There is now predominant societal acceptance that our climate has changed, will continue to change and that human behavior has contributed to an on-going environmental crisis. This crisis threatens the environmental system that enables the existence of life on earth, carries implications for our production and use of energy, may demand shifts in the types of food we produce and eat, the way we travel and, among a vast array of other concerns, how we account for the needs and rights of future generations. The scale of the emerging climate crisis is unprecedented in human history. There are, however, historical experiences from which we can draw lessons.

In 1985, scientists discovered a hole in the ozone layer above the Antarctic. The ozone layer protects life on earth by absorbing ultraviolet light. Ten years previously, two chemists published a paper warning that the chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) emitted by humanity could cause serious damage to the ozone layer. In that intervening decade, the aerosol industry launched an offensive to discredit the underlying science. There was talk of the science being utter nonsense and the threat of economic chaos if CFCs were phased out. However, the discovery of the hole in the ozone layer – and its associated risks – captivated public attention. In 1987, 43 nations signed the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, which sought to phase out CFC usage. There was little to no economic chaos. In 2018, the World Meteorological Organization predicted that by 2060 the ozone layer would be largely healed.

Particularly noteworthy about this response to the ozone crisis was that it came close to representing a collective, whole of society response. Governments negotiated and enacted the Montreal Protocol, civil society organizations built awareness and pressured private corporations, and citizen action helped shape consumer behavior. Recognizing the immediate as well as long term risks of a severely weakened ozone layer, the above protagonists worked in diverse ways to achieve a common goal. Such a response is an interesting juxtaposition to how the world has, for years, grappled with forming a coherent, future-centric response to a worsening climate crisis.

The international resolve necessary to battle climate change has been slow to emerge and is often rooted in national interest, as opposed to the global, collective good. Additionally, the international response, typified by the work undertaken by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, is inherently incremental and gradual in nature. While it could conceivably drive widespread, rapid change, it is a top-down process that does not necessarily draw on individual and community level responses. It is a mechanism of government involvement.

At the other end of the spectrum is individual action. For those of us living in “developed” countries, effective climate action can take the form of using products, such as clothes and electronics, for longer, limiting meat and dairy consumption, minimizing fossil fuel powered transport, and considering our household energy use. In short, sacrificing excessive consumption is a net positive for the planet and its people both now and into the future. Likewise, individuals can engage in collective action with citizen advocacy groups that seek to promote policy solutions such as establishing carbon fees, ending fossil fuel subsidies, or promoting more effective and efficient public transport.

There is, however, significant debate about the extent to which individual action may offset the worst ravages of a changing climate when compared to the positive developments that could result from significant changes in the political and private sector arenas. Since 1988, a mere 100 state owned and private fossil fuel companies have been responsible for producing 71% of carbon emissions. Of course, what must be acknowledged here is that individuals, among other entities, are responsible for purchasing and using the products produced by these fossil fuel companies. As a result of this, there are those who argue that lifestyle changes can drive the possibility for wider systemic change.

This interplay of individual and institutional demands necessitates the exploration of the interconnection between moral and technical solutions. Wind power, solar energy, electric vehicles, meat, and dairy substitutes and more beyond all provide technical answers to a worsening environmental crisis. However, these solutions can only succeed if, among other factors, citizens begin to examine and strengthen the moral underpinnings of their consumer choices and, potentially, embrace the need for sacrifice in their day to day lives.

Whether explicitly or tacitly, we have, as a global community, conceived an economy that revolves significantly around the extraction and burning of fossil fuels and, thus, imperils our environmental stability. There are no easy solutions to how to transition away from such an economy. But there are questions that can be asked, which may inform the decisions that we make around spurring positive collective action:

- What innovative governance structures will help us tackle environmental degradation and concentrations of wealth that impede constructive climate action?
- How can sacrifice – and the courage needed to sacrifice – be normalized so that attachment to political capital, corporate profit or ever-increasing standards of living will not stand in the way of positive environmental decision-making?
- How do we begin to conceptualize and articulate the duty we hold to future generations, as yet unborn, to ensure they have a livable, stable environment?