

POLICY *dialogue* BRIEF



The Role of International Climate Policy in Addressing Socioeconomic Change

Following the setting of the 1.5C temperature target in the Paris Agreement, the climate community has begun to grapple with some of the tougher social and technical challenges required to meet this goal. As the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change recently noted with the launch of the special report on 1.5C, “limiting global warming to 1.5C would require ‘rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes’ in all aspects of society.”¹ Topics like just transition have moved into the spotlight as a growing number of people become concerned with how to handle the social disruptions that come with major shifts like coal phaseout.

As previous Stanley Foundation reports and convenings have explored, the topic of just transition extends far beyond the realm of fossil fuel industry workers to nearly every sector of the economy. But what should be made of the disruptive changes that are the backdrop to any modern conversation—or in some cases are more squarely in the foreground—be they larger political shifts, rapid technological advances, societal reconfigurations, or the interplay of all three at once? Addressing climate change may include adapting to and adopting new technological advances, and the policy community is coming to terms with the need for large scale socioeconomic shifts, but how will climate change policy react and adapt to larger shifts in the background of every social sphere? Automation, for instance, threatens more than just fossil-fuel workers. From driverless transportation to brain surgery, machine learning is taking great strides into more advanced human endeavors that seemed unthinkable even a few years ago. But if these disruptive changes are so widespread, how is it that the climate community finds itself at the center of so many of these conversations?

To consider these questions, the Stanley Foundation gathered civil society and policy experts from social justice campaigns and the international climate community at its 59th annual Strategy for Peace Conference for a roundtable on “The Role of International Climate Change Policy in Addressing Disruptive Economic, Technological, and Social Change.” This policy dialogue brief provides an overview of the roundtable discussion, identifies areas for further analysis and discussion, and offers policy recommendations where possible.

It begins with an explanation of the climate change field’s positioning in relation to larger disruptive forces. Following this overview is an examination

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Additional information about this roundtable and others held as part of the 59th Strategy for Peace Conference is available at www.stanleyfoundation.org/spc-2018.

of different varieties or sources of disruption: technology, economic transformation, political upheaval, and societal reconfiguration. The brief then examines how the climate community can approach these disruptive issues through international policy, with a particular focus on what is needed from multilateral institutions in the areas of economic governance, social justice, sustainable consumption and production, and managed energy transitions. Finally, the brief builds on these findings to make recommendations for international policymakers to 2020 and beyond.

Climate Policy and Disruption

Climate policy occupies a special place in large-scale social disruptions for at least three reasons.

1. As climate policy looks toward the socioeconomic shifts that are required to keep warming under 1.5C, it risks becoming entangled with or being seen as an outside cause for what may be painful social changes. The automation of coal worker jobs is already woven into the phaseout story. Though automation has been replacing coal workers for over a century, the pressures on coal jobs from new technologies (wind and solar) are perceived as a direct threat from the climate community. The political implications of pursuing a climate policy necessary to achieve coal phaseout have been apparent in a number of countries and regions with mining or coal power jobs. Relatively speaking, though, the coal industry is not a major employer. As socioeconomic changes to deal with climate change occur at the same time as automation increases, this dynamic of placing outside blame for job loss on the mantle of climate policy is a risk in other sectors, including some far larger than coal.
2. An opportunity almost inverse to the problem outlined in the last paragraph exists and should be capitalized on for the benefit of everyone. The large-scale social, economic, and political disruptions taking place offer an opportunity to lay out new ideas on a similar scale, such as rethinking the idea of the social contract or how we understand well-being and happiness. With a solutions-oriented lens, the climate community can use broader social change as an opportunity to ensure requisite climate considerations are included. At the same time, climate policies can be framed as a positive rethinking of society that benefits everyone, beyond the first order effect of preventing irreparable damage from climate change to second order effects of a more prosperous and just society.
3. Perhaps most obvious, all sectors, organizations, social movements, and policy spheres, inter alia, must consider how these disruptions will impact their current frames of thinking and theories of change. Given this, there is nothing inherently special about climate policy, but like any other sector or policy sphere that ignores

these issues, it will realize painful consequences if it fails to adjust accordingly.

