

Condemned to utopia ?

Climate and democracy: changing our paradigm to preserve the climate and our future

by [Materne Maetz](#)

The [Convention citoyenne pour le climat](#) (the Citizen Convention for the Climate) which recently ended its deliberations in France is often presented as a democratic innovation. The main argument underpinning this view is that the way its 150 members were selected - by random draw - makes them more representative and more diversified a group than the members of the three assemblies of the French Republic (National Assembly, Senate and Economic, Social and Environmental Council), and that they do not take part in discussions as agents of particular interests but as independent citizens. Because they benefit from exhaustive information and participate in facilitated debates, they should be, according to the promoters of this approach, more likely to find a consensus around what is often referred to as “general interest”.



The reaction to the [149 proposals \(in French\)](#) of the Convention suggests that while a consensus was reached among its 150 members, its results do not generate immediate support from the French population as a whole. Yet, most of the solutions put forward point to the right direction and they make up a catalogue from which ideas should be drawn.

A well-known French constitutionalist and political scientist, professor emeritus at the prestigious Science Po of Paris, spoke out during a [weekly programme dedicated to politics](#) on the French radio, France Inter, and criticised the Convention for having fallen into the trap of normativism: “A considerable number of proposals boil down to : forbid, ban, restrict, and forbid... an enormous proportion of restrictions, and when it is not forbid, oblige... and if there is another possibility, tax.”

The paradox of this process that was intended to be participative and democratic is that its results are likely to cause an outcry and an avalanche of criticisms of recommendations that could be seen as signs of a “punitive ecology” (*écologie punitive*), or as an attempt to plan for a green democratorship (*démocrature verte*) that could trigger a tenfold “Yellow Jacket” type of movement that, experience showed, would probably not lead to anything from the political point of view.

Does this mean that we have reached a dead end?

Maybe, unless we find a way to change paradigm by imagining a method for managing the transition that leaves enough room and a possibility of choice by the mass of citizens. These conditions could be achieved by offering a solid framework and sufficient information for people to decide with responsibility, in a manner quite similar to that experienced by the participants in the Convention themselves.

As a matter of fact, opinion polls show it: the climate and the environment are among the main concerns of the French. There must then be a way to carry out what is being labelled as “the transition towards a low-carbon economy” by obtaining a buy-in of the population and without having to resort to an overregulated micromanagement. It can be expected that there will be no real commitment without the freedom of a responsible choice. The power of authority and the so-called “pedagogy” are signs of infantilisation of the people and they are likely to lead to behaviours of deception, trickery, evasion of the law or upheaval.

As a very large majority of the population agrees to the necessity to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions - a referendum on this topic would probably obtain a very high rate of approval -, it is important to first consolidate this consensus and translate it into individual commitments. It is then on the basis of these commitments that each and every one, according to their socio-economic characteristics and preferences, will be left to opt for solutions to be implemented at personal, family, company or local level, chosen among the many solutions presented by the members of the Convention and others. Few of us, maybe no-one, are ready to adopt them all, but we will accept to carry out some of them in order to cut our emissions while respecting our preferences. This will help us to see how the efforts we make at our level contribute to the overall national and global effort.

What is required here is therefore a total reversal of the approach, if we want to reduce sustainably our climatic and environmental impact.

A possible approach: principle and tool

That is the moment when fiction comes to rescue reality, a fiction that is inspired by some characteristics of our society and pushes them one step further.

In the fourth volume of my novel « [Octuor](#) », with title « [Deus ex machina](#) » (in French, soon available), I put forward an idea of a solution that, although set in the context of a fiction that occurs in the near future, could be of interest. It rests on a principle and some specific implementation modalities.

The principle consists in placing in the centre what matters most for the desired objective. If the objective is to decrease our GHG emissions to make climate change bearable, there is evidently a need to give the paramount role to GHGs emissions and not to economic value. This is a theme that we have already had the opportunity to address in articles published earlier on hungerexplained.org [[read](#)].

