to prevent the disaster; they destroyed the illusion created by the ideologization of the concept of sustainable development. At the same time, the development of populism and irrationalism in politics, which is a consequence of the destruction of the social solidarity mechanisms cementing the social state, showed the destruction of hope for the emergence of a new global entity – united humanity capable of harmonizing its goals and balancing the development.

### **Is there a possible alternative to the sustainable development strategy?**

I believe that the paradox of the current intellectual situation is that there is no logical possibility to construct an alternative concept for sustainable development. It was created in the process of reconciling various interests on a global scale, and, at least in theory, it reconciled them all perfectly.

The need to break with the concept of sustainable development that stems from the rapid reduction in the time remaining to avert the danger, as well as the scale and complexity of the problems which need to be resolved in such a short time, must lead to decisions that will result in brutal confrontations. Moreover, the struggles we are talking about will not only be fought for the victory of various interests but also for the sake of survival. Victory in the struggle for the access to various limited resources securing survival, which will not suffice for everyone, must mean death for the defeated in the most literal sense. Therefore, elimination of some part of humanity, and in a longer perspective – an increasing number of people, becomes a condition for the continuous existence of humanity.

Thus, we are dealing with the mechanism of social life organization, to which Peter Frase referred to as “exterminism” (Frase, 2016) in his considerations regarding the world after capitalism, as he himself described it. I analyze in detail the issue of exterminism and the problems related to it elsewhere (Ciążela, 2019). Here, I will limit myself to merely stating that the unification of humanity in the name of the exterminism project seems to be an absurd idea because it requires the people who unite to acknowledge that some of them are unnecessary.

Thus, when we talk about the final consequences of a global climate catastrophe, we must agree that it is impossible to work out a strategy of cooperation towards this final perspective. However, if we look closely at the ways of avoiding the catastrophe, then the problem looks no less bleak. In the attempt to stave off the fast-approaching disaster, parallel efforts must be made, which must rapidly and radically modify, and often cross out, the existing rules of social organization.

First of all, a task which requires enormous effort and expenditure is stopping the emission of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. It must be remembered that at present, a very large part of the world economy is directly dependent on fossil fuels (Dudzik, Korzeniowska, 2019). This dependence, as I have already written, is not limited to purely economic or technological issues. It translates into the existence and functioning of a powerful lobby in the political sphere, which, in defense of its interests, is capable of undertaking far-reaching actions (Broniatowski, 2019; Czuma, 2019). The cost of these activities is no less important. Social differentiation and internal conflicts lead to a situation where the distribution of the costs of these projects among different social groups is no less important than the fight against the interest groups defending the fossil fuel industry. The protest of the "yellow vests" movement in France, which was triggered by the increase in the fuel excise tax motivated by the need for climate protection, was a foretaste of just that.

The phenomena we are talking about are just the tip of the iceberg. Apart from the issue of solving greenhouse gas emissions, investments are needed to combat the effects of global climate destabilization. In Poland, these effects have revealed a profound crisis in water management and a direct threat of drought in large areas of the country. This requires significant investments as well as preparations related to the perspective of food shortages, going beyond temporary shortfalls, and the perspective of shortages on a global scale. Poland's problems are only an example of what awaits the countries facing major changes brought on by global warming in the near future.

The enormous cost of change and the need for rapid and intensive modernization is just one of the dimensions of the painful transformation that is forced by the struggle against the expeditiously progressing catastrophe. The sphere of wasteful and growing consumption must also undergo a no less dramatic change. A society whose sense for action is an increase in the quality and quantity of consumption of the manufactured goods must radically change the rules of its organization, its hierarchy of values, its customs, habits and expectations. This revolution will undoubtedly cause a wave of conflicts and tensions because consumer ideals have grown deeply into the consciousness of the globalizing society. How strong the arguments and how obvious the experiences prompting us to break with consumerism must be remains an open question. It should also be remembered that, as in the case of the fossil fuel energy lobby, we are dealing with a powerful lobby of producers and traders.

As Peter Frase correctly pointed out, this is essentially the end of capitalism and the beginning of planning and regulating the economy (Frase, 2016). It must be remembered, however, that over the past half-century, the powerful offensive of neoliberalism has created extremely negative attitudes towards these phenomena. To this day, the mythology of environmentalists' conspiracy, spread by the neoliberals, aimed at enslaving humanity with the stories of climate threat, tries to subject people to central planning, rationing, and extermination in the name of biocentrism which negates anthropocentrism.

The ideology is associated with the first significant defeat in the environmental debates, namely, the issue of birth control (Ciążela, 2018). Presented in the 1960s as one of the central problems of the future, the issue of a conscious population policy as a way of relieving the pressure on the environment became the object of a crusade unifying the economic and political neoliberals and traditionalists of great religions, and led not only to abandoning this policy, but created a certain ritual of political correctness out of opposing it. The belief that the Earth can feed an unlimited number of inhabitants (Ciążela, 2018) remains the legacy of neoliberalism, and the challenge does not lie in the increasing population growth but, on the contrary – there are "not enough hands to work" and "aging societies" constitute an urgent problem that requires fertility support. This leads to the deepening of tensions and problems, which will constitute one of the most critical factors destabilizing the situation in the coming decades.