This last point aside, climate policy seems particularly poised with threats from large-scale social disruption and opportunities to advance new social solutions. Mitigating climate change requires social change. As a field, climate policy is not as well established institutionally as other issues. Further, the policy action required to address climate change is highly conceptual and changes quickly as more is learned. This may make policy action difficult for many people to grasp, resulting in uncertainty about what climate action looks like and how livelihoods are met in that context. The climate community has to create a positive vision of the future that includes climate action or it risks being subsumed by the negative concerns and experiences felt from broader disruption. It is unlikely that broader disruption will suddenly take a positive turn toward opportunity through climate action without active engagement from the climate community.

Disruptive Technology

Disruptive technology exists within and outside of climate policy. Some technologies may carry inherent risks, such as solar radiation management—an experimental idea to pump particles into the atmosphere, temporarily blocking the sun’s rays. If mishandled, solar radiation management could certainly be disastrous. Even if it is well governed, it could come with risks like unpredictable and potentially devastating changes in weather patterns. Other technologies may be more neutral, presenting risk if not considered appropriately but perhaps opportunities if understood and handled well. It is possible automation fits in this category. If automation is advanced without much consideration, society is almost certainly not going to be equipped to deal with it. But if policy takes automation into consideration and seeks to adjust socially, it may be to the benefit of all, reducing risks in areas like driving or surgery, while freeing up people’s time to pursue what makes them happy or benefits society.

Disruptive technology may also be useful to force change in seemingly intransigent institutions. As an example, the recent fast pace in the development of solar and wind energy efficiency has caused dramatic changes for institutions invested in coal energy. The advancement of the electric engine, in large part due to investment by incumbent manufacturers, has applied pressure for adaptation to mainstream automakers, which in the last few decades saw little reason to invest in electrification.

But as indicated above, disruptive technology may create unwanted pressures on the climate movement. The association of automation with green policy in certain cases may mean an inflated feeling of climate policy as a job displacer. For instance, it may be that driverless cars and ride sharing are strongly associated with electric vehicles

pioneers like Tesla and changing consumption through shared economy, respectively. This might be a positive for many, but for the huge number of drivers employed to move cargo or passengers, this may look like a threat. Blaming climate policy for loss of jobs in this area may be a false equivalency, as the automated technology applied to driverless cars can be used for internal combustion engines as well, and ride sharing platforms will only be truly green if they are reducing vehicle ownership. Nevertheless, without carefully assessing where climate policy fits within these conversations, there is some risk of transitive blame being placed at the feet of the wrong community. This idea is surely not lost on intransigent actors who benefit from the fossil fuel industry, who may further incite and misdirect this blame for their own benefit.

Though fairly hypothetical, the above picture is not difficult to imagine in some shape or form, particularly because new climate solutions are often associated with state-of-the-art technology, which in other areas may be displacing workers or disrupting social norms. But in other cases, social disruption may be helpful if it can be harnessed by policymakers to address issues of inequality. Inequality has always been a social issue, but it is appearing more frequently as a conversation in regions where it was previously on the margins. Well-thought-out policy can anticipate social disruption as an opportunity to address inequalities inherent in old structures. In this way, climate policy and social disruption may reinforce one another in positive ways. Disruption provides opportunity to address inequality as well as climate, and new climate solutions can be framed to address inequality. This means that with the right approach, the transitive association of climate policies with new technology could be beneficial and positive.

Economic Transformation

With large-scale climate action required in the near-term, the world cannot afford to err in a way that locks carbon intensive structures into place. In order to provide for a resilient future, policymakers have an obligation to carefully consider how climate fits into larger structural systems and how quickly evolving systems can best incorporate climate action. At the same time, they must consider how economic shifts caused and required by climate action ensure equity. The level of transformation needed to address climate is likely to take the form of a step change in policy, not tweaks, and the management of these changes must be carefully considered and planned for.

During the last global financial crisis, major decisions were made on accelerated timescales, with virtually no political mandate. Large amounts of wealth were eliminated, and long-lasting policy decisions made on the fly. Whether another global financial crisis is inevitable or not, preparing to deal with such a situation is prudent. Creation of the Bretton Woods system, one of the biggest institutional shifts for

international policy, did not happen in a couple of weeks. In reality, it was the result of about a decade of planning. When a crisis emerged, that prudent planning paid off, as well-thought-out solutions were available for the important and long-lasting decisions that needed to be made.

