Working Group 4:

THE POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

Extract from:

Planetary Security:

Peace and Cooperation in
Times of Climate Change and
Global Environmental Challenges

Conference Report

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WORKING GROUP 4

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The dominant impact of our species on planetary systems has given rise to a new term to describe the state of our planet – the "Anthropocene". In the Anthropocene, it is argued, all processes on our planet are shaped by human impacts; essentially, there is no 'nature' anymore that is separate from human activities. Yet what does this mean for our political systems? How will politics in the Anthropocene need to be different? And what are the implications of the new Anthropocene context for planetary security?

Moderator: **Frank Biermann**, Earth System Governance Project
Speakers: **Ingrid Boas**, Wageningen University
Joyeeta Gupta, Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research of the University of Amsterdam / UNESCO-IHE Institute for Water Education
Sebastian Oberthür, Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Rapporteur: **Katarina Hovden**, TMC Asser Institute
Infographics: **Philippe Rekacewicz**, Visionscarto.net

1. CHALLENGES

Firstly, the Anthropocene creates, changes, or reinforces multiple interdependence relations within and among human societies (Biermann 2014). For one, the Anthropocene creates new forms and degrees of interdependence among the more than 190 formally sovereign countries and their national jurisdictions. Some of these new interdependencies emerge from functions of the earth system that transform local pollution into changes of the global system that affect other places that have (much) less contributed to the problem, with examples being climate change, stratospheric ozone depletion, the global distribution of persistent organic pollutants, and the global spread of species with potential harm for local ecosystems. Countries are becoming more interdependent also when local environmental degradation leads to transregional or global social, economic, and political crises, for instance through decreases in food production, which raise global food demand and prices. In short, the Anthropocene creates a new dependence of states, even the most powerful ones, on the community of all other nations. This is a defining characteristic as well as a key challenge that requires an effective institutional framework for global cooperation.

Secondly, the Anthropocene increases the functional interdependence of human societies. For example, political response strategies in one economic sector are likely to have repercussions for many others. Functional interdependence also relates to the mutual substitutability of response options, which poses special problems of international allocation. In climate governance, for example, for every global policy target there are an unlimited number of possible combinations of local responses across nations and time frames with equal degrees of effectiveness. In short, increased functional interdependence in the Anthropocene requires new degrees of effective policy coordination and integration, from local to global levels.

Thirdly, the Anthropocene creates new intergenerational dependencies that pose novel political challenges. Causation and effect of transformations of the earth system are usually separated by (often several) generations. Sea level rise, for example, is expected within a time range of a hundred years and more. Such planning horizons exceed the tenure and often the lifetime of present political leaders. Among other things, this poses the questions

of international credibility and trust that future governments will reciprocate and comply with international rules, and the problem of democratic legitimacy of policies in the intergenerational context. What rights and responsibilities do present generations and their representatives in parliament owe to their unborn successors? And to what extent can present generations be held accountable for activities of their ancestors, for instance regarding the burning of fossil fuels in Europe before the greenhouse effect became more widely known in the 1990s?

Fourthly, the Anthropocene comes with persistent uncertainty about the causes of earth system transformation, its impacts, the links between various causes and response options, and the broader effects of policies. Most transformations, such as global climate change, are non-linear and might accelerate, or slow down, at any time. Surprises in system behaviour can be expected, but are by definition unforeseeable. This creates a new political context, as exemplified by Ulrich Beck's notion of a global 'risk society'.

Finally, the Anthropocene is an epoch that sees the human species with extreme variations in wealth, health, living standards, education, and most other indicators that define wellbeing. According to the World Bank, the richest 20 percent of humanity account for 76.6 percent of the world's total private consumption. The poorest 20 percent, on their part, account for just 1.5 percent of global wealth. Almost half of humanity, roughly 3 billion people, lives on less than 2.50 dollars per day (Chen and Ravallion 2008). 850 million people lack sufficient food. The poorest 25 percent of humanity still has no access to electricity (UNDP 2007). 1 billion people lack sufficient access to water, and 2.6 billion have no basic sanitation (UNDP 2006). Politics in the Anthropocene has to operate in this global situation of large inequalities in resources and entitlements.

