

We've missed many chances to curb global warming. This may be our last



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IT WAS always likely to come to this. Despite decades of ever-starker warnings, and years of increasingly obvious changes to the climate, we still haven't done nearly enough. Now, according to the latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) – the UN's advisory body on the science of global warming – we are rapidly running out of time. Limiting warming to a manageable (but still dangerous) 1.5°C is possible, strictly speaking, but it would require “rapid, far reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society” by 2030 (see “What you need to know about the big UN climate report out this week”). That would mean starting not some time in the future, but right now.

Will humanity do what's necessary? For individuals, that means making sacrifices and sticking to them, forever. For politicians, that means an end to the indulgence of the fossil fuel industry; investing in renewable energy, and carbon capture and storage; radically transforming transport; halting deforestation; and dropping the remorseless pursuit of economic growth above everything else.

If we don't act, though, the consequences are grave and they are going to hit us within the lifetime of our grandchildren. As the IPCC says, even if everyone sticks to the Paris Agreement, we are currently on course to warm the planet by 3°C by the year 2100. That would mean a decisive end to the balmy and benign Holocene climate that allowed our civilisation to flourish, and the start of something much less hospitable. Heatwaves, flooding, wildfires, drought and famine will become much more common “in every inhabited continent” – which is why most of us try not to think about it too much.

“We still have time for a rescue, but it will be the largest project humanity has ever undertaken”

If anything, denial is deepening. The populist revolt is hostile to climate action and its leaders have managed to tar environmentalists as just another wing of the liberal elite. Populism thrives by offering simplistic solutions to complex problems – the exact opposite of what the world needs right now (see “Economics Nobel prize given for putting a price tag on climate change”).

The natural reaction to the IPCC report and wider developments may thus be despair. But that guarantees only one outcome: defeat. As the report makes clear, we still have time to pull off a rescue. It will arguably be the largest project that humanity has ever undertaken – comparable to the two world wars, the Apollo programme, the cold war, the abolition of slavery, the Manhattan project, the building of the railways and the rollout of sanitation and electrification, all in one. In other words, it will require us to strain every muscle of human ingenuity in the hope of a better future, if not for ourselves then at least for our descendants.

Is it possible? Over the coming weeks and months, we will be reporting on the ways in which we might transform society to avert the crisis.

The history of humanity is one of stupidity, denial and dawdling followed by heroic rearguard action to prevail against all odds. The climate crisis is close to that inflection point. Does our generation have the gumption? It is time to find out.

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