

Kluwer Mediation Blog

All the world's a stage

Charlie Woods (Core Solutions Group / Scottish Universities Insight Institute) · Thursday, June 8th, 2023

“All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players”

In his ‘untold history’ – “[The Earth Transformed](#)” Peter Frankopan charts the way in which the natural environment has shaped human history and more recently how humankind has in turn begun to influence the natural environment. In his conclusion he builds on Shakespeare’s famous metaphor from As You Like It:

“environmental factors...provide the very stage on which our existence plays out, shaping everything we do, who we are, where and how we live. And like most stages, it can be all too easy to think only about what happens on them...without thinking about the fabric of the set itself. Actors come and go; but if the theatre closes or collapses, that marks the end for us all.”

We have become more and more adept on adapting the natural environment to suit our needs – most dramatically in the last two centuries or so – powered by burning carbon based fuels laid down over millions of years. We have been incredibly innovative in exploiting the resources that nature has provided us with and using it as a sink for our waste. Along with the apparently slow rate of change (in human if not planetary terms) in our circumstances and our ability to adapt this has perhaps given us a false sense of security. Perhaps this is why governments around the world still pay people more to exploit nature rather than protect it.

Climate change and the increasing incidence of storms, droughts, floods, wildfires, heatwaves etc. are perhaps the most tangible demonstration of the unsustainable changes in our environment. But it goes much deeper than this in terms of the impact we are having on nature and the extractive, non-renewable aspects of our way of life.

By way of illustration it is likely that sometime in July this year we will pass ‘[Overshoot Day](#)’, this marks the date when it is estimated that humanity’s demand for ecological resources and services exceeds what Earth can regenerate in that year. In 1971 Overshoot Day was towards the end of December and has been moving forward ever since. It reached the end of September in the mid ‘90s and accelerated rapidly in the early ‘00s before slowing down slightly over the last decade. Despite this slight improvement in the rate of change it is still estimated that we need around 1.75 earths to produce the resources we consume each year.

Similar conclusions are reached by the Earth Commission (part of the [Global Commons Alliance](#)) in a recent [report](#) analysing safe and just boundaries in biophysical systems. It estimates that

human activity has breached safe and just levels in several indicators covering climate, the biosphere, water, nutrient cycles etc. As they put it: *“several boundaries, on a global and local scale, are already transgressed. This means that unless a timely transformation occurs, it is most likely that irreversible tipping points and widespread impacts on human well-being will be unavoidable.”*

The impact of climate change and pressure on resources will have an increasing impact on the environment in which mediators operate and on the nature of disputes that they work on. A recently published UN [Practice Note](#) summarises the potential issues mediators will face and offers suggestions for addressing them. While it deals mainly with violent conflict (often in the developing world) the implications of a changing environment are likely to be felt in many types of conflict. The note’s introduction offers a stark perspective:

“Increasing evidence shows that the effects of climate change can exacerbate existing fault lines and vulnerabilities, thereby fuelling violence and insecurity. In many of the countries that are most vulnerable to climate change, fragility and conflict have weakened coping mechanisms, people are dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods, and stark inequalities exist between men and women, or between culturally defined or identity-based groups.

As climate change is fast becoming a major test of our collective ability to prevent and manage crises, mediators will increasingly need to consider its short-, medium- and long-term implications for their engagements and integrate climate-informed practices into mediation and other forms of peacemaking.”

Mediators will have a key role to play not just in helping address conflicts exacerbated by climate change, but also in helping prevent pressures from escalating and in mediating between the short term needs and challenges of life today and the needs and interests of future generations.

As in any mediation we need to work hard to build rapport and trust between different groups to provide the foundation for developing a clearer understanding of the different perspectives that exist on the potential dangers we face and the opportunities that exist to address these challenges. This will then provide the material to explore and assess options, before deciding how best to proceed. These decisions may well be difficult, not least for those who have to give up something in order to allow others to develop and for us all to gain.

Citizens Assemblies’ such as the [Climate Assembly UK](#) (commissioned by six committees of the UK Parliament) offer examples of ways of facilitating informed dialogue built on mediative principles to tackle potentially difficult conversations between different perspectives. Japanese [initiatives](#) to find ways of including citizens from the future when making plans also offer some interesting ideas to include voices that are seldom heard.

Major investment programmes such as that included within America’s [Inflation Reduction Act](#) offer hope that we can take the steps needed to tackle climate change, although there have been some [concerns](#) voiced about the impact of some of the subsidies involved on international trade and cooperation. However, even action on this scale may well be insufficient to prevent a lot of the change that is already ‘baked in’ to the climate as a result of past emissions. It’s also interesting to note how this Act was framed to win over some of the more climate sceptical legislators.

Frankopan reminds us that we owe our presence on earth to changes in the natural environment and the many fluke circumstances that made the planet suitable for human development. It was our

ability to cooperate with each other that allowed us to take full advantage of these circumstances. If we as a species can't cooperate sufficiently to rise to the challenge of addressing manmade climate change and our overexploitation of resources, nature will do it for us in one way or another, the problem is this may well leave us with very few boards left to tread.


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