Overview lobby

2. RESPONSES

Yet what does this mean for our political systems? How will politics in the Anthropocene need to be different? And what are the implications of the new Anthropocene context for planetary security?

In the academic community, pleas for drastic change in global governance are becoming a frequent feature of scientific gatherings. For example, the 2011 Nobel Laureate Symposium on Global Sustainability called in its Stockholm Memorandum for "strengthening Earth System Governance" as one of 8 priorities for coherent global action (Third Nobel Laureate Symposium on Global Sustainability 2011). One year later, the 2012 State of the Planet Declaration, supported by various global change programmes and international agencies, called for "[f]undamental reorientation and restructuring of national and international institutions". It is fundamental, the Declaration continues, 'to overcome barriers to progress and to move to effective Earth-system governance. Governments must take action to support institutions and mechanisms that will improve coherence, as well as bring about integrated policy and action across the social, economic and environmental pillars (State of the Planet Declaration 2012, C1). A press release preceding this Declaration, supported by the International Council for Science and others, even requests governments to fundamentally "overhaul" the entire UN system (Planet under Pressure Conference 2012).

Yet the response clearly will not lie only in strengthening global institutions. Notably, also technological change and incremental policies at local and national levels will remain a driving force of progress in earth system governance. For instance, just cutting down the emissions of black carbon and methane, which is a precursor of tropospheric ozone could be a win-win solution by reducing global mean warming by around 0.5 degree Celsius by the middle of the 21st century. Incremental change by national and regional policies is important, too. For example, a mix of technological change and climate change policy has allowed the European Union member countries to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 18 percent from 1990 while growing their economies at the same time by 48 percent (European Commission 2013).

Transformations in social behaviour are crucial as well. Large-scale changes of lifestyles are likely to be non-linear and might depend on "social tipping points". There is ample historic precedence of drastic changes in perceptions of good and appropriate lifestyles. Environment-related changes in public perceptions of good and appropriate living include the public ban on smoking as inappropriate behaviour for movie actors, politicians and other perceived role models; the change in perception of whale meat consumption that is hardly affected by a recovery in some species stocks; and the rising social movement of vegetarianism. Another example is the increasing acceptance of bicycles as default vehicle of transportation in cities. In October 2013, 70 top managers of Dutch companies publicly left their chauffeur-driven cars behind in support of a week-long national "Low Car Diet" campaign, thus accepting a partial redefinition of the appropriate lifestyle in the most affluent segments of society. However, it might mean throwing out the baby with the bathwater if intergovernmental institutions were discarded. The UN system and international negotiations do not stand in an antagonistic relationship with local action and non-state movements. In a world of over 190 independent nation states, also strong and effective international cooperation remains important in the Anthropocene.

In sum, in the course of the 21st century, the Anthropocene is likely to change the way we understand political systems both analytically and normatively, from the village level up to the United Nations. This makes the Anthropocene one of the most demanding, and most interesting, research topics also for the field of political science, which has to develop novel, more effective and more equitable governance systems to cope with the challenges of earth system transformation.

