Combatting climate change in our daily life

by Materne Maetz

How?

Like a growing number of people, you are worried by the climate crisis and its deleterious impact described by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in their successive reports [read] and that the media continuously bring up.

You know that to avoid further disruption of the climate that would increase ecological and economic disasters, it is urgently required to reduce our greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. There is a lot of talking taking place around commitments made by governments at the 2015 COP21 held in France, the European Green Deal and, in France and elsewhere, post COVID-19 economic recovery plans that may have a component aiming at funding an ecological transition and the decarbonisation of our economies. Experts discuss skilfully on the media, some to convince you that the fight against climate change is the responsibility of the State, others that it is the private sector that should take the lead.

But for you (and your loved ones), what is it that you can do? How can you participate individually and effectively in the fight against climate disruption? How can you relate what you do every day with all this and become an actor of the necessary changes?

Almost everyone agrees to say that we should modify our behaviour and invest personally to contribute to this battle, by eating differently, by travelling differently, by imagining new kinds of leisure and by improving our homes, among other things.

Do you even know the amount of your GHG emissions every year? Do you know which dimension of your life makes you contribute most (is it your food, your travel or your heating?), and in which one it would be easiest for you to reduce your emissions? Are you able to anticipate today the impact that a change in behaviour would have on the quantity of GHGs you emit?

Unless you are a member of a tiny minority of people, the answer is no, because you are not in a position to reply to those critical questions. However, they call for an answer, if your intention is really to be actively part of the fight against climate disruption in your daily life. Participating in street demonstrations, clicking on the Internet, watching documentary films, listening and taking part in debates, is fine; but acting in your daily life is much, much better!

Very diverse starting points

Our lives are so different (depending on whether we are rich or poor, urban or rural, young or old, etc.) that there is no one solution to the problem. Let's just consider a few figures to illustrate this point.

According to the data published in its yearly report (in French) by France's department for sustainable development (Commissariat général au développement durable), the world emitted 53.5 billion tons CO_2 equivalent in 2017, or an average of around 7 tons per person and per year (accounting for all forms of emissions, including those arising from land use, land-use change and forestry).

Variations across countries are enormous: for example, in Qatar, the average GHG emission per person and per year is 50 tonnes CO_2 equivalent, in Yemen, it is only 2 tons. In North America, it is more than 20 tons and in Europe slightly less than 15 tons. The origin of emissions also varies a great deal from one country to another. For example, if you compare China and France, in France only 11% of GHGs are due to electricity production and 47% in China, while transport weighed 42% in France and only 9% in China.

These figures show that the reduction of GHG emissions is a very different issue depending on the country.

There is one aspect that is generally overlooked (in particular in the report prepared by France's department for sustainable development) despite its importance, it is the presence of a high disparity in the amounts and origin of GHG emissions within a given country, due to, *inter alia*, the socio-economic characteristics of every individual (income, place of residence, age, etc.). Data illustrating these variations are rare, but just make a little effort to imagine the volume of GHGs emitted (and its breakdown by source) by billionaire Bill Gates and by John Doe, one of the 70,000 homeless people living in New York, to understand that the size of the residence and the frequency of air travel of the former will generate much greater emissions than those generated by the latter. There are, however, some studies that demonstrate this diversity (see here and here) and show that the rich emit more than the poor, a fact that will be no surprise for anyone.

These figures suggest that it is indispensable to look into the situation of each and every person and not to envisage a set of recipes so general that they have no meaning in our daily life.

What do we need to know for adopting an individual approach that respects our preferences?

As mentioned in the introduction to this article, the problem is that, individually, we do not have the information required to be in a position to choose what to modify in our lifestyle to be able to contribute in the most effective – and acceptable to us – way to the fight against climate change.

What information should each of us have to decide? It is of two types:

- An assessment of our situation, that is the amount of our individual (or family level) GHG emissions with indications on their structure so as to be aware of our most GHG emitting activities;
- Data on possible alternatives that give the level of GHG emission reduction we can achieve by changing a particular behaviour: how much cut will be achieved by travelling by rail rather than by plane? by public transport instead of by private car? How much can we save by improving the thermal insulation of our home? By replacing animal proteins by plant proteins in our food? etc.

In other words, we would need to have **a detailed account of our GHG emissions** and **documentation** to help us in assessing and choosing among the many ways of cutting our emissions willingly those that are the most acceptable to us.

As we indicated and discussed in an earlier article [read], requirements for the establishment and the real time updating of such an account are already largely fulfilled. In France, a small part of the 30 billion euros envisaged under “greening the French economy” heading of the “France-Relance” recovery plan would be enough to:

- Develop a computer application that could draw from where it is available (our bank and our main suppliers) the necessary data on the major components of our consumption so as to build and maintain our account, while ensuring confidentiality.
- Compute the norms on the GHGs emitted for each element of our consumption. These norms could be first gross estimates that would be progressively refined to cover our GHGs in a more precise and exhaustive manner.
- Prepare an explanatory documentation allowing everyone to figure out the effect on GHGs emitted of an envisaged modification of our behaviour.

With this in hand, we would be in a position to understand in very concrete terms what combatting climate change requires and to act effectively in our daily life according to our preferences and possibilities.

For now, this idea is like a message in a bottle that has just been tossed into the sea. Let’s hope that someone will pick it up before it is too late, and that we will not have to wait for the sea level to rise to discover it again in our daily lives with a strength and an extreme urgency that we need to avoid at any cost.

Further readings:

- Commissariat général au développement durable, Chiffres clés du climat, 2020 (in French).
- Paris Agreement, 2015.

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

- Opinions : Condemned to utopia ? Climate and democracy: changing our paradigm to preserve the climate and our future, by Materne Maetz, 2020.
- Opinions : Back to reality - Reflections around the COVID-19 crisis by Materne Maetz, 2020.
- Ensuring world food security in a changing climate will require us to modify our diet, develop appropriate technologies and implement conducive policies, 2019.
- Policies for a transition towards more sustainable and climate friendly food systems, 2018.
- Food and climate change: it is up to us, as consumers and producers, to change our food system! 2018.
- Climate is changing - Food and Agriculture must too - Towards a “new food and agricultural revolution”, 2016.