On our watch

At the time of writing, the world's financial system is in free fall. Hubris and recklessness, together with an insatiable hunger for money, have created a global crisis that is driving many of the world's economies into recession. One result is rapidly increasing unemployment and fears are rising that pensions will be rendered worthless; yet, there is no sign of an end to this economic disaster, which has been happening 'on our watch'.

Greed, egoism and ignorance are also responsible for the rapidly declining state of our natural environment. There is no doubt that man-made global climate change is causing problems that go beyond the need to carry an umbrella: fertile land is being lost, cultures are having to abandon traditional practices, delicate ecosystems are in decline, and many animal and plant species are faced with extinction. This is in addition to the already ongoing massive reduction in biodiversity around the globe. This has also been happening 'on our watch'.

Linked to the environment is an energy crisis that is also of our own devising. It is only recently that 'we' have accepted the fact that there are now only a few decades-worth left of oil reserves. The cavalry charge of alternative energy sources is just beginning to respond to the bugle call, but might well not arrive in time because we missed the opportunity to take action when we could have been truly effective. Again, this has been happening 'on our watch'.

Worse still, away from the minute-by-minute headlines focused on the economic meltdown and the changing environment, a humanitarian tragedy has

been festering. While the citizens of the industrialized countries worry about an epidemic of obesity, nearly one billion people in the world are hungry and nearly 10 million children die each year before their fifth birthday because of hunger or disease, both of which could easily be prevented. All of this—the ruin of the environment, humanitarian disasters, dwindling resources and the financial crash—has been happening 'on our watch'.

How did this come to pass? Are we not the greatest and most affluent generation of humanity so far? Do we not live longer and healthier lives, produce more knowledge and communicate globally with ease? It is easy to point the finger and blame those that we elected to power for their failure to anticipate these problems and act accordingly; or to lay the fault at the door of the capitalistic system; or even to blame the media for not issuing clear enough warnings. But, blaming others does not absolve each one of us for our own responsibilities—we all have been part of this system failure.

We—the consumers—were gluttonous kings, and any miserable knave who came with bad news has been duly ignored. The media have to make a living, so they have told us what we wanted to hear; similarly, our governments also did not tell us the harsh truth in order not to jeopardize their re-election. Simply put: we have feasted as the band played on and we sailed into the icebergs like an 'unsinkable' Titanic.

In the midst of analysing what went wrong, it is appropriate to reflect on the role of the research community: scientists should have been the first to identify these problems and sound the bugle call for

action. Indeed, some researchers did voice their concerns and published their analyses back when corrective action could have taken place without major disruption. But they did not galvanize their community, or their community ignored their message or presented contrary analyses; in any case, the scientific community failed. But, even the scientists who voiced their concerns early and proposed corrective measures were largely ignored by modern societies in which sound bites trump evidence and in which 'academic' has become synonymous with 'practically useless'.

There are major challenges ahead and business as usual is no longer good enough. There is an increasing need for courage in the scientific community to both speak up and propose measures, however unpopular in the short-term, to bring about systemic change. We, as scientists, also need to become politically engaged as experts in the political world, rather than poking fun at and ridiculing it. We need to talk to the public directly, convince them of the evidence and present possible solutions to get us out of this mess. More importantly though, it is a time to reflect on how we have contributed to the current system failure and what we can do to help society recover from it. It is still our watch and we can make change happen.

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