

# Earth's existential threats: Inequality, pandemics and climate change demand global leadership

February 24 2021, by Jacob Ainscough, Alex McLaughlin, Luke Kemp and Natalie Jones

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Future of the planet is in our hands. Credit: PopTika/NASA

Asked in 2003, the UK's astronomer royal, Martin Rees, gave our present society [50/50 odds](#) of lasting until the end of the century. It's fair to say the odds haven't improved in the years since he made this call. The planet is warming, a pandemic runs wild, the threat of nuclear war still hangs overhead and emerging technologies are allowing for the

development of new weapons of mass destruction. Existential threats to human existence are growing—and the time left to address them [gets ever shorter](#).

So the new presidential term in the world's most powerful nation takes on a special significance. The Biden-Harris administration cannot tackle the global challenges we face alone, but the US will be pivotal to efforts to wind back the [doomsday clock](#). Joe Biden made his agenda clear in a short passage of his inaugural speech: "A once-in-a-century virus silently stalks the country ... A cry for racial justice, some 400 years in the making, moves us ... A cry for survival comes from the planet itself ... The rise of political extremism, white supremacy, domestic terrorism, that we must confront, and we will defeat."

After the Trump years, these new political commitments from the world's dominant power are welcome. Yet this rhetoric reveals a flaw in Biden's conception of the threats facing the world. Each issue is treated as a distinct challenge. But our [research on catastrophic risks](#) reveals that such threats are actually deeply interconnected. Threats facing humanity are a many-headed Hydra—they are all parts of the same beast.

## Threat and inequality

The [catastrophic risks](#) are held together by a sinew of racial, gender, economic and political inequalities that simultaneously [exacerbate each threat](#) and [block potential action](#) to address them. Take the [climate crisis](#). Desertification, land degradation and extreme weather disproportionately affect the world's poorest countries and are estimated to have [increased international inequality](#) by 25% in the past 50 years.

But inequality also drives climate change. The richest 10% of the global population are responsible for [more than 52%](#) of all emissions. Globally, carbon dioxide emissions track GDP growth with [remarkable tenacity](#).

Higher inequality means less of the benefits of growth accrue to those at the bottom. More growth, and therefore emissions, are [then required](#) to meet the material needs of the world's population. Meanwhile the [fossil fuel industry](#) has [stymied action](#) with its constant lobbying and sowing of doubt about the connection between fossil fuels and climate change. These factors together threaten to lock us into a downward spiral of worsening inequality and climate breakdown.

A similar story can be told about other threats. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated inequalities both [between and within countries](#). Social distancing is made more difficult the further down the economic scale you are. And [access to vaccines](#) seems to follow the same pattern, especially on an international scale.

Or consider artificial intelligence (AI). The increasing capabilities of AI technologies pose a [threat](#) to the global political order. These include the use of facial recognition to empower surveillance states, worsening disinformation, the large-scale use of lethal autonomous weapons (killer robots) and—more speculatively and long-term—the potential development of an "[artificial general intelligence](#)" as smart and capable as humans, with all the dystopian possibilities that conjures up. Big tech firms such as Google and Facebook have a disproportionate influence in the development and regulation of many of these technologies and applications. This has allowed them to monopolize the benefits while passing the risks on to everyone else.

## Looking for global leadership

These connections between threats and [inequality](#) are a global phenomenon. Solutions need to be similarly global. On climate change, rejoining the Paris Agreement is a necessary step for the new US administration—but it's not enough. Most urgently, Biden must work to reconcile bipartisan anti-China sentiment with the reality that China is

now a major player in climate politics and must be factored into any solutions.

But there is much more the US, and indeed other rich countries, can do. Both by addressing their own emissions, but also building international partnerships to provide developing countries with the financing and technology required for energy transition. Instead of locking lower income countries into the fragile position of relying on commodity exports to maintain their economies, these efforts should assist countries in diversifying into high value-added industries needed in the new green economy and provide them with greater control over their economic development as partners in the global low-carbon economy.

Biden can [leverage America's position](#) in international financial institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to tackle the debt crisis that not only prevents poorer countries from taking action to mitigate [climate change](#) and adapt to its impacts, but has also stymied their COVID-19 relief efforts.

The regulation of big tech is another key battleground. Australia's recent attempts to spread the profits from tech monopolies provoked a public retaliation from Facebook, which [temporarily blocked](#) access to Australian news content on its site.

These events are a stark reminder of the power of big tech, and it is this same power that must be limited in the context of [AI governance](#). The US has a stake in these issues, and it must play its part in reducing the risks associated with the development and deployment of AI by international corporations.

In this area and many others, coordinated international approaches are needed to address the links between threats and inequalities pushing our civilisation towards collapse. Such efforts should be at the top of the

Biden-Harris agenda.

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