3. FURTHER READING

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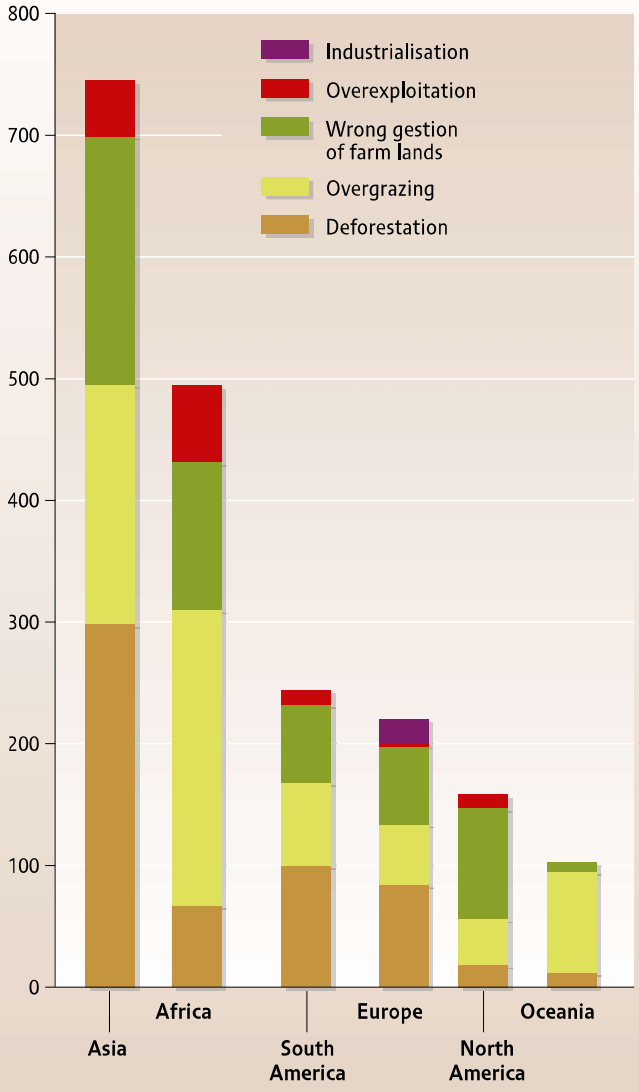
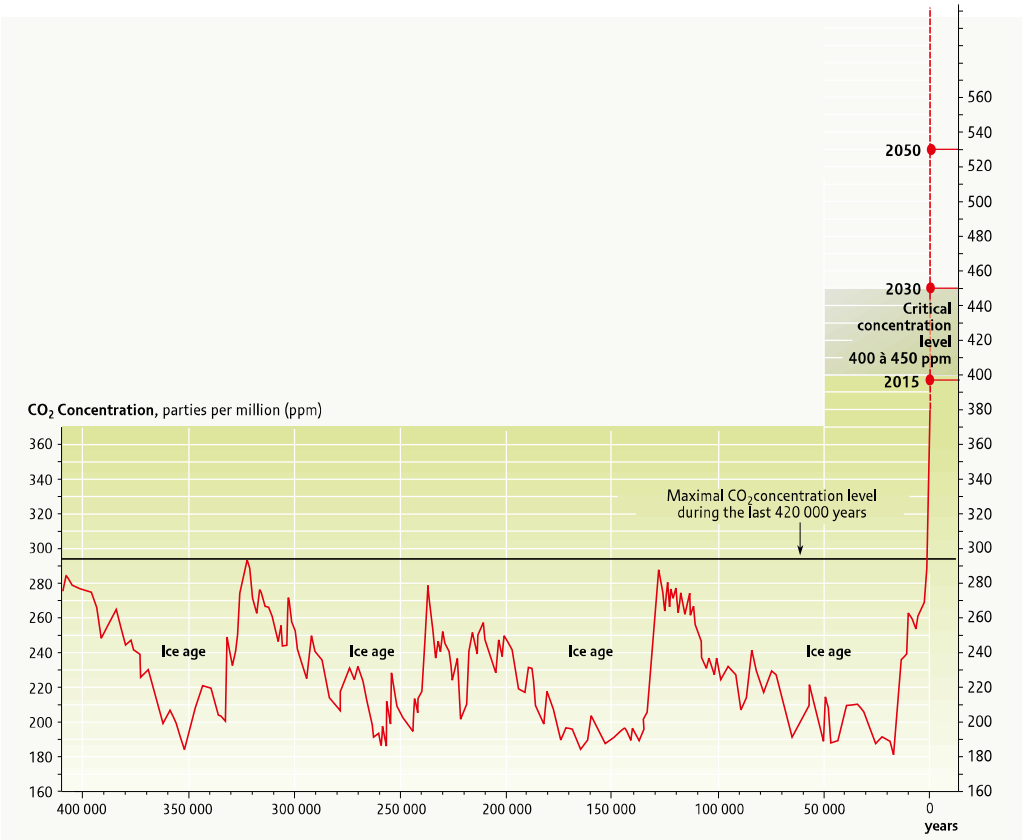
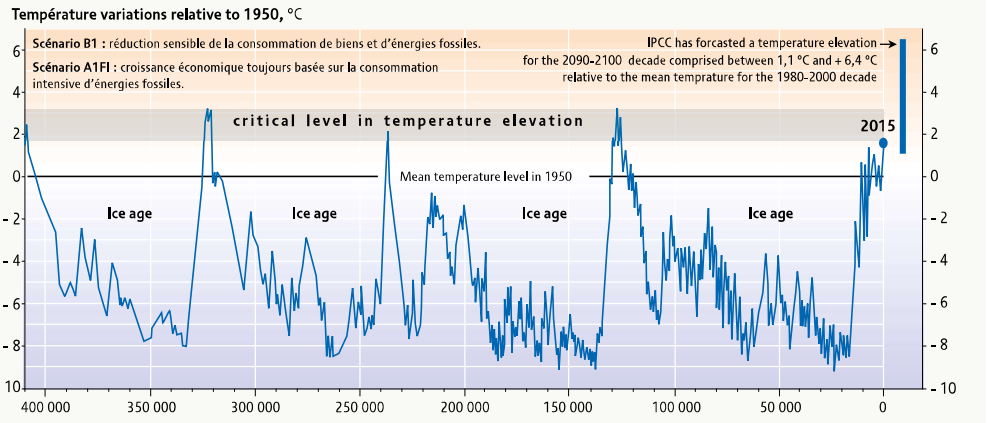
Causes of environmental degradations

