

Correspondence

Fifty years after UN environment summit, researchers renew call for action

On the eve of the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, a group of 2,200 scientists signed a letter – now known as the Menton Message – to their (then) 3.5 billion neighbours on Earth. In one of the earliest examples of researchers collectively calling for societal change, they sounded the alarm on the ongoing environmental crisis, the nuclear arms race and the possibility of the extinction of life on Earth. As the Stockholm+50 summit gets under way this week – the UN conference's 50th anniversary – the International Science Council, Future Earth and the Stockholm Environment Institute have convened an expert group of natural scientists, social scientists, engineers and humanities scholars to modernize and extend that historical call. Writing as co-chairs of that group, we invite readers to sign our open letter at <https://science4stockholm50.world>.

After 50 years, environmental action seems like one step forward and two back. The world now produces more food than ever before, yet many still go hungry. We continue to subsidize and invest in fossil fuels, even though renewable energy is increasingly cost-effective. Governments subsidize private cars instead of building public transport systems. We extract resources where the price is lowest, often with disregard for local rights and values.

These and other contradictions are rooted mainly in mismatches around values, world views and institutions. Our individualistic,

materialistic, exploitative short-term thinking has led us to lose sight of the global public good. The focus on economic growth is detracting from human well-being and destroying our shared resources. The belief that we can bend all nature to our will through the unrestricted use of new technologies is an illusion.

Economic, political and social institutions are failing us. Financial power is concentrated in the hands of a few and legitimizes the relentless pursuit of profits, manipulation of citizens as consumers and valuation of nature for short-term economic gain. Racism and patriarchy continue to legitimize the deprivation of and environmental impacts on people of colour, women and Indigenous communities. Those most responsible for the crisis are the ones who suffer the least.

The worst fears of the Menton Message have not been realized, but we are getting closer to the brink (see M. Ivanova *Nature* 590, 365; 2021). Action is needed to create a safer and better future. The priority is to redefine our normative goals. Personal well-being needs to focus on physical and mental health, community and peace. Goals for societal well-being should include a sustainable future, justice and respect for all humans and the protection and conservation of all species. The privileged must recognize their responsibilities: those who consume too much must scale back and make space for those who are disenfranchised and disempowered.

Collective action is crucial. We must shift to an economy of cooperation and sharing, instead of competition, accumulation and planned obsolescence. Democracy and participatory governance should be strengthened and reinforced. Compassion and collaboration in our families,

communities and nations are paramount.

A small but important first step is to meet current international commitments to reduce pollution, improve conservation and tackle climate change. Naming and acclaiming countries, companies or citizen groups that deliver on pledges will inspire action, as will honouring the UN Environment Programme (see *Nature* 591, 8; 2021) and ensuring that the United Nations receives the best scientific advice (see *Nature* 600, 189–190; 2021).

The scientific, engineering and scholarly community must deepen its engagement with these issues, building bridges that span disciplines, geography and income discrepancies, and ensuring that technological innovation is socially responsible. Together with our teaching, research and technological skills, we can help to secure sustainability, justice and dignity for all.

We must become good ancestors and better neighbours.

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