

# 7 Global Trends Impacting the Sustainability Movement

**Timothy J. McClimon**

[Leadership Strategy](#)

*I write about the intersection of grassroots movements & philanthropy.*



April is Earth Month, and Forum for the Future, a global nonprofit organization that advocates for systems change to promote sustainability, has recently published a [report](#) entitled *Driving Systems Change in Turbulent Times*. In it, the Forum advances seven trends that have major implications for how (or if) we will be able to address current global environmental challenges:

**The plastics kickback.** Although eight million tons of plastic enters our oceans every year and only 14 percent of plastic is actually recycled, we continue to produce and throw away vast amounts of plastic every day with no real change in sight. Some consumers, governments and businesses are waking up to the consequences of this throw-away culture, and many have taken bold steps to reduce the amount of plastic that is generated and disposed, but fundamental change will require structural shifts and changing mindsets in ways yet to be seen or even contemplated-even for those of us who are sympathetic to the cause.

**Migration and the climate crisis.** With large parts of the world becoming less hospitable due to climate change, it is expected that more people will seek to migrate to safety from these threats. We already have record levels of displacement brought on by drought, agricultural failure, and food and water shortages. Rising oceans will certainly displace many others from low-lying coastal areas, and more major cities are expected to run out of drinking water in the near future. These mass migrations will require changes in government priorities and policies to cope with these potential humanitarian crises.

**Nationalism marches again.** Nationalist governments and movements are rising around the world spawning fragmentation, intolerance and competition for resources. The causes of these movements are complex, but growing income inequality, ubiquitous social media, demographic changes and increased migration are all contributing factors. Fragmented global politics risk collaborative efforts like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement just when they are most needed.

**The on-life.** Half of the world's population will be online in 2019, and this fact has consequences for our politics, mental health, social cohesion and personal interactions. While the internet can be a force for good, questions of data privacy and security, citizen surveillance, lack of accountability-not to mention the huge increase in electricity needed to drive these platforms-may require new efforts to step back and reassess the costs and benefits of this technology.

**The rise of participatory democracy.** To combat rising levels of nationalism and protectionism, some cities and states are turning to new ways of engaging people in their governments beyond voting. Cities like Antwerp, Belgium and Porto Alegre, Brazil involve citizens in making budget decisions, and in northern Syria communities have adopted a model of participatory self-government at the village level. These innovative approaches could herald a new era of local decision-making and civic participation.

**Changing consumerism in Asia.** Based on current growth rates, Asia could account for 59 percent of the world's middle-class consumption by 2030. Despite a recent slow-down, China still leads the way with India, Japan, South Korea and

Thailand close behind. Ironically, as more people gain access to goods and services that make a better life, we are losing our global capacity to sustain these advances. However, there are signs of more conscious consumerism, particularly with Millennials in Asia, which may slow this trend.

**Biodiversity in freefall.** Scientists believe that we're in the midst of a mass extinction of certain plant and animal species, and 20 percent of the Amazon rainforest has disappeared in the past 50 years. Against this backdrop, agriculture is driving vast land conversion and pesticide use in order to feed a growing population, and urbanization is changing evolutionary processes, and in some cases creating new species. While there is general knowledge of these changes, little is being done to stem the causes and understand the consequences (good or bad) to our fragile eco-system.

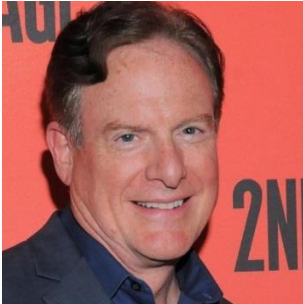
Forum for the Future warns that we need to step up our ambition levels and how we work towards fundamental and lasting change. It believes that we can overcome these challenges by adopting the following principles:

- Realizing the scale of challenges we face and the time within which they need to be solved;
- Building connections beyond your field and outside echo chambers to bring new perspectives and to foster empathy;
- Identifying and addressing the root causes behind the problem, helping to avoid "sticking plaster" solutions;
- Aligning on the goals of the change you're trying to make;
- Understanding your role in the system and the power you have, and doing everything you can to leverage your assets for systems change; and
- Moving beyond competition to experiment, learn, share, be open and collaborate.

The signals of change are everywhere, but are they enough? Planting trees and eliminating the use of plastic bags and bottles is a good start, but widespread changes in our attitudes, practices and policies are needed to produce long-lasting

benefits to the planet. What are you and your organizations doing to reduce your dependency on plastic, to be more conscious consumers and to use technology for good rather than for evil or just entertainment? Read Forum for the Future's report today and pledge your support for Mother Earth this month.

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**<https://www.forbes.com/sites/timothyjmcclimon/2019/04/15/7-global-trends-impacting-the-sustainability->**

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