

A \$2 trillion problem

Part 1: If we "invest in our planet",
we can alter the course of society"

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Our growing global population and human overconsumption continues to strain our limited resources and advance climate change. By 2050, it's estimated that our population will reach almost 10 billion people on Earth (IMF). Society will be challenged to support our growing population and access more space, water, food, minerals, and other resources, while combatting intensified storms, rising sea levels, flooding, and coastal and land erosion, to name a few climate impacts.

For example, amidst global concerns of food scarcity, which is exacerbated by climate change, 28% of the global agricultural area that is used to produce food today is lost or wasted annually (FAO 2023). This highlights the significant inefficiencies in the global food supply and the need to address global resource management shortcomings.

We have seen throughout history the hardwiring of human nature for survival, and this remains true today. Our societies are increasingly at risk of falling into civil unrest and warfare driven by the human imperative of survival, creating conflict zones around our scarce resources. Thus, our efforts in trying to address resource insecurity and climate change impacts would not only address environmental issues, but also the interconnected societal issues that will plague us to come.

Our Caribbean community, however, will likely face existential threats by sea level rise and flooding sooner than resource-scarcity driven warfare. For example, the prolonged period of rainstorms in November 2022 caused weeks-long flooding across Trinidad and Tobago, leaving entire communities, like Mayaro, isolated without access to food, water and jobs as their local road infrastructure slipped into the sea.

Natural disasters like these are happening all over the world and are having great impacts. In 2022, headlines surfaced indicating that developing countries, which includes Trinidad and Tobago, would need US \$2 trillion annually to address climate change (Al Jazeera). Since 2009, developed countries have already been falling short of their promised US \$100 billion to developing states to address climate change, which is a tiny fraction of all the funds needed.

Thus, globally and in Trinidad and Tobago, our communities need to find other ways to address these climate-related disasters and impacts.

How can we alter the course of our futures, where disaster is almost imminent? We have faced a challenge in Trinidad and Tobago to address global climate change since our economy is so highly dependent on oil and gas revenue. Our reliance on extractive industries for our livelihoods, has left an immense unseized opportunity in regenerative green projects and initiatives that could shift the