The dynamic growth of the population inhabiting the planet leads to the expansion of global migrations. Migrations turn out to be a politically toxic phenomenon because, in addition to the benefits that emigrants' work brings, they create a sense of danger among the people for whom the emigrants are a competition (Lindenberg, 2019). The escalation of this feeling of being threatened, stemming from the wave of refugees caused by civil wars brought forth by the so-called Arab Spring, has become one of the leading ideological motives of the great political uprising that started questioning the neoliberal order of the West.

It should also be noted that the current decline in the inflow of refugees, which gives the impression of stability, is not the end, and one should expect further progression of the problem, which already strongly affects the internal situation of many countries, which include the United States, Italy, Great Britain, France, Germany, Poland, and Hungary (Lindenberg, 2019).

Due to the political destabilization and unpredictability of the situation in the modern world, sustainable development strategies are a completely unsuitable proposition for the developing conflicts and tensions, as the fundamental problem here is the lack of entities that could define goals and strategies of achieving them. The leaders whose political strategies are based on the ostentatious negation of diagnoses and forecasts developed by the community of scholars come to the fore in democratic elections. The President of the United States, Donald Trump, has backed away from the thesis that global warming is a Chinese intrigue against the United States (Ćwiklak, 2017), but his policy is leading to an actual suspension of the US participation in the Paris Agreement, and his latest project to buy Greenland from Denmark, due to its strategic importance and natural resources, which are becoming increasingly available due to the progressing climate change, proves a vision of the world completely opposite to that resulting from the IPCC studies (Walewska, 2019).

No less telling is the activity of Jair Bolsonaro – the President of Brazil, whose goal has been to intensify the economic use of the Amazon rainforest, widely recognized as an area of particular importance for the self-regulation of Earth's climate (Brueck, 2018; Maissonave, 2018; Górzyński, 2019b). His ostentatious disregard for the voices of the opposition, even if

they come from politicians as prominent as Angela Merkel or Emmanuel Macron (Ohme, 2019), indicates that the existence of extreme attitudes and negation of the consensus is a phenomenon that cannot be ignored. In Europe, an example of real climate negationism are the leaders of Poland, who are maintaining coal-based energy generation system (Broniatowski, 2019), rejecting the need to develop environmental protection programs even in the most traditional sense and are promoting the vision of a traditional consumer society as a far-reaching political goal.

It should be noted that the mentioned examples pertain to extreme phenomena. The political elites of the modern world, even if they do not openly deny the new diagnoses regarding climate change, cannot, in fact, see the importance of the issue. The subject of coordinated international actions may be actions that violate the international law (e.g., the accession of Crimea to Russia) or violations of human rights. For now, it is unimaginable to introduce sanctions against states whose actions lead to the deepening of the global ecological crisis, or which sabotage its arrangements. Thus, even a change in the attitude of the political elites regarding the issue of ecological catastrophe is a matter of the future. In Poland, the only change that can be observed as a result of the publication of the new predictions regarding the prospect of climate catastrophe is in the media, where the issues of climate change have become one of the leading topics.

When looking at the entirety of the briefly reported phenomena, it should be noted, that the development of events is moving us towards a more profound political crisis, to the development of tensions of confrontational nature. The multitude of conflicting interests and entanglements, in which the societies of the leading countries are finding themselves, means that we should not count on compromises and reaching a consensus. In the circumstances in which it is necessary to undertake radical actions, compromises, which constitute a premise for hope of their success, indicate ineffectiveness and giving up on goals and, thus, hope for survival.

The most important thing is time. Given the ever-closer forecasts and the increasing pressure regarding decisive actions, which, in order to be effective, must be taken in a few, within, perhaps, several or so years if the humanity's future is to be secured. Moreover, within these few years, the actions which must be taken should have a scale unimaginable in history. During these several years, humanity must transform its existence to its very basics.

A factual look at the world around us seems to indicate that there is no chance for such actions. One can imagine humanity laboriously sorting trash or giving up plastic. Can one imagine humanity giving up international tourism and mass airplane communication within a few years?

A phenomenon, which in the summer of 2019 becomes a symbol of the situation, are mass forest fires that range from the Arctic to the tropical forests of the Amazon. These fires are only partially natural. Most often they are a result of slash burning economy related to the rapidly growing population and the search for new areas of cultivation (Górzyński, 2019a; 2019b).



These fires, in the context of sustainable development, are particularly tragic because in the IPCC reports great importance is attached to afforestation as an essential tool for reducing carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Fire-driven, intensive deforestation of large areas, which increases the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere turns, out to be extremely catastrophic in this perspective (Medoń, 2019).

## Conclusion

In conclusion of these considerations, it should be said that the concept of sustainable development is becoming a thing of the past. It turned out to be a beautiful illusion, perhaps the most beautiful one that humanity has ever created, but, unfortunately, it has never been taken seriously enough to become something more than a dream.

From the perspective of the observed events, it is difficult not to realize that the most prophetic book for the 21st century was the novel by Gabriel Garcia Marquez "Chronicle of a Death Foretold" (1982). Although the matter concerns a murder in a provincial town, the fatalism and rigorous consistency of events best describes the logic that we seem to be dealing with in the case of the collective suicide of humanity that is taking place right before our eyes, when everyone knows what will happen and no one is able to go beyond the role assigned to them. In this respect, Marquez's logic seems to surpass the ambitious attempt to present the future, which is the "The Collapse of Western Civilization. A View from the Future" written by Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, whose forecast of the survival of humanity and life on Earth seems too optimistic (Oreskes, Conway, 2014).

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