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## **The Ecological Crisis and Human Rights: Why We Are All Vulnerable**

*Roberto De Vogli\* and Marta Lusiardi\*\**

**Abstract:** This paper has been developed from a keynote presentation at the Conference ‘Conceptualizing Vulnerability in a Time of Human Regression’ organized by the Human Rights Centre, University of Padova in Padova (November 13, 2023). It revolves around four topics. First, it analyses the ecological crisis, its impacts on human rights and the inequality in climate vulnerability and climate responsibility across different nations and social sectors within nations. The second part explains why we are all vulnerable to this ecological crisis due to the existential threat that climate change is posing to humanity. Modern society is confronting an unprecedented risk of collapse induced by a cascade of social, economic, and political crises facilitated by the ecological crisis. The third part deals with policies that can confront the ecological crisis and reduce its detrimental effects on human rights and public health, reducing our existential threat. The last part delves into two major barriers hindering policies toward equity, ecological sustainability, and protection of human rights: neoliberalism and economism. The final discussion focuses on the need for an alternative socioeconomic system.

*Keywords:* ecological crisis, human rights, neoliberalism, climate change, vulnerability

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## 1. The Ecological Crisis, Human Rights and Unequal Vulnerability

The first part of this paper revolves around an analysis of the ecological crisis, with particular emphasis on climate change, and its impacts on human rights. Climate change, or long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns worldwide, is the most important threat of global health and human rights of this century (Romanello et al. 2023). Although John Shimkus, a former US congress man said that we shouldn't worry about it because the planet will not be destroyed as God promised Noah it wouldn't happen again after the great flood (Shimkus, 2009), there is ample scientific evidence that climate change is happening, and it is mainly caused by human activities (Lynas et al. 2021).

What are the effects of the climate change and ecological crises on human rights? Starting from the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948), we have a few items that can be listed as potential effects and rights that are affected by climate change. The right to life, the right to health, the right to an adequate standard of living and of course the right to an international order because climate change causes disruptions not only on individuals, the ecosystem but also in societies. The key articles of the UN Declaration of Human Rights that heavily affected by the climate crisis are the following:

- Art. 03. Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.
- Art. 13. Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.
- Art. 22. Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social, and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.
- Art. 25. Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age, or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.
- Art. 28. Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.

There are several pathways connecting climate change to violations of human rights. The rapid increase of the global temperature (NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information 2022) and the effects associated with the ecological crisis are increasing the chance of extreme events such as

floods, storms, drought, heatwaves, and wildfires (WMO 2021). Findings from the Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change Report 2023 clearly show that these extreme events have already produced tragic health consequences worldwide and generated adverse effects on the right to health, food, water, and housing. The burden of climate-related health risks disproportionately affects vulnerable and marginalized populations and regions with limited infrastructure and resources, exacerbating existing health inequities between and within countries. Moreover, as the report notes, these adverse climatic conditions are expected to worsen considerably in the future (Romanello et al. 2023).

Although there are several definitions of the concept of vulnerability, according to the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, it mainly refers to ‘conditions determined by physical, social, economic and environmental factors or processes which increase the susceptibility of an individual, a community, assets or systems to the impacts of hazards’ (Limongi & Galderisi 2021). Populations particularly vulnerable to human rights violations due to climate hazards include indigenous populations, people living in a coastlines or areas prone to severe storms, people living in areas at risk of severe droughts, low-income groups, people living in poor disenfranchised housing and neighbourhoods, individuals involved in outdoor occupations, the elderly, people with mental health conditions and disabilities, pregnant, breastfeeding and postpartum women and their children (Environmental Protection Agency 2023).

Of the populations that will be affected by the climate crisis, migrants are of particular importance. A major consequence of the climate crisis is environmentally induced migration and the displacement of tens to hundreds of millions of people by 2100 (International Organization for Migration 2023). Major paths regard large-scales movements of people from Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe, from Latin America to Northern America and from South Asia to other developed nations. These patterns of migration reflect global inequalities in terms of climate vulnerability and climate responsibility. Although poorest countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and South Asia are those most heavily affected by the environmental disasters and damages as a result of climate change, they are the least responsible for current and historical carbon emissions worldwide. Conversely, richer countries that are at lower level of risk of losses and damage due to climate change, have contributed the most in global carbon emissions (Bharadwaj et al. 2022; Hickel 2020).