In shoring up financial and social stability, policymakers should look to current emerging best practices in the climate and finance space, such as those used by the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD), a body that sets standards on accounting and transparency for climate risk on balance sheets and investment portfolios. In the areas that climate action necessitates or causes economic transition, policymakers must work to protect, and even enhance, the livelihoods of people. The climate community should prepare top-shelf ideas, ready for implementation in dire situations, that ensure a brighter and more equitable climate future for all.

Political Upheaval

Over the last several years, political upheaval has occurred in many countries and regions that had been relatively stable. Populist politics with extreme positions have spread and gained traction. And while not the case everywhere, in many places, achieving climate goals through consensus building and deal making does not appear possible in the current political environment.

While the drivers of populist politics vary from place to place, one important element is often concern for growing inequality or diminishing socioeconomic well-being. In circumstances where it is prudent, policymakers may turn to climate policies as a lever to improve well-being. For instance, some have begun touting a “new green deal” in the United States as a climate-focused version of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, which could create jobs, spark the economy, and improve overall well-being through sustainable new infrastructure.

In this environment, policymakers must take extra care to ensure that climate action is equitable. Regressive taxes, like fuel taxes, are likely to be met with protest from the middle and working classes. The yellow vest protests in France, in reaction to President Emmanuel Macron’s new fuel tax, are an example of this. Ordinary citizens, already feeling increased economic pressures, are wary about how much they should pay for the burden of transition—a particularly resonant issue in today’s political environment.

Societal Reconfiguration

The changes required to place the world on a 1.5C pathway necessitate societal reconfiguration. Technological advances, such as the development of wind and solar capacity or electric transportation, will help, but they will not take us far enough without changes to the way we live

our daily lives. One of the biggest challenges the climate community faces is to create a vision for a positive future through climate action. Beyond the fact that addressing climate change is often very conceptual and occurs at a scale that overwhelms many, what usually comes to mind is curbing certain behaviors. In this sense, creating a positive vision means helping people imagine what their world will include, as opposed to imagining what will be removed. In other words, net-zero emissions may be a great objective, but it is not a vision for how to live life.

Defining what a climate-friendly lifestyle and society look like helps manage the conceptual nature of addressing climate change and concretizes outcomes. From here, these outcomes can be backcast to the present in order to outline the steps and actions that must be taken to get there. A positive vision, though, should be thought of in another sense, too—one of creating a better future. Rethinking our social interactions, our relationships to nature, and how our economies function under climate action can help create a vision of a better future, as opposed to one where people have given up luxuries and pleasures. Climate decision makers must grapple with what is requisite, socially and politically, to create this vision. The moon-shot challenge, for instance, harnessed new technologies, security concerns, and public interest to catalyze a massive undertaking. This is the scale and level of ambition policymakers must embrace.

A ready framework for international policy may be the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs deal directly with climate in goal number thirteen (climate action). The SDGs deal strongly with climate through goals seven (affordable and clean energy), eleven (sustainable cities and communities), twelve (responsible consumption and production), fourteen (life below water), and fifteen (life on land), but on the whole, each of the goals has a role to play on the climate agenda, and vice versa. Particularly pertinent to the reimagining of socioeconomic systems are goals one (no poverty), two (zero hunger), three (good health and well-being), four (quality education), five (gender equality), and ten (reduced inequalities).

What Is Needed from Multilateral Institutions and International Policy?

The Paris Agreement birthed the temperature goal of 1.5C, a new set of parameters allowing countries to cooperate on climate, and the ability for countries to set their own climate targets. While it has felt up in the air at times over the last few years, the recent agreement on the rulebook under which the regime will be operationalized has highlighted that multilateral progress is still moving in the right direction. Urgency is needed to increase ambition, but opportunities exist over the next few years to set it in motion.

Even though there is reason for cautious optimism for the multilateral process in the future, a tricky line must now be

walked between the agreed-upon structure, as established at a time of progressive leadership on the issue, and the circumstances in which that structure now operates. A part of the reason the agreement survives so well under drastically different political circumstances today is owed to the structure of the agreement. The nature of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) can protect against the sudden emergence of climate laggards by putting country targets in their own hands. This may not be the most ideal approach for driving ambition, but it ensures that the entire framework cannot be sunk by a few bad actors.

