



## Letter to Hong Kong

13 November 2021

Professor [Amos TAI Pui Kuen](#) ([Earth System Science Programme](#))

### “Countering Climate Change by Changing Personal Lifestyle and Habits”

Dear Judy,

Do you still remember watching the documentary “Chasing Ice” together in Boston nine years ago? The 2021 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) was just wrapped up, and I came across an online article recommending documentaries that discuss climate change, with “Chasing Ice” topping the list; it was a really thought-provoking film! I still remember vividly how we discussed the threat of polar bear extinction after the movie; you were saddened by the impending fate of the polar bears, while also feeling helpless that humans seemed to be doing so little to help.

Nine years later, climate and environmental problems have become aggravated, and your sadness could not have grown less. Indeed, whether it be in my research or whenever I hear news about the current climate crisis, I too feel a sense of helplessness. In 2021 alone, extreme weather events such as the heatwaves and forest fires in North America, as well as the floods in Germany and China, have all brought significant economic losses. Not only did the world suffer economic, calculable losses, but the deaths that ensued and the millions of people displaced by the disasters suffered losses that are difficult to quantify. Climate change was never only about the fate of the polar bears; it’s a global challenge and closely tied with human health and lives.

Even more disheartening is that many of those living in more well-off regions are still only concerned about themselves. Indeed, this is just because we have relatively more resources to cope with the impacts of climate disasters on our lives. Developing countries, however, don’t have it going so well, and their people are already in the thick of it all. Rising temperatures, water shortage, floods and droughts have all become increasingly severe, affecting farmers’ harvest and causing hunger. The changes in weather have made mosquito-borne diseases, such as dengue fever and malaria, even more prevalent. I cannot help but recall that in November 2013, the Philippines was hit hard by Haiyan, the strongest typhoon of the year, which killed over 6,000 people. Three days after the storm, the United Nations held COP19 in Warsaw, Poland, and the Philippines representative, Yeb Saño, tearfully pointed out that the world should have taken a more active role in addressing the climate crisis, but the Philippines bore the brunt of the consequences of their indifference. Unfortunately, even in the face of such a catastrophe, Saño's words did not lead to immediate actions.



Developed countries are undoubtedly responsible for the greatest share of climate and environmental problems. It is the industrialized countries that have historically been the biggest emitters of greenhouse gases. They have been extensively using fossil fuels, massively cutting down forests, using chemical fertilizers for agriculture, and raising large numbers of cattle and sheep, all of which emit large amounts of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide. People can still pretend to be asleep only because the worst affected by climate disasters are the island nations and the relatively poor and underdeveloped countries in the tropics. Speaking at the COP26 summit, Mia Mottley, Prime Minister of the Caribbean island nation of Barbados, stressed that if the overall warming could be contained within 1.5 degrees Celsius above the level before the industrial revolution (currently it's 1.1 degrees already), the people of the islands and poor countries could still survive, despite more frequent natural disasters; however, an increase of 2 degrees or more, would spell a death sentence for people of the island nations. Their fate is not in their own hands, but depends on whether rich countries can deliver on their promises to invest enough resources and power to combat climate change.

I find it hard to believe that most people in the world are still deluding themselves, that states and large corporations are still putting profits first, and that people are unwilling to change their lifestyles until they feel the pain. If we let things get worse, the illusion that the developed world can be spared will soon be shattered. In fact, climate change is already having serious impacts on Hong Kong, especially on the lower-income citizens. According to statistics, the number of "very hot days" is increasing every year: this year, the Hong Kong Observatory issued its first hot weather warning as early as in May, when the temperature reached 33°C or above. According to a survey conducted by The Chinese University of Hong Kong, hot weather on consecutive nights poses a greater public health risk than during the day, with hot nights for more than five consecutive days increasing the risk of death by around 6%, women and the elderly being the most affected. The Observatory also estimated that Hong Kong will have hot nights for almost the entire summer by the middle of this century. In addition, the price of imported food has been rising faster than inflation in Hong Kong over the last decade, with climate change being a major factor, affecting the livelihoods of low-income families.

COP26 was held in Glasgow, Scotland, and key issues included a coal retirement agreement and the amount of resources that rich nations will put in place to combat climate change. While dozens of countries have pledged to phase out coal, several large coal-using countries have yet to join. In addition, developed countries pledged in 2009 to provide US\$100 billion a year until 2020 to help developing countries combat climate change and develop clean energy, but this pledge has never been actualized, leaving these countries vulnerable to the climate crisis. Developed countries need to establish an effective humanitarian aid system to help developing countries, and invest more resources to accelerate construction of cleaner energy and implement energy transition.





Apart from the states and corporations, the efforts of individuals should not be ignored. As responsible citizens, if we can change our consumerist lifestyles, the production and sales patterns of corporations will have to be adjusted as a result. We can review our own living habits, consumption and dietary patterns; for instance, we can eat more plants and less meat, conserve energy, adopt the three rules of "reduce, reuse and recycle", just to name a few starters. Everyone can participate in these actions to help reduce our carbon footprint and combat climate change.

We should have been up and running long before the screening of "Chasing Ice" and other documentaries. You may wonder, is it too late for change? The slogan of this year's COP26 was "WE CAN DO THIS, IF WE ACT NOW". We are indeed quite far behind, so we need to work even harder before it really becomes too late.

Amos

13 November 2021