Inequality in climate vulnerability and responsibility applies across social groups within countries, not only across countries. We are not all equally vulnerable to the effects of climate change for individuals living in poorer

houses, and neighbours, working in low-income jobs, are disproportionately exposed. In terms of climate responsibility, recent research shows that although on average, every single citizen is responsible for 6 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> per person per year, the top 1% in terms of wealth are responsible for about 101 tons of carbon emissions per year (Chancel 2022).

Another effect of the climate crisis on human rights regards the risk of violence and armed conflicts as underlined by Gwynne Dyer in its book 'Climate Wars: The Fight for Survival as the Overheats' (Dyer 2010). There is abundant evidence and numerous studies showing that climate change crises around the world are causing conflicts and political violence between social groups, but the major fear is that such ecological crises can escalate into potential conflicts among nations worldwide (Hendrixet al. 2023). Will climate change contribute to World War III and the risk of nuclear confrontation?

## 2. Existential Threat: Why We Are All Vulnerable

Despite the inequality in climate vulnerability (and climate responsibility) between nations and within nations, the ecological crisis needs to be conceptualized as a threat to human survival. Unless it is effectively addressed, the climate crisis can cause future consequences that will not be restricted to poor people in poor countries. In a sense, we are all vulnerable. As underlined by paper published in *PNAS*:

‘There is ample evidence that climate change could become catastrophic. We could enter such ‘endgames’ at even modest levels of warming. (...). This requires exploring (...) the potential for climate change impacts to contribute to systemic risk and other cascades’ (Kemp et al. 2022).

In an article published in *Climate Change* by Huggel and colleagues, it is argued for a ‘clearer and more precise definition and framing of existential risks of climate change’ (Huggel et al. 2022), an area of studies still relatively neglected. Another study on the existential threat posed by climate change concluded that humanity as a one-in-20 chance to risk a catastrophic outcome. The authors of the study put it very eloquently: ‘it is equivalent to a one-in-20 chance the plane you are about to board will crash. We would never get on that plane with a one-in-20 chance of it coming down, so why are we willing to send our children and grandchildren on that plane?’ (Xu & Ramanathan 2017).

In recent years, the global community has intensified its efforts and proposed various strategies to prevent crossing the critical ‘point of no return’

in climate change, commonly referred to as ecological or climate tipping points. These tipping points are defined as crucial junctures where small changes can lead to self-sustaining, abrupt, and irreversible environmental transformations, often with severe consequences for global health (Lenton et al. 2020). A key proposal among policymakers and scientists is to limit the increase in global average temperature to no more than 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. Achieving this goal requires maintaining atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases below 350 parts per million (ppm), which translates to a reduction of carbon dioxide emissions by about 90% from 1990 levels by the year 2050 (Harvey C. 2023). This target is extremely challenging, yet it's considered necessary to reduce the risk of triggering these tipping points.

Recent assessments, including those analysing the goals set by the Paris Agreement, suggest that even limiting warming to 1.5°C may not be sufficient to avoid crossing multiple climate tipping points. These include the potential collapse of the Greenland and West Antarctic ice sheets, the die-off of low-latitude coral reefs, and widespread, abrupt permafrost thaw. Crossing one tipping point could lead to a domino effect, increasing the likelihood of triggering additional tipping points due to positive feedback mechanisms. Additionally, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in its 2022 report highlighted the current impacts of climate change. It noted that the increase in extreme weather and climatic conditions has already led to some irreversible impacts, as natural and human systems have been pushed beyond their capacity to adapt (Portner et al. 2022). As Patricia Espinosa observed, 'we are collectively walking into a minefield blindfolded' (Harvey F. 2021).

In his critically acclaimed book 'Collapse: How Societies Choose To Fail Or Survive', Jared Diamond conducts a thorough analysis of the historical collapse of civilizations, identifying key factors that have led to their downfall. Diamond's exploration reveals a range of environmental and resource mismanagement issues as primary causes of these collapses, including excessive deforestation, habitat destruction, soil erosion, water mismanagement, overhunting, overfishing, and the detrimental impacts of introducing new species into native ecosystems. Additionally, he highlights the challenges posed by overpopulation and the escalating impact per individual. Beyond these, Diamond also discusses the role of climate change, the accumulation of environmental toxins, energy shortages, and the extensive human consumption of the Earth's photosynthetic capacity. Through his analysis, Diamond notes that approximately 10 to 20 civilizations have succumbed to these issues, marking them as pivotal factors in their collapse. However, he brings attention to a unique and alarming aspect

of our current situation: for the first time in history, these risks are not isolated to individual civilizations but are global in scale (Diamond 2005). Diamond's work resonates with the environmental adage, 'there is no planet B', emphasizing the critical need for sustainable practices and policies to safeguard our future.