How could we materialise this change of priority?

This is rather simple: as we (individuals or businesses) almost all have a financial account, we could have an account that records the GHGs that we emit during a particular year¹. However, contrarily to money that we have to earn and the volume of which is potentially illimited, in the case of GHGs, the law will fix for each of us the maximum GHG emission credit that we cannot exceed. This maximum is determined by the level of our emissions for the previous year multiplied by a coefficient that varies in an inversely proportionate way to the amount emitted.

For more clarity: the more you emitted GHG last year and the higher will be the rate of reduction that will be required for the ongoing year. The rates are computed in a way to bring about the overall decrease required by the fixed national or global objective (for example in order to ensure that the world average temperature will not increase by more than 2 degrees). Individual objectives will therefore be at the same time consistent with national or global objectives and contribute to a reduction of difference between people (decreasing inequality which was a key concern of the “Yellow Jackets” movement). For those persons who consume less, the individual objective will probably leave some space for greater GHG emissions. Each and everyone will then have a clear idea of his/her personal responsibility in diminishing GHG emissions, and the objective of GHG emissions will cease to be a general and vague objective without an obvious connection to the everyday life of the citizens. This approach is expected to foster individual commitment to an endeavour on which our future and that of generations to come depends.

If ever the annual individual objective is on the way to be exceeded, measures are taken to try and prevent this from happening, while social programmes will help avoid that this leads to dramatic consequences for the people concerned, if required.

¹ In my novel « Octuor », the account concerns at the same time GHGs and consumed energy. These two variables being strongly correlated nowadays, it is possible to limit the accounting process to one of them, namely GHGs, and include the other in a second phase.

This raises the key question of the more or less normative (compulsory) nature of the maximum level of emissions fixed for each person. There could be criticisms that this principle is too strict if the decision is to make the maximum level normative, but this choice could be justified by the fact that there is a massive commitment in the population to reduce GHGs. This harshness and the pressure for performance are offset by the maximum freedom left to every individual on the way they will decrease their GHG emissions: each will be free to choose his/her preferences among the many solutions available, in particular those proposed by the Convention, and they will be provided financial and technical assistance required for a successful implementation. The only thing that matters here is the performance requirement.

Objections

The immediate reaction to this approach is to say that it is **unworkable** in the present situation and that, if it were applied one day, it would bring about an intolerable **invasion** of the privacy of individuals. A little thinking demonstrates that these arguments are not that much convincing.

Unworkable?

The information required to establish GHG emission accounts is already largely available. It will just be a matter of assembling and processing it to build the accounts and update them in real time.

For example, it is easy to gather data on the energy used by anyone at home or for their transport and, according to the nature of the energy, it is feasible to estimate the GHG emissions that relate to it. On the basis of purchases made nowadays mostly by electronic payments, it is possible to know roughly what a particular individual or family consumes. A strengthened research programme would help to improve the computation of the GHGs emitted during the manufacturing of all the goods that we consume (for durable goods, the GHG emissions would be depreciated according to the usual accounting rules²). All the computations required for maintaining accounts in real time and for fixing individual annual objectives will be automatic. This aspect of implementation is therefore largely solved, even though it will require some pilots and periodic refinements with time.

In brief, the idea is to create for individuals and companies a new type of account using a numeraire with very specific characteristics - GHG emissions - but which, just like a bank account to which everyone is accustomed, has its rules that must be respected and that are defined by law.

In order to make it easier for individuals to choose the solution they will adopt, an on-line documentation will explain the GHG emissions reductions each of them offers. Funding modalities will be proposed in the case of some solutions, as for instance for a better insulation of homes.

Evidently, at first, the data used in the accounts will not be 100% correct: errors will be likely such as omissions and double counting that could lead to disputes within limits

² To avoid, for example, replacing old cars by more recent models in order to make meagre savings in terms of fuel consumption without considering for the sizeable amount of GHG emissions generated for manufacturing the new vehicle.

fixed by law. What matters most is to reach a consensus on the objective and the indicator that helps to measure whether the movement is in the right direction and at a rate consistent with national and global objectives. With some investment, the tool will be improved with time. What matters is to apply it soonest: now.

