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# Don’t Abandon the Paris Temperature Target

## Now Is Not the Time for Climate Defeatism

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We are living through one of the most disruptive moments in modern human history, as the early impacts of climate change [1] coincide with the onset of massive economic, technological, and social transformation. In this period of extraordinary challenge and obligation, it would be wrong to become indecisive or to consider no longer pursuing the goals that to date have driven climate action. In short, to abandon the target of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels—as close to 200 countries have promised to aim for in the landmark Paris agreement on climate change—would be a grave mistake.

Yet at this crucial moment, Ted Nordhaus (“The Two-Degree Delusion [2],” February 8) advocates that the international community do just that. He risks blindfolding policymakers to the available solutions to meeting the target while betting on unproven technologies that could do more harm than good. In consequence, Nordhaus also risks chaining our economies to the same dirty-energy systems that have already done so much to imperil the climate.

**[Read "The Two-Degree Delusion [2]" here.]**

Nordhaus premises his claims on the false assumption that limiting warming to two degrees Celsius —let alone 1.5 degrees—has already been proven impossible and that adherence to this goal undermines the urgency to adapt. As a solution, he advocates economic development through the burning of fossil fuels to fund adaptation. But this is nonsensical.

Consider that just a few years ago, very few people would have predicted that the end of the combustion engine was in sight. Yet with China [3], France [4], India [5], and the United Kingdom [6] talking about and setting deadlines for the end of fossil fuel road vehicles, this is now a reality.

The global energy mix is also transforming. Some of the world’s largest economies, including Canada, France, Italy, and the United Kingdom, have pledged to close all coal plants by 2030 as part of a timeline for Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development member countries [7]. In the United States, despite the pro-coal rhetoric of President Donald Trump, coal plants have continued to announce retirements at a rate of one every 15 days, and power generation from coal has continued to fall.

As China’s and India’s cities choke on deadly smog, a huge debate about public health is driving a boom in renewable energy investments. And as the global energy transition accelerates, it’s worth noting that utility-scale solar systems were about 25 percent cheaper [8] per megawatt in 2017 than they were two years earlier, while the cost of onshore wind power has fallen by around one-quarter since 2010 [9].

These are just some of the disruptions to the energy and transport systems that policymakers can and must embrace to ensure we meet the ambitions of the Paris agreement. This transition will be neither easy nor smooth, but the next few years are critical in the fight to achieve the necessary peak in greenhouse gas emissions by 2020, followed by a rapid decline. The solution to climate change is not an either/or argument. We need to have both mitigation and adaptation—and both on an unprecedented scale. But building adaptive, climate-resilient societies and economies does not necessitate the use of fossil fuels.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is yet to conclude its special report examining how to limit warming to 1.5 degrees. This report, expected to be published in October [10], will draw on the latest peer-reviewed science that tells us that limiting warming to 1.5 degrees will be tremendously difficult but nonetheless achievable. This requires transformative change, but not just through a shift to 100 percent renewable energy. Urgent work to defend and restore the world's forests, revitalize its oceans, and transform its agricultural practices is also critical.

Although it is true that the current commitments of the Paris signatories fall far short of the emissions cuts required to meet the aspirational 1.5-degree target, putting the world on a dangerous and irresponsible three-degree trajectory instead [11], the solution is not in giving up the goal but in significantly stepping up action while also investing in adaptation to build resilience.

Even by the standards of current technology in agriculture, buildings, energy, forestry, and other sectors, there is already considerable capacity to cut emissions. Ecofys, an energy-consulting company, has estimated that 30 to 36 gigatons of carbon dioxide emissions [12] could be cut by 2030. The estimated total emissions reduction potential [13] is sufficient to bridge the emissions gap in 2030 for two degrees (with a greater than 66 percent chance) and 1.5 degrees (a 50 to 66 percent chance).