As observed in *The Global Risk Report 2023*, a publication of the World Economic Forum, the major concern regards the outbreak of a potential 'poly-crisis' relating to shortages in natural resources such as food, water, and the associated 'socioeconomic and environmental fallout'. The report warns that 'newly emerging or rapidly accelerating risks to natural ecosystems, human health, security...and economic stability that could become crises and catastrophes in the next decade' (World Economic Forum 2023).

### **3. Policies to Confront the Ecological Crisis**

To effectively address the urgent need for environmental sustainability, it is essential to recognize that without significant and immediate changes in our economic systems and lifestyle habits, we are at a high risk of encountering catastrophic ecological consequences that could severely impact global health. Despite over fifty years of environmental activism, international climate agreements, and widespread advocacy for ecofriendly practices, we have yet to achieve a substantial reduction in global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. This persistent challenge underscores the difficulty of enacting rapid and comprehensive societal changes. It is noteworthy that the most significant decreases in annual carbon dioxide emissions historically have occurred during periods of economic downturn, such as the 2008 global financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Hausfather 2021).

One may wonder whether we should aim at a transitional period characterised by a 'healthy' reduction of GDP per capita or a state of stational state where we prioritize climate over economic goals. The good news is that economic recessions are not necessarily negative events at least from a public health perspective. For example, Japan had years of fall GDP but experienced a reduction in chronic diseases mortality (Kondo et al. 2008). In Finland, all-cause mortality decreased more during the recession than during the economic boom in the late 1980s (Valkonen et al. 2000). Cuba recorded a halt in crude mortality alongside an increase in life expectancy (Borowy 2013).

The relationship between GDPs per capita, life expectancy, and life satisfaction illustrates an interesting dynamic. At lower levels of GDP, there's a strong correlation: as GDP increases, life expectancy and life satisfaction

also tend to rise. However, this relationship significantly diminishes beyond a certain GDP threshold, suggesting that beyond a certain level of economic development, further increases in GDP do not necessarily lead to proportionate increases in life quality or longevity. Moreover, several countries have demonstrated remarkable achievements in life expectancy with relatively low carbon emissions. This indicates that it's possible to achieve high standards of living without relying heavily on activities that contribute to climate change. This scenario presents a hopeful path forward, showing that environmental sustainability and high life quality can coexist.

Moreover, research from LUT University and 14 other major international universities, after analysing hundreds of scientific studies have shown that systems of 100% renewable energy can be achieved globally, regionally, and nationally by or before 2050 (Ram et al. 2018). Addressing the challenge of transitioning to renewable energy by 2050, researchers have proposed various strategies. However, funding such a massive shift require policies and reforms in the economic system that may include actions such as the following:

1. **Redirecting Fossil Fuel Subsidies:** Governments currently subsidize the fossil fuel industry with approximately \$7 trillion reflecting in 2022 – a \$2 trillion increase since 2020. These subsidies amounted 7.1% of global GDP in 2022 (Romanello et al. 2021).
2. **Taxing Major Polluters:** Reports have identified certain companies as major contributors to carbon emissions. Taxing these polluters could generate revenue for environmental initiatives and discourage harmful practices (Starr 2016).
3. **Taxing Under-Taxed Corporations:** During economic downturns, where job losses are common, taxing corporations that have historically paid minimal taxes could provide a source of revenue. This would also ensure economic security in challenging times. Sixty multinational corporations, including Amazon, Netflix, IBM, and General Motors, to pay 0% in taxes in 2018! (Saul & Cohen 2019).
4. **Taxing Ultra-Rich Individuals:** The tax rates for the wealthiest individuals are reportedly lower than they have been in decades. Estimates from a ProPublica analysis showed that Warren Buffett, Jeff Bezos, Michael Bloomberg and Elon Musk, from 2014 to 2018, paid 0.1%, 0.98%, 1.3% and 3.27% in taxes respectively (Eisinger et al. 2021).

Adjusting these rates to ensure that ultra-rich contribute their fair share could significantly aid funding for environmental and social programs.