The danger of invasion of privacy

The second argument, invasion of privacy, does not seem to be more convincing than the first one, as we are already accepting today that private companies use our data (type of purchases made by credit card and their location, various loyalty cards and subscriptions, cookies storing our activities on the Internet and on our smartphones, etc.) in order to make profit, with relatively limited control.

Under these circumstances, how could we deny the use of our data to try and achieve a common objective that corresponds to the general interest and that we support, provided this happens under a public scrutiny that safeguards the confidentiality of our data? The important point here is to define a regulatory framework that gives confidence to the population on how the collected data will be used.

Modalities and funding

The objective of this paper is not to go into the details of modalities of implementation of the approach proposed here. However, it may be worth mentioning that pilots could be helpful and that funding will be required in sufficient amount to ensure that it will be effectively carried out.

Pilotes ?

Time is running short and every day that passes without being actively involved in reducing our GHG emissions means that efforts required in the future will be greater, if we want to be sure that the average temperature of the planet will not increase by more than say 2 degrees.

Ideally, the approach should be adopted immediately. However, to solve technical problems, create the confidence necessary for a successful implementation of this initiative and identify issues that need more research and investment, pilots could prove to be helpful.

Resources

Carrying out the approach will require resources to gather the data, perform the computations, inform and advise the population, monitor implementation, fund the actual solutions and support this whole process by a reward and recognition system for those who obtain the best results (individuals, companies, localities, territories) as well as in order to turn this activity into something pleasant and not a dull and excruciating experience that will spoil our lives.

The total amount needed may be rather important, but this is not an unusual issue and is quite similar to that of health which has been well illustrated by the current COVID-19 crisis: do we absolutely want to save a few dozens of billions of euros today while being sure that the bill of climate change will run into thousands of billions of euros in a

relatively near future, not taking into consideration the suffering that people will endure. Part of these expenses could be paid from resources from the [European Green Deal](#), but this will not be sufficient and there will be a need to mobilise additional funding either through everyone's efforts (increased contributions and private investment) or through more debt.

Here too, it is necessary to reverse the usual narrative on “debt as a burden for future generations who will have to reimburse it”. As a matter of fact, expenditures made today will be investments for limiting and hopefully bringing the climate change process to a halt. These investments will produce prospective benefits in so far that they will avoid that generations bear the enormous burden of climate change. Debt incurred now will be incommensurably lower than the costs that investments made today will prevent in the future.

Conclusion

I can already hear the criticisms of those who will certainly emphasise the utopian side of the approach proposed here.

To this argument, I have responded in part by showing that it is feasible. I will add that if the choice is between “Utopia and death” (to quote the title of the well known, in France, book of Prof. René Dumont), and utopia is the only way to avoid a disaster compared to which the COVID-19 crisis will look like a walk in the park, I will definitely choose utopia!

Further readings

- [Les propositions de la Convention citoyenne pour le climat](#), site web, 2020 (in French).
- Maetz. M., Octuor, tome 4, [Deus ex machina](#), roman, 337 p., Vêrone éditions, Paris, (à paraître prochainement) (in French).
- Dumont, R., [L'utopie ou la mort](#), L'histoire immédiate, Seuil, 1973 (in French).

Selection of past articles on hungerexplained.org related to the topic:

- Opinions : [Back to reality - Reflections around the COVID-19 crisis](#) by Materne Maetz, 2020.
- [The dangers of a “partial” impact analysis: the example of a study on the impact of a 100% conversion to organic farming in England and Wales](#), 2019.
- [Policies for a transition towards more sustainable and climate friendly food systems](#), 2018.
- [Climate is changing - Food and Agriculture must too - Towards a “new food and agricultural revolution”](#), 2016.