Earth's existential threats: Inequality, pandemics and climate change demand global leadership
24 February 2021, by Jacob Ainscough, Alex McLaughlin, Luke Kemp and Natalie Jones

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

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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