The insulating effect of the NDCs on the resilience of the overall agreement should not make us shy away from bolder proposals to support the high ambition it sets out, to strive for 1.5C and complete decarbonization by 2050. The mechanism designed to keep ambition in line with this goal was the five year review and renewal of country targets. With ambitious climate leaders at the fore, this design should operate as a ratchet for increasing ambition and action over time, regularly highlighting the urgency required in order to meet the midcentury decarbonization goal.

But as it stands, ambition around NDCs is far too low to meet the 1.5C target, and the actions and policies of most countries are insufficient to even meet current NDCs. To achieve the 1.5C goal, step change should be considered. Review and renewal of climate targets under a scenario with unambitious leaders risks locking in commitments that ensure we will not meet the decarbonization required to avoid dangerous levels of warming.

Therefore, work is needed over coming months and years to realign ambition and cooperation internationally with the goals of the Paris Agreement. Opportunities for step change reside in the following areas from international policy.

New Economic Governance

The current economic system is built to generate production and value but externalize nearly all social and environmental costs. Compounding this problem, in climate as well as social justice, are issues at a scale and profundity that current systems are unable to adequately address. At the enterprise level, policymakers should consider adjusting the rules that govern corporate charters and the makeup and focus of boards to ensure they adequately incorporate climate costs and benefits and are socially inclusive—lessening the difficulty of navigating around small but powerful vested interests.

For investment and finance, a key starting point for international policy should be expanding the TCFD. The task force offers an existing set of guidelines that are already well accepted and would be easier to expand into a broader suite of economic policies that help guide finance ministers and decision makers. This could include the creation of oversight bodies similar to rating agencies or

securities-and-exchange commissions, and the creation of a capital gains tax and systems of transparency. Lengthening the reporting requirements beyond quarterly outlooks would also help frame decision-making over a longer time horizon, making climate considerations far more important in financial decisions. And in general, policymakers should focus on eliminating perverse subsidies that encourage carbon intensity and social inequality.

Another important area to examine would be foreign direct investment. Developing climate proofing criteria linked to foreign direct investment, including through multilateral development banks, would be tremendously helpful. This conversation has traction, particularly around bank investments in areas like coal infrastructure finance, and may provide an opening for even broader conversation on a structure to ensure green investment. The Paris Agreement includes greening finance in its structure and may be a good stepping-stone for this conversation.

At an even higher level, changes to economic health measures, such as gross domestic product, should be considered. Many proposals put forward better reflect the overall health of society by including measures of human well-being, for example. In the past, the Stiglitz Commission recommended changes to the national measures of socioeconomic health.² These kinds of recommendations have not existed purely in academia or think tanks; Bhutan has developed and launched its own new measure, called the Gross National Happiness index.³

Finally, to achieve systemic change, a concomitant shift in power can realign economic priorities so they address the important social and climate issues that are neglected by stakeholders with narrow focus on financial profitability. Issues of social justice and inequality taken up with climate can create just climate solutions. Connecting the issues of climate and socioeconomic equality provides an opportunity for climate to rise higher on the agenda when legitimately included as a piece of other social issues. “New Social Contract” is one potential label for this approach.

Sustainable Consumption and Production

Aside from changes in the global financial system, climate mitigation requires changes to consumption and production. While sustainability in these areas requires lifestyle changes, as well as overall reductions in levels of production and consumption, particularly from the Global North, care is needed to ensure that adjustments are equitable. For instance, meat consumption must be reduced in certain regions, like North America and Europe, but would be inappropriate in other areas, particularly in parts of the Global South. Likewise, policies must be shaped so that within a region or country, such as the United States, reductions are equitable across communities. Issues of

sustainable consumption are often framed as matters of individual choice, but in reality they are systemic issues that require policy and governance solutions.

