Still being stupid

83% – people see cyber attacks in the top three threats facing organizations today
3 minutes to midnight – time on the Doomsday Clock in 2016

Still being stupid

Despite a better understanding of the long-term challenges we face, we individually and collectively continue to make decisions that may make sense in the short-term - but do not lead to better longer-term consequences.

The Doomsday Clock has been maintained since 1947. It is a symbolic clock face that represents a countdown to possible global catastrophe such as nuclear war, climate change or cyber-terrorism. It is maintained by members of the Science and Security Board of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists who are in turn advised by the Governing Board and Board of Sponsors including 18 Noble Laureates. In 2010 it was set at 6 minutes to midnight and in 2016 the dial has moved to 3 minutes to midnight. It seems, despite growing public awareness, huge amounts of evidence, and constant reminders, we are incapable of changing our downward trajectory. What is going wrong?

What, then, are the disasters we're trying to avoid? There are many. Mark Carney, Governor of the Bank of England, is not alone when he points to Climate Change, *'The challenges currently posed by climate change pale in significance compared with what might come';* The WEF's list is long, adding geopolitical instability, water crises, food shortages, constrained economic growth, weaker societal cohesion and increased security risks; In ISACA's global security survey 83% of people said that cyber attacks were in the top three threats facing organizations today. We could also add the global refugees crisis and the threat of nuclear attack.

But none of the above is a new issue. The point is that as a society we have known that we are teetering on the brink of global disaster for a long time and yet despite this, and despite the wealth of innovation, technology prowess and sheer talent at our disposal, we seem incapable of doing anything about it. Why?

One reason may be the sheer size and complexity of the problems we face. They all have similar traits such as an inherent complexity, a need for extensive collaboration to drive change, not to mention the need for huge investment. They also need time for solutions to have an effect - and the possibility of extreme change/disruption if left unresolved. Some say that we are already too late in regards to cracking the problem, or that the correction required would require too significant change from our current way of life, so corrective traction will never willingly occur. Others are more even more direct, pointing out that many of the challenges we face need to be addressed in corners of the world that simply don't have the necessary infrastructure to deal with the problem, are too poor to carry much weight on the global stage, and so find it hard to get the necessary support.

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Power and influence

Politics and global leadership can of course make a huge difference. On a positive note the Pope's acknowledgement that "human-induced climate change is a scientific reality and its decisive mitigation is a moral and religious imperative for humanity" will change lives as does the work of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. This however is countered by lack of political action, which, some suggest, is often too driven by expediency to be able to drive change. Think of "the steady backtracking of the United Kingdom's present government on climate policies and the continued intransigence of the Republican Party in the United States, which stands alone in the world in failing to acknowledge even that human-caused climate change is a problem."

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Collectively, it seems we lack understanding of the complex nature of the issues, we disagree on how to address them and even if we do achieve consensus, we struggle with capacity building to do anything impactful. In addition, we have little or no global coordination, few frameworks and our regulation is often behind the curve. Our institutions such as the World Economic Forum, the United Nations and World Health Organisation work hard to make a difference and are successful at maintaining awareness but they are unwieldy, consensus-driven and usually have to follow the path of least resistance to achieve anything. Often their actions are in response to a crisis, not because they weren't aware of impending problems but simply because they can't get political traction for things that might not happen for a while, or indeed might not happen at all. The recent Ebola crisis and indeed the current migration crisis in Europe are both good example of how, despite previous warnings, the global community failed to act in time to avert disaster.

When it comes to individual action, many of the issues are largely too distant from every day life to inspire much change. Sometimes this is because the language is often wrong or patronising – conversations around air quality for example gets on-the-ground response; climate change less so. Sometimes because the subject is quite simply too distasteful – talking effectively about sanitation is a challenge. Sometimes consumer/citizen awareness is robust, but there's an acceptance that nothing can be done – many believe that disease, hunger and poverty will always be with us for example. It can also be a financial issue, of course it's better to buy local and organic but if you operate on a strict budget those sorts of priorities are secondary to the need to feed your children. Sometimes we are just too used to our lifestyle to be prepared to change.

Avoiding catastrophe is said to require swift, collective action. It needs 'whole party' participation with new corporate forms and multi-capital success measures that genuinely value people, society and nature alongside traditional assets. Also needed is a shift in perceptions where humans become more connected to nature, social development and legacy thinking as well as focused social movements, such as the emerging fossil fuel divestment activity today. While there is a vast array of all of the above in place already, at the time of writing this does not seem to be enough.

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Related insights

Capitalism challenged

Unable to shake key issues like inequality, capitalist societies face cries for change, structural challenges and technology enabled freedoms. Together these re-write the rules and propose a more participative, collaborative landscape of all working together.

Declining government influence

National governments' ability to lead change comes under greater pressure from both above and below - multinational organisations increasingly set the rules while citizens trust and support local and network based actions.

Full Cost

Increasing transparency of society's reliance on nature, intensify requirements for business to pay the true cost of the resources provided by 'natural capital' and so compensate for their negative impact on society.

Key resource constraints

Economic, physical and political shortages of key resources increase and drive increasing tension between and within countries. As we exceed the Earth's natural thresholds, food and water receive as much focus as oil and gas.