We cannot let fearmongering or defeatism divert us from capitalizing on the seismic shifts that keep the ambition of 1.5 degrees alive. The more the climate warms, the greater the threat of catastrophic tipping points. Every fraction of a degree matters, and the sooner we act the better.

The temperature target agreed to in Paris is neither delusion nor distraction—but the outdated idea advanced by Nordhaus that development necessarily entails fossil fuels is. According to the United Nations Development Program, economic growth as measured by GDP would be 10 percent, or $12 trillion higher [14], by 2050 if global warming were to be held to 1.5 degrees rather than the current three-degree trajectory. This is because climate action will preserve economic growth possibilities that would otherwise be lost owing to climate change impacts. For example, in Cape Town, South Africa, residents already face the prospect of water taps running dry, and—if unmitigated by a phaseout of fossil fuels—climate change will likely increase the frequency of drought [15] across the globe, multiplying risks and threatening development and economic growth. This is why the World Bank already rejects coal as a cure for poverty [16] and is ending its support for upstream oil and gas projects [17].

Moreover, many of the carbon removal technologies advocated by Nordhaus pose unacceptable ecological and social risks and may not permanently remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. No atmospheric geoengineering proposal will change the need for a rapid decarbonization to abate the risks of global warming. This is why proponents of these unproven and potentially unsustainable technological fixes are wrong to back these proposals.

The reality is that those who have benefited most from fossil fuels are the carbon producers who have profited from their pollution. Advocating fossil fuel–driven development, as Nordhaus does, will only extend this economic system of injustice rather than address the need for transformative change.

A recent study [18] by researchers from the Union of Concerned Scientists, the University of Oxford, and the Climate Accountability Institute found that emissions linked to the world's 90 largest carbon producers, a mix of investor- and state-owned fossil fuel companies and cement manufacturers, have contributed 50 percent to the rise in the global average temperature since 1880. Attribution science is rapidly advancing and will likely be used as evidence to hold carbon producers liable for climate impacts such as rising seas.

In this context, U.S. cities such as New York are filing lawsuits [19] against carbon producers for the costs of adaptation. Filipino natural disaster survivors and others triggered a first-ever investigation [20] into fossil fuel companies' responsibility for climate-related human rights impacts, calling for changes to business plans. Governments are not off the hook either. People in Switzerland, Norway, and elsewhere are taking their governments to court [21] over weak climate policies and for licensing new oil and gas drilling. These legal actions stemming from the "polluter pays" principle are becoming a more popular tool in the policy tool kit for climate action.

Societal disruption is changing the dynamics of corporate power and responsibility. Along with economic and technological factors, these developments open the gateway to radical change at a critical moment for our climate. Now is not the time to give up, as Nordhaus would advocate. Fossil fuel–driven development will fail to protect vulnerable communities and instead expose them, in fact all the world, to ever greater climate risks. We are on the cusp of transformative change, and accelerating climate change mitigation, together with adaptation, remains our best method of defense. This moment in history represents the defining test of our generation. We should maintain the vision of Paris and act with the determination, responsibility, and urgency that the 1.5-degree goal demands.





**Links**
[1] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-02-16/next-front-climate-change
[2] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2018-02-08/two-degree-delusion
[3] https://www.economist.com/news/business/21728980-its-government-developing-plan-phase-out-vehicles-powered-fossil-fuels-china-moves
[4] https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/jul/06/france-ban-petrol-diesel-cars-2040-emmanuel-macron-volvo
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[6] http://money.cnn.com/2017/07/26/news/uk-bans-gasoline-diesel-engines-2040/index.html?iid=EL
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[10] http://www.ipcc.ch/scripts/_calendar_template.php
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[20] https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/3k7dv9/the-woman-going-after-big-energy-for-the-typhoon-that-killed-her-family?utm_campaign=c85a5d1988-

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[21] http://columbiaclimatelaw.com/files/2017/05/Burger-Gundlach-2017-05-UN-Envt-CC-Litigation.pdf