One area that may be effective in addressing this issue is the analysis of cross-border sustainability metrics. For international policy, this topic is likely too undeveloped to be included in a process such as the NDCs, at least at this time. However, analytical organizations that track and publicly report on country progress toward emissions and other sustainability metrics may be able to shine light on the issue in a way that puts it on the agenda. With initial forecasting of what NDCs would look like with consumption accounting, momentum may build until countries are comfortable including this.

Another area for increased attention is waste management, with a particular focus on circular economy framing. The issue of waste management at a global scale is increasingly problematic, as many countries in the Global North ship waste to the Global South; however, some of the larger waste takers, like China, have begun to reevaluate their roles in waste trade. This has left waste floating on ships internationally, with no place to land (and additional emissions as ships aimlessly navigate around the world). With momentum from the circular economy, including from the business prerogative, as well as recent reevaluation of waste trading generally, it may be possible to create a new global authority on waste management. While this would not have an entirely climate focus, it would be a useful way to begin addressing the issue of cross-border emissions. It could also gently avoid tackling the tricky issue of consumption head on but still be connected back to the broader consumption conversation later.

The Basel Convention exists to monitor hazardous waste, but something beyond this is required to cover all other waste. A new or additional government-led convention would be a good approach. France has made a proposal to the United Nations General Assembly to fill certain gaps on climate and environmental rules, which might be a viable route for addressing international cooperation around waste management and ultimately reduction.

Managed Energy Transition

Ensuring a prosperous social and economic energy transition is important not only for livelihoods but in building confidence that climate action can work well to create a good future. In many areas, the energy transition is already underway, in large part due to the dropping cost of renewable energy. There are many lessons to be learned from the frontier regions of transition, not least of which are the legitimate concerns about whether policymakers can adequately care for workers and their communities through transition. Several approaches can inform climate and energy policy that address economic and social disruptions.

First and foremost, ensuring a just transition where fossil fuel phaseout is already occurring should be a priority for policymakers. Identifying what sectors and communities are already experiencing transition and where it is on the horizon is a key first step. Even in areas where the transition is limited to one industry, the socioeconomic consequences will be widespread and complex, making long-term planning essential. Affected communities should be brought to the table early in order to ensure their well-being.

More broadly than including all voices in the transition conversation, the concept of energy democracy can help to ensure a more equitable future. When undertaking long-term planning, policymakers should ensure that these stakeholders have ownership of their future. Energy transition offers the opportunity to decentralize grid systems and create cooperatives managed by the communities they serve while also building wealth within these communities.

Policy ideas for economy-wide transition at a massive scale should be encouraged, and the effort must start now. One possible model to consider is economy-wide mobilization close to the level seen in wartime economic shifts, such as those that occurred in the United States during World Wars I and II. While we need grassroots movements to ensure just transition includes affected communities, we will also need top-level policymakers and institutions to initiate and coordinate the massive shifts required.

As major shifts occur globally, new international institutions and regimes are needed, with functions to ensure the management of these shifts occurs smoothly. Whether this takes the form of an existing body or a new entity, orienting and aligning energy and economic institutions like the International Energy Agency, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank is needed. These institutions must deal with the difficult question of how to handle the systemic risk from stranded assets and developing the mechanisms for structural adjustment—albeit with socioeconomic obligations—toward a decarbonized economy.

Climate Rights and Justice

Failing to plan for and manage the energy transition could ultimately result in exaggerated socioeconomic injustice, and even conflict. A broader approach to the issue of climate rights and justice would be to create a framework for protecting the earth as a human right. In this way, the impacts of changing earth systems can be more readily connected to the impacts they have on people. Migration already occurs in many regions due to local environmental changes, but it is often poorly connected back to these issues. The result is often that migrants are left in limbo by an imperfect human rights framework, and the root cause of migration continues unabated.

A helpful starting point, and what could be the beginning of shifting norms, is legal action holding accountable those who contribute most directly to climate change. Recent lawsuits brought by average people have challenged polluters, like the suit from a Peruvian farmer against Germany's energy provider RWE. Taking a similar approach, Canadian youth have filed a class-action lawsuit against the federal government for failing to take action on climate change. These approaches help to connect the impacts of climate change, like melting glaciers in Peru, back to their root causes in the form of greenhouse gas emissions.

At another level, reconsidering an international institution focused on consumer rights could be an important consideration for policymakers. Among other things, consumers should have access to durable goods that meet their needs, and the ability to maintain and repair these goods.

