

Adaptation: Getting Ready for the Inevitable

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Original posts from the New Earth Disability blog

www.WID.org/NED

October 27, 2014

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When I started this blog, I gave it a certain vision. The goal is to look at how the world is changing, both environmentally and economically, and posit how we can best prepare for the future. For the time being, though, it will not address how we can live more “sustainably,” except for when those actions also improve our resilience going forward. (For example, figuring out more efficient uses of medical equipment cuts down on frivolous consumption & pollution, but also helps us identify how to live healthily under upcoming resource constraints). In a world where everyone is striving to live more “green,” - with the idea that, if we do, we can save ourselves – that focus may seem a bit misguided, fatalistic, or even blasphemous. It’s also scary as hell: if we can’t prevent upcoming disruptions, then then the alternative is frightening. But it’s something we’ll have to face and get ready for.

So, why the focus on adaptation, but not mitigation?

Well, these days, we’re faced with a dilemma. On the climate change front, we absolutely must switch to a cleaner energy system (for power, transportation, and more), and reduce other actions that contribute to climate change (deforestation, etc.). But we must also get ready for upcoming changes in climate – and their related consequences, such as water shortages. And I’d argue that the second part is actually more important, but receiving far too little focus and energy. It’s not that efforts around renewables and pollution are misguided, or are getting too much of our focus per se. It’s rather that adaptation simply isn’t – and if we have a limited amount of focus to put on mitigation & adaptation in aggregate, the ratio right now is skewed too far towards the former. (The same holds true for other aspects of this blog: pollution from modern “civilization,” resource shortages, etc.)

Living “green” simply can’t stop climate change. It will just put it off for a bit longer. Equally importantly, the positive feedback loops of climate change (reduced albedo from melting polar ice caps, fewer carbon sinks due to forest fires or plant die-off from invasive species, the release of methane hydrates from melting permafrost, etc.) are unstoppable, and could lead to snowballing consequences sooner rather than later. And making modern society completely carbon-neutral is impossible: some things (i.e. container ships) can’t be retrofitted, and manufacturing “green” alternatives is polluting in its own right (for example, building an electric vehicle has its own carbon footprint). So, we have to develop a more resilient and flexible society, and in some cases just hunker down.

But we largely aren’t getting ready. And where we are, we need to have a broader scope and greater sense of urgency.

The numbers right now speak for themselves. As of 2012, 37 states had renewable portfolio standards (RPS), where a benchmark for renewable energy generation is set by a certain date (say, 50% of statewide power should be generated by renewables by 2020). But only 14 have any sort of climate adaptation plan, and those likely aren’t robust enough for the snowballing changes we’ll be seeing shortly. (some counties and cities also have adaptation plans, but the overall number is still way too low). Part of this is simple ignorance: many elected & appointed officials still don’t believe that climate change is real, and those that do largely underestimate its impacts. So for those in the first camp, there’s no perceived need to prepare; and for those in the 2nd, any perceived adaptation we do need is underwhelming compared to the reality. Another part is willful ignorance: people simply don’t want to think about their potential demise, or admit defeat. The psychological effect of doing so and locking down is often just too much. Also, they’d rather be fighting and defeating the enemy,

even though the battle is really postponing the inevitable instead of preventing it. Part of our hyper-competitive society (wars, capitalism, sport, etc.) is that we always fight to win, and believe that we have the power to do so. And if we don't, we simply ignore that loss and move on to the next sport where we actually have a fighting chance.

But, as I mentioned earlier, that's not the case. The impacts of climate change are coming, and in some cases they are scary as hell. "Risky Business," a recent report organized by Mike Bloomberg and some colleagues, outlines the various impacts of climate change in the United States up through 2100. Some things will simply be difficult to manage, such as stronger hurricanes in the southeast. Others will be impossible to survive without massive infrastructure investment. For example, the Great Lakes region will see a couple days a year above the safe levels on the "humidity heat stroke index," where the combination of heat and humidity will make it impossible to be outside without dying of heatstroke (and that's for an able-bodied person in perfect health). That means that we'll have to build more air-conditioned shelters, make sure that blackouts don't hit them, and figure out how to get people into them before we cross the unsafe thresholds. And since people with disabilities will be especially susceptible to these and other impacts, it will take a concerted focus to keep us safe, happy, and as healthy as possible.

So, let's start getting ready, and do it soon. It'll take figuring out what exactly is coming along, exploring the options that we have to address those changes, and making the investments to improve safety and resiliency going forward. We certainly shouldn't abandon efforts at reducing our environmental impact, but we also need to make sure that all of our bases are covered. Psychologically and politically, it'll be tough. But all in all, getting the ball rolling is certainly possible.