Millions of hectares



Source: UNEP ; WRI ; FAO ; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment.





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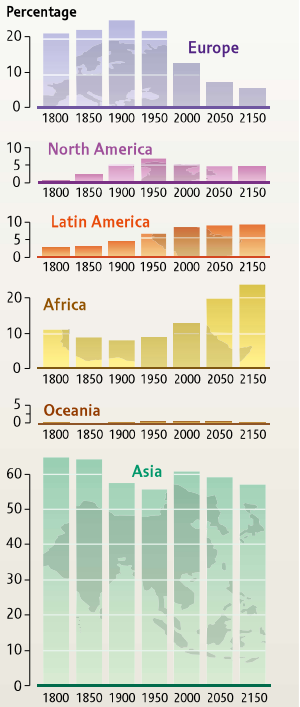
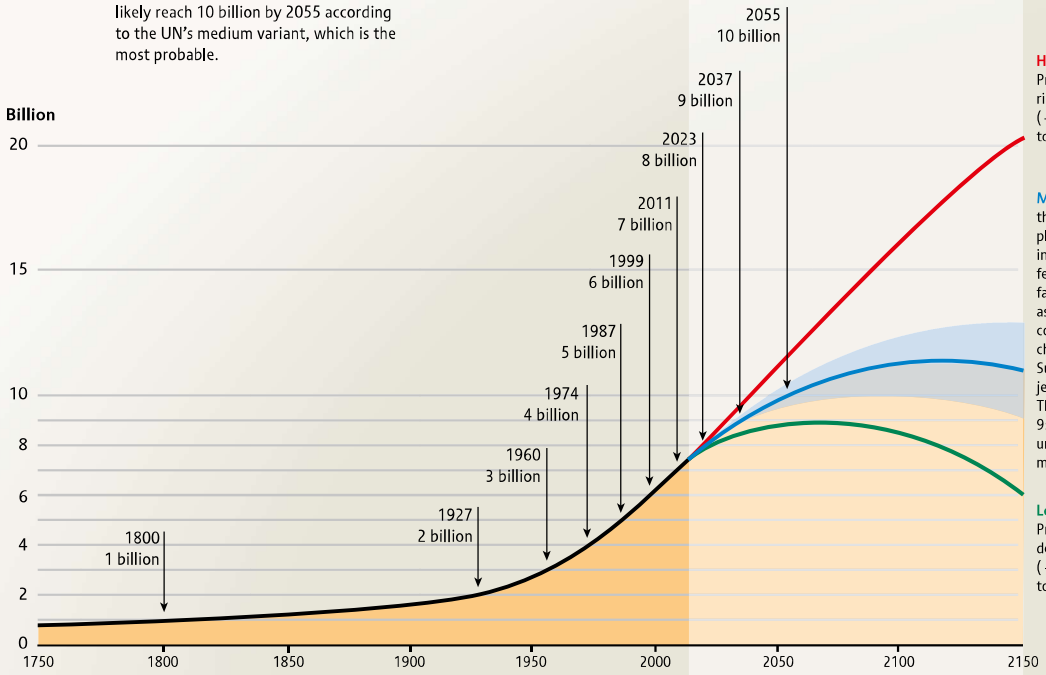


Sources : « The world at six billion » (October 1999), United nations, New York ; *Index of african development 2007*, World Bank, Washington, DC; World Population Prospect, the 2015 revision, United Nations.

World population growth

After several centuries of slow evolution, the world's population grew by a factor of six between 1800 and 2000. It will most likely reach 10 billion by 2055 according to the UN's medium variant, which is the most probable.



High Variant: Projection assuming rising fertility (+ 0.5 child relative to the medium variant)

Medium Variant: clearly assumes that the effective use of family planning will result in reductions in total fertility rate, a decline of fertility for countries where large families are still prevalent as well as a slight increase of fertility in countries with fewer than two children per woman on average. Survival prospects are also projected to improve in all countries. The blue surface represents the 95 % of confidence (level of uncertainty) surrounding the median trajectory.

Low Variant: Projection assuming declining fertility (- 0.5 child relative to the medium variant)

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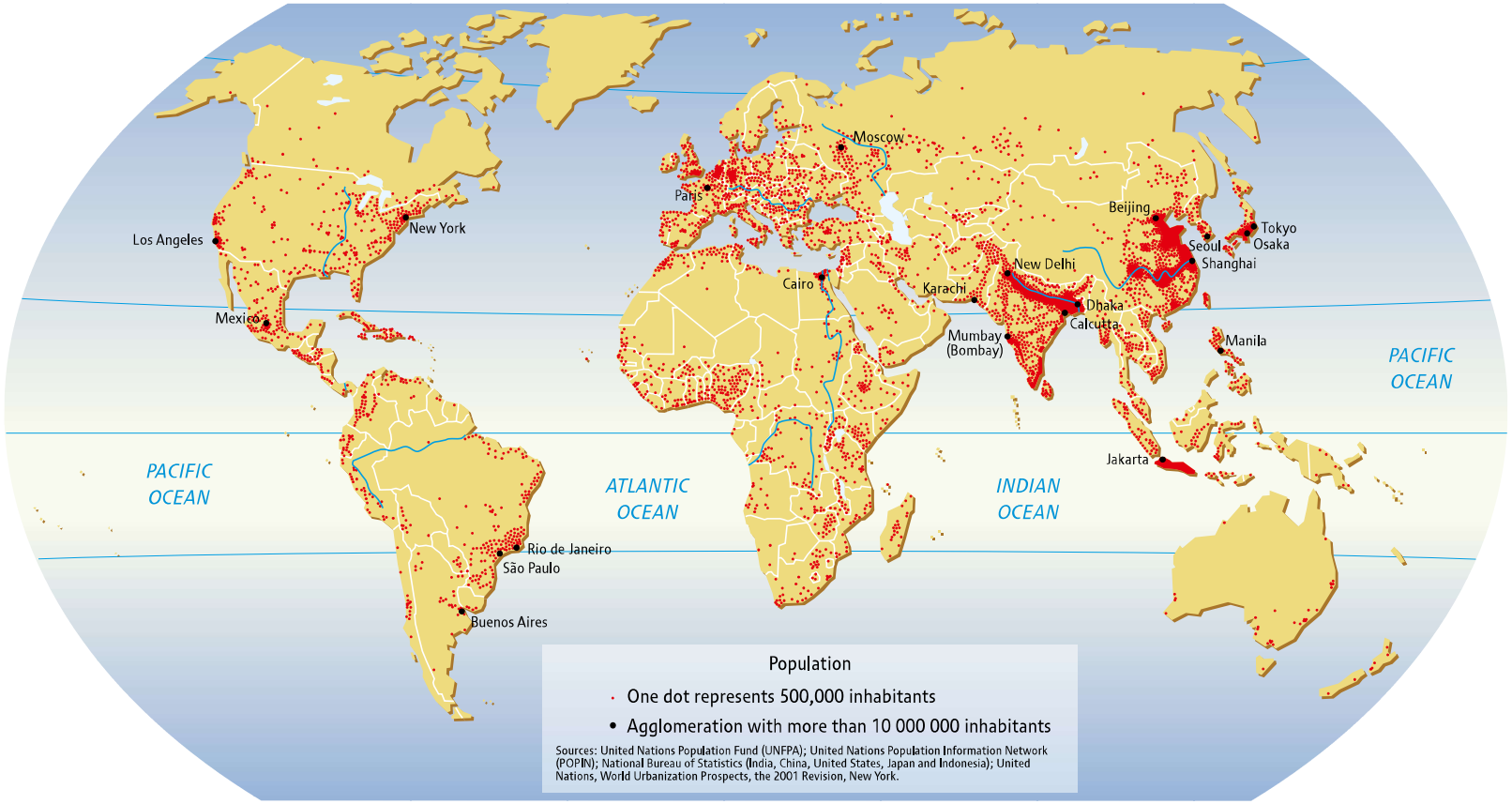

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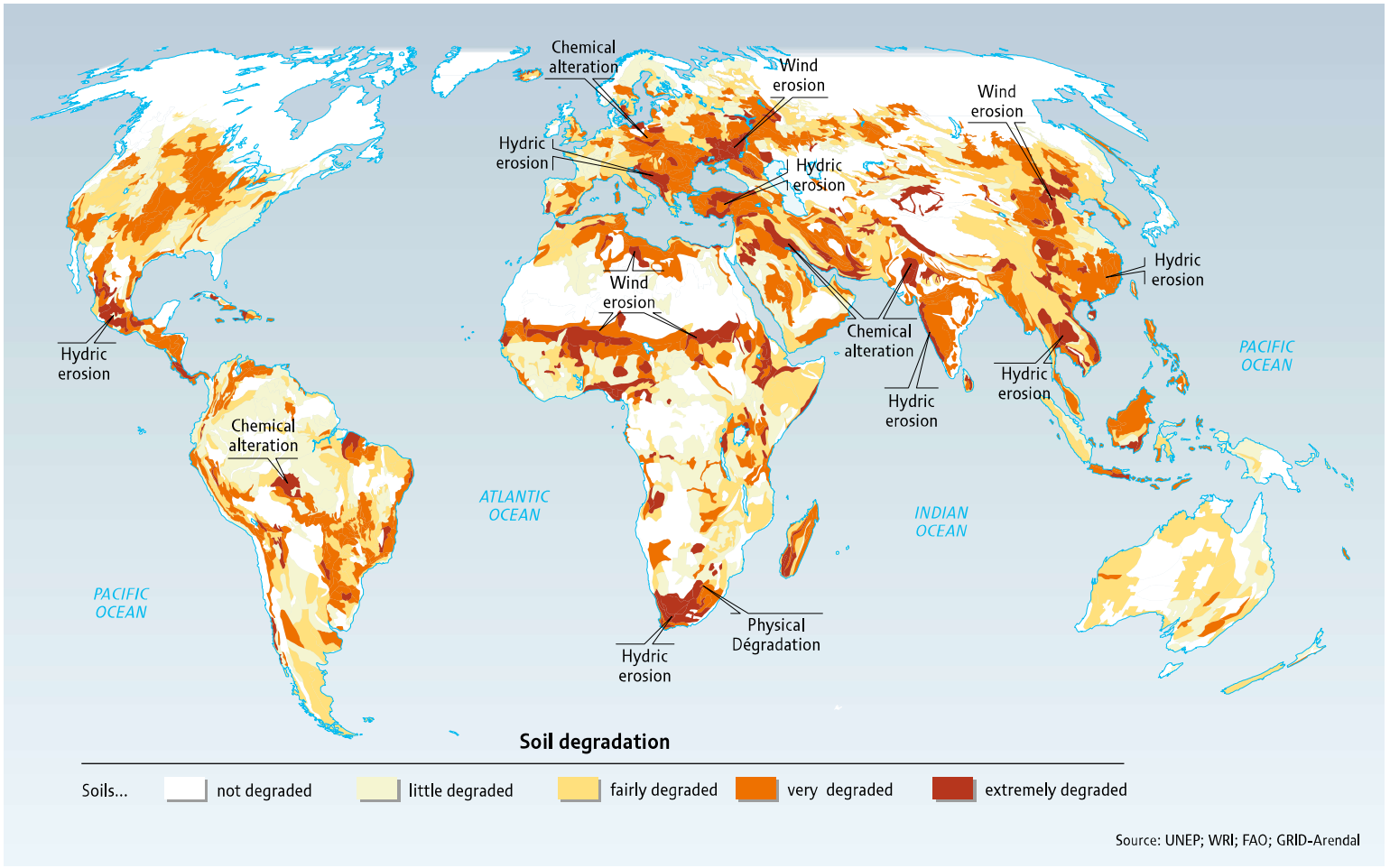