As resource pictures and economies change and adapt with climate, areas that have not adequately planned to address the needs of people will face resource constraints and the inability to meet livelihoods. In these areas, migration is likely and will impact other areas that may appear to be more insulated from these first rounds of climate or transition impacts. Addressing the inadequacy of international migration policy will be key as a measure to mitigate conflict. The current systems are already stressed and poorly address the issue, and will certainly be strained more with a changing climate, even under ideal transition scenarios.

Setting Objectives for 2020

The volatile international political environment, for all the technological, economic, political, and social factors mentioned above—along with climate change—should spur policymakers and stakeholders to plan in earnest and reenvision the international system at the same scale as Bretton Woods did in the middle of the twentieth century. The scale of change globally requires this level of thinking, and the systems created in the past were, in reality, the result of decades of planning and research that could be assembled when urgently required. A new system will necessitate not only new institutions, but assessing the fit for purpose of current institutions, identifying where consolidation may be warranted where missions are redundant or counterproductive, and sunseting institutions that no longer function well. Without this level of planning, the international community risks being inadequately prepared to address the socioeconomic issues that will emerge as a result of social disruption from climate change and the eventual forced transition from fossil fuels.

While achieving system change depends on broad political change, there are entry points to fill in gaps in the international system—the Sustainable Development Goals and the UN secretary-general's Climate Action Summit in

September offer high-level, tangible points of engagement. Mainstreaming climate with the SDGs will be important in order to bring in the various stakeholders needed to develop robust NDCs. As the past has demonstrated, a whole-of-government approach is needed, not just environmental ministers. The NDCs will reach across all aspects of society and the economy and must include line ministers, such as finance, health, education, and transportation. The SDGs can help bring a broader array of actors into the development of NDCs while also providing useful benchmarking tools for setting NDCs. Beyond this, the SDGs provide the framework the climate community needs in order to ensure it delivers on equity and justice.

As Chile takes the mantle of incoming climate champion and host of the 25th Conference of the Parties (COP25) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, it will play a key role leading ahead of the summit and should work to raise ambition. Chile may be a useful actor to bring pressure on others to revise and improve NDCs. Aside from Chile, France will host the 2019 Group of Seven (G7) meeting and is in good position to make some pushes on the climate agenda. At the UN General Assembly, the French have currently proposed a measure to fill environmental gaps that other international agreements have left. The General Assembly may be a good place for pushing an idea like an international body on waste management, among other things.

On finance, in the lead-up to the secretary-general's summit, the climate community, including those in the private sector through coalitions like We Mean Business, should push for the inclusion of climate related financial criteria on the agenda. This should be pursued through multilateral development banks too.

Overall, the climate community has a short period to grapple with the large-scale socioeconomic change required to put the planet on a 1.5C pathway. At the same time, the world

is dealing with social, economic, and political disruption in a variety of areas. These disruptions may threaten climate action, but if properly accounted for, many may actually provide an opportunity to create a more equitable, just, and climate-safe future. Looking at the goals and milestones of the coming year or two in comparison to the socioeconomic reenvisioning that is required, a major lift is needed to take commitments from the secretary-general's climate summit and NDC revisions and translate them into the international institutions and policies necessary to meet them. Beyond the existing SDG and climate policy process, policymakers should begin planning for the new socioeconomic pathways and institutions that will meet the scale of change called for in the Paris Agreement temperature goal of 1.5C.

Endnotes

- ¹ Megan Rowling, "Why Does 1.5C Warming Goal Matter to Global Poverty and Health?," Thompson Reuters, October 8, 2018, accessed April 12, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-global-climatechange-development-fact/why-does-15c-warming-goal-matter-to-global-poverty-and-health-idUSKCN1MI17C>.
- ² Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, and Jean-Paul Fitoussi, *Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress*, European Commission, September 2009, accessed April 12, 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/118025/118123/Fitoussi+Commission+report>.
- ³ "A Compass Towards a Just and Harmonious Society: 2015 GNH Survey Report," Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research, 2016, accessed April 12, 2019, <https://ophi.org.uk/policy/national-policy/gross-national-happiness-index/>.

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