#### 4. The Need for a New Socioeconomic System

Envisioning and implementing policies that guide us towards a healthier, more equitable, and sustainable world is crucial, not only for environmental well-being but also for the protection of fundamental human rights. These policies should foster a society where sustainable living is not a privilege, but a common standard accessible to all. Yet, without tackling the root economic and political causes of the ecological crisis, current climate policies will continue to be 'green-wishing', 'green-washing' or 'green wishy-washy', have ambiguous goals and lacking concrete measures, or the necessary enforcement mechanisms to bring about meaningful change.

The evolution of world economic development in recent decades has demonstrated some common trends, despite the diverse characteristics of modern societies and their varied political-economic systems. This global trend has been marked by two key features: a growing internationalization and the widespread adoption of a specific set of economic policies, often applied in a 'one size fits all' manner to both developed and developing countries (Hui 2003). However, the exploration and critique of these neoliberal reforms by social scientists have often been met with scepticism or dismissal. Historian Philipp Mirowsky, known for his work 'The Political Movement that Dared Not to Speak Its Name', highlights two common reactions to discussions of neoliberalism. The first dismisses neoliberalism as a mere figment of imagination, a 'fevered delusion', while the second acknowledges its existence but argues that it is too inconsistent and varied to be considered a valid analytical category (Mirowski, 2014).

Neoliberalism, a term that encompasses a range of economic and political ideas, is often associated with various phrases like the 'Washington Consensus', 'laissez-faire capitalism', 'hyper-capitalism', 'turbo-capitalism', 'shock therapy' (particularly in the context of Eastern Europe), and 'structural adjustment policies' (in developing countries). At its core, neoliberalism is defined as a theory of political and economic practices that posits the enhancement of human well-being is best achieved by fostering individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within a framework defined by robust private property rights, free markets, and free trade (Harvey D. 2007). As former World Bank's economist and former President of Harvard University, Lawrence Summers famously noted 'despite economists, reputation for never being able to agree on anything, there is a striking degree of unanimity in the(ir) advice; privatization, stabilization and liberalization must be completed as soon as possible' (Hamm et al. 2012).

A fundamental aspect of neoliberal ideology is the belief that state interventions in markets should be minimal, underpinned by the conviction

that markets are self-regulating and inherently capable of yielding optimal outcomes when left unencumbered. This perspective posits that free markets, driven by supply and demand, are the most efficient means of allocating resources and fostering economic growth. The idea is that the invisible hand of the market, rather than government intervention, should guide economic activity. Ronald Reagan, a prominent political figure who championed neoliberal principles, famously encapsulated this distrust of government intervention in his quip, 'The nine most feared words in the English language are: I'm from the government, and I'm here to help' (Reagan 1986). This joke reflects the neoliberal scepticism towards government involvement in economic affairs, suggesting that such intervention is more likely to hinder than help. However, there is a noted discrepancy between the theory and practice of neoliberal policies. While theoretically advocating for free markets without government interference, in practice, these policies have often necessitated significant state interventions and even authoritarian politics.

The aggressive pursuit of free-market and free-trade policies, emphasizing minimal state intervention, has indeed been implicated in hindering the development and enforcement of robust environmental regulations, which are crucial for addressing issues like deforestation and climate change effectively. This tension between economic and environmental priorities becomes particularly evident in international negotiations and policy-making forums. A striking example of this conflict was observed during the negotiations of the Paris United Nations Climate Conference (COP21). In this instance, a leaked internal European Union (EU) document revealed a directive where European governments instructed their representatives to oppose any discussions of measures to combat climate change that might impose restrictions on international trade (Hilary, 2015).

This stance reflects a prioritization of free trade over environmental considerations, highlighting the inherent challenges in balancing economic interests with the urgent need for environmental action.

They suggest a reluctance among some governments to adopt measures that might constrain trade, even if such measures are essential for mitigating climate change. This attitude poses significant obstacles to the global community's ability to reach consensus on and implement effective environmental policies. The incident at COP21 underscores the need for a more integrated approach to economic and environmental policy making. It highlights the importance of aligning trade and market policies with environmental objectives to ensure that economic growth does not come at the expense of the planet's health. To effectively combat climate change, it's crucial that international agreements and national policies prioritize

sustainability and consider the long-term impacts of economic activities on the environment. This may require re-evaluating current economic paradigms and exploring new models that harmonize economic development with ecological preservation.