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4. ANALYSIS

The Working Group commenced with an introduction of the Anthropocene, the present epoch in planetary history that is characterised by human beings' domination and human beings' potential to impact upon, and change, the planet's natural processes. A period where, researchers have argued, there is no nature that is separate from human activities.

This period, the Anthropocene, brings with it numerous, complex and multi-faceted challenges. In the political sphere, responses thereto must engage in an unprecedented discourse and be willing to consider different perspectives and new agendas.

The Working Group session dealt primarily with 3 main themes relevant to this discourse, but which are by no means exhaustive of the wider debate that is necessitated by the challenges of the Anthropocene: the role of equity, the importance of "framing" and the role of multilateral institutions/governance.

The Role of Equity

The first presentation, on the role of equity, raised the questions, how do we allocate rights, responsibilities and risks in a period where some natural resources are fixed and others are shrinking yet the global population and aggregate demand is steadily increasing? Moreover, how do we deal with global inequities in wealth and resource allocation, such as the findings of a 2015 report by Oxfam suggesting that by 2016, the richest 1 percent will be sitting on more than 50 percent world's wealth? In particular, how can we ensure that all human beings have access to sufficient resources to enable a healthy life? How should our political systems change in order to deal with these challenges and what political and other mechanisms do we need to employ to aid that response? What governance models would best support efforts to deal with those difficult questions? A neo-liberalist model? A hegemonic model? Polycentric governance? Transformational governance?

While it was not possible to engage in a comprehensive discussion on how to answer those important, yet difficult, questions, some reflections were nevertheless offered. The speaker recommended *inter alia* the need for multi-scalar approaches, a human right to water and food, ecological standards such as sustainability, the rule of law, global constitutionalism and inclusive development. It was pointed out that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have made progress in addressing the above questions- with its attention to social, ecological and relational inclusiveness – but that there is still room for improvement. This analysis was then linked back to the issue of sharing, where the importance of finding better ways to share the earth's resources was expressed. In the ensuing discussion, it was concluded that it is vital that we engage with these difficult questions and are willing to talk about what is really needed even if that means swallowing an uncomfortable truth. In wealthier nations, for example, people will have to accept that lifestyles must fundamentally change and that they must learn to live with less.

The Importance of Framing

The second presentation addressed the importance of framing, asking in particular what consequences follow from framing a conflict as a climate change conflict, and from framing climate change as a security issue. The discussion that ensued made it clear that framing is politically sensitive and highly context- and audience-dependent.

While indeed changes to the climate system can mean that previously habitable regions become temporarily or permanently uninhabitable, leading to migration, one should be cautious about framing, for example, the Syrian conflict as a climate change conflict. Indeed there is little evidence to suggest that people move far afield when climate change issues arise. Moreover, those who are most severely affected by climate change tend to be poorer and hence are less likely to have the sufficient resources to enable them to migrate to another

country/region. A controversial framing has the potential to exasperate political relationships and may delay efforts to work out practical solutions on the important issues at stake.

Whether or not climate change should be framed as a security issue is a politically sensitive and complex question due to the connotations that such a framing occasion. The definition of security in any given context will be important and may mitigate any potentially negative effects but the historical baggage of words should not be undermined. Thus, while it is of course possible to define security broadly, it is important to bear in mind that the term itself may be cloaked in high-politics and defence, a cloaking that it might be difficult to escape or overcome.

After this general debate, the discussion turned to the advantages and disadvantages of framing climate change in terms of security. On the one hand, it was felt that a security framing might engage a wider audience and broaden actor coalitions. Moreover, it was noted that a security framing has the potential to mobilise interest and to motivate ambition and action on climate change and environmental challenges. The U.S. political context was offered as one example, where it was suggested that the security framing might have helped to make the issues related to climate change more palatable and relevant to conservative factions in politics. Furthermore, it was expressed that the present conference might also have benefitted from a security framing, as this might have helped to attract the large and high-level audience.

On the other hand, it was felt that a security framing has the potential to increase international tensions and overwhelm the public. India was offered as an example, where British efforts to encourage greater ambition on climate change by using security arguments led to suspicions of ulterior strategic motives and had the effect of increasing political tensions. The discussion on framing concluded with a concern that the security framing might be unduly narrow. Climate change, it was felt, encompasses a broader range of issues than those which traditional security responses have grappled with. Thus, it was commented, the responses will also have to be broader in order to take account of the multi-faceted and complex nature of climate change. In particular, it was noted that while ministries of defence and foreign affairs are indispensible to the response to climate change, there is a risk that a security framing might exclude other key actors, such as the ministries of education and science that are also integral to a comprehensive response.

The Role of Global Institutions and Global Governance

The third presentation dealt with the role of global institutions and global governance in dealing with climate change, with a particular look towards COP21 in Paris. It was explained that while in the past emphasis has been placed on the global level of governance, with high expectations that global climate negotiations will deliver the solutions to climate change, the dialogue has been reframed in recent years. This re-framing might have occurred partly in response to the failure of Copenhagen to deliver the expected results but it has also come about due to complex changes in the political balance at the global governance level. The result is a greater recognition of the need for solutions to come from all levels of governance and non-governance, ranging from the individual to the global and across the spectrum of public and private initiatives. And yet, global institutions and global cooperation remains important to the process of incremental reform. Global institutions can help to enable action at other levels (for example by addressing concerns relating to competitiveness), can send an overall impulse and signal that the global community is taking action and can contribute to an aggregate idea of the climate policy agenda by indicating the expected trajectory. Equally, it is important to incentivise non-state actors at the local and national level, including civil society.

To apply these trends in international climate policy to the upcoming Paris Conference, it would be naïve to expect comprehensive solutions to emerge from Paris alone. Indeed, the majority of the Paris "outcome" has already been achieved and has been the result of the

process leading thereto, during which countries have communicated their intended level of ambition and the measures that they will put into force. Nevertheless, the conference can fulfil the function of sending an important signal that there is convergence on the need to act at all levels. Moreover, the conference could send a stronger signal, for example by putting decarbonisation on the agenda, or addressing transparency and accountability, although it is not yet clear whether Paris will send those signals. If that signal transmitted, policy makers and non-state actors will have an important role in creating an environment in which decarbonisation is both feasible and appealing.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We face, in the Anthropocene, a daunting and unprecedented global governance challenge. Legal and political tools are becoming increasingly out-dated. Legal, political, economic and social systems are becoming increasingly complex, diversified and interdependent. This process of diversification entails the risk of fragmentation, and fragmentation in turn brings with it new challenges, where responses thereto will have to take on new perspectives and think outside the box.

There is still a great deal of research and work to be done in order to begin to address the many political and governance challenges that we face today. Future conferences can contribute to this response by focusing on issues that have been less researched and discussed in the past. Among those are discussions about the role of the finance sector, tax havens and subsidies to the fossil fuel industries. Moreover, in light of the extent of global inequity, research should also investigate the 1 percent and assess their links, if any, with the fossil fuel industries. Finally, there is a need to continue to research and work out the legitimate roles and responsibilities of non-state actors and how to better involve them in policy development and implementation on a global scale.

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Rapporteur: **Katarina Hovden,** TMC Asser Institute

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