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## The South African Government's Green Paper Fails to Address Climate Change Challenges

**An opinion piece by Professor Jørgen Randers**

The deadline for commentary on the government's green paper on climate change recently closed with many commentators agreeing that it is a vague document that does not present a sufficiently detailed or coherent plan for addressing the looming challenges of climate change.

The paper is yet more evidence that the democratic process may not be able to deliver the pace and scale of change needed to confront the problem. The perception is that the imperatives of economic development and the pressures of big business will always conspire to prevent governments from taking the long-term view.

The hard truth is that South Africa – in common with the rest of world – is faced with the challenge of simultaneously having to grow its economy and protect natural systems – including a stable climate – that are vital to that growth.

In a country like South Africa economic growth is the most effective way – in the short term probably the only way – of providing social goods such as increased employment, poverty alleviation and security in old age.

The challenge is to find a way to grow the economy while addressing very real climate change threats. The good news is that this is entirely possible.

While world governments remain sceptical, evidence is that economic growth with a reduction in carbon emissions is fully doable using existing technologies. Furthermore, it is

not very expensive – consumption levels may fall by perhaps 1 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP).

This means that countries that pursue climate friendly strategies will be as rich in June 2020 as they would have been in January 2020. It may be even cheaper than that as fresh levels of innovation kick in.

In principle there are no limits to economic growth and growth need not be a threat to sustainability. The real problem is that humanity tends to be too slow in deciding to push back the resource constraints that will stop growth if left unattended. Examples of actions that can be taken include finding climate-friendly substitutes for oil, or cutting greenhouse gas emissions to sustainable levels. This can be done from a technical and economic point of view. But it takes time – the decision to act must be made decades before the solution is needed.

Societal decision delay is the real problem. That is what is dangerous, not that the world has a limited capacity, not that we are growing too fast, but that the hard decisions that need to be taken to ensure that we can survive this growth are not being taken early enough because politicians are not given a mandate to sacrifice short-term gains for long-term security. The biggest obstacle is a lack of political will caused by non-existent voter support, as the green paper illustrates so well.

Unfortunately, unpalatable as it might seem to a Western audience, those who are getting it right are the institutions that are free of the worst aspects of democratic governance. For example, the Chinese Communist Party is successfully growing the economy and raising the standards of living of its population, while reducing carbon emissions relative to GDP – which should be the goal of governments everywhere.

China is very aware of the dangers of climate change. Temperatures over large areas are already up by an average of 2°C and rainfall patterns have shifted radically.

The Chinese are responding by, among other things, investing in green technologies such as electric cars, alternative energy and carbon capture and storage and will soon be world leaders in these fields.

When we get to 2020, the politicians in democratic countries may very well still be debating whether we can afford measures to curtail climate change.

By that time the Chinese may equally well have solved the problem, and be profiting from selling the solutions back to these democracies.

The European Commission, which by virtue of the way it is structured is still not completely controlled by the European Parliament, is also able to take decisive steps, as evidenced by its bold announcement that Europe will reduce emissions by 20 per cent by 2020, regardless of whether others do likewise.

More such examples are needed. The challenges facing the world now are considerable. The global economy is set to quadruple in size by 2050, and world population will continue to grow for another few decades before it stabilises.

In the same time frame, emissions must be reduced by at least a half in order to avoid widely predicted and potentially catastrophic temperature rises.

This means that on average all countries and companies need to reduce greenhouse emissions per unit of value added (Geva) by 5 per cent a year to know that they are “doing their bit”.

But if history is anything to go by, the decisions needed to effect these changes will not be made in time so long as the democratic process holds sway. The failure at Copenhagen and Cancun is likely to be repeated in Durban if all 190 nations are to agree. It may take a climate crisis to galvanise democratic governments into action.

In the meantime, business is starting to move on its own. In the UK and the EU, the [Corporate Leaders Groups on Climate Change](#) – supported by CPSL – were launched in 2005 and 2006, respectively, when prominent chief executives came together to try and provide the political space necessary for progressive climate policy with the belief that investing in a low carbon future is a strategic business objective – whether their governments recognised it or not.

Similar moves are afoot in South Africa as businesses and individuals start to realise that, while we cannot do without the democratic process entirely, action needs to be taken at other levels to protect the environment without sacrificing economic growth.

The economic imperative is that business in South Africa needs to grow like crazy. The mind shift needed to accommodate this is that it does not have to come at the expense of sustainability – quite the reverse; growth that does not maintain and restore the natural systems underpinning our economies is suicidal.

And if one wants a simple way for businesses and government departments to measure adequate progress along this path, use a target of 5 per cent annual reduction in Geva.

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