Another key obstacle to develop a more sustainable, equitable and healthy world is an ideology called economism. Economism, as described in the context of Karl Polanyi's best-selling book 'The Great Transformation', refers to a cultural tendency to prioritize economic goals above all other aspects of human life (Polanyi 2001). This ideology places economic objectives at the forefront, often at the expense of social goals and ecological sustainability. In essence, instead of integrating the economy into broader social and environmental objectives, economism subsumes these broader objectives under the economic system. The prevalence of this ideology is reflected in various aspects of society, including the recognition and value given to different fields of human endeavour. For instance, the existence of a Nobel Prize in Economics, but not in disciplines like human rights, international affairs, political sciences, psychology, sociology, or anthropology, can be seen as an indication of the higher status often accorded to economic achievements over other societal contributions.

The root of the ecological crisis can be traced back to a prevailing approach to human progress that overwhelmingly prioritizes economic goals – like infinite economic growth, free trade, and the adherence to a global self-regulating market – often at the expense of other critical societal values, including human survival and environmental sustainability. This approach tends to favour immediate economic benefits, overlooking the long-term consequences on the environment and human well-being. Jørgen Randers, a professor of climate strategy at the Norwegian Business School and co-author of 'Limits to Growth', poignantly encapsulates this dilemma. He suggests that the 'tyranny of the short term' often dominates decision-making processes because, in the immediate context, it is more cost-effective to postpone global climate action. This short-termism is driven by the pursuit of immediate profit and economic gains, which, paradoxically, leads to long-term detrimental consequences. Randers's statement, 'It is profitable to let the world go to hell', underscores the tragic irony and danger of this approach. This perspective highlights a critical flaw in current global economic and political systems: the tendency to prioritize immediate economic benefits over long-term environmental sustainability and human health. This short-term focus not only jeopardizes the planet's ecological balance but also threatens the future of human societies (Confino 2015).

The pervasive belief that neoliberal policies represent the only viable economic framework – often characterized as the culmination of economic

evolution or 'the end of history' as conceived by Francis Fukuyama (Fleming 2022) – has deeply influenced global economic thought and policy. This viewpoint posits that neoliberalism is not just the best, but the only feasible economic system, leading to the widespread acceptance of the idea that 'there are no alternatives'. Critics and proponents of radical societal reforms frequently face accusations of lacking realism. They are often portrayed as idealistic or impractical for challenging the established economic order. However, the real utopian thinking might lie with those who believe that the current state of affairs can continue in a business-as-usual fashion.

The need for an alternative approach to economic development is becoming increasingly clear. To effectively address the ecological crisis, a reorganization of societal priorities is necessary. This would involve a recalibration where the economy is recognized as just one component of a larger system, including social and ecological dimensions. The economy should serve these broader goals rather than dominate them. In this reimagined framework, the health of the ecosystem and the well-being of society would take precedence, with economic activities structured to support these ends (Schoenmaker & Stegeman 2023).

Fortunately, in recent times, many economists have begun to challenge the neoliberal and neoclassical paradigms that have long dominated economic thinking. These forward-thinking economists are exploring new ways to teach economics, focusing on developing sustainable, healthy, and equitable societies. They advocate for innovative policy alternatives that address climate change, such as implementing pricing mechanisms for activities that emit greenhouse gases. By increasing the cost of carbon-intensive activities, these policies aim to steer economic decision-making towards more environmentally friendly practices while simultaneously encouraging innovation in low-carbon technologies and renewable energies (Grantham Research Institute & Clark 2012).

Yet, there is an urgent need for a change in the global approach to economic policy making, moving away from the narrow focus on growth and profit towards a holistic view that integrates economic activity within the larger context of social welfare and environmental sustainability. In his influential book 'Cancel the Apocalypse', writer, author and activist Andrew Simms explains that there is a way out of the ecological crisis (Simms 2013). He described the existence of what he defined as 'Goodland'. It is a nation where well-being is more important than economic growth and human rights are more important than economic goals and where there is a national plan for good living where cities are green and produce healthy food. It is a nation where most fossil fuels have been phased out, where health and education services are free and child and elderly care is subsidized by the state. In

Goodland the constitution is written by the citizens, there are laws that establish the protection of ecosystem, the president donates a large part of his salary to the poor, there is a dynamic loco banking system that goes out of its way to help small businesses, the trade is largely dominated by cooperatives and the working week is much shorter than in other countries.

Goodland is not a fantasy, Goodland exists. All these virtuous examples just mentioned exist or existed. Our challenge to protect human rights, promote public health and well-being is to put all these lessons and virtuous examples together. We know it sounds utopian, but either we imagine a new future, or our future will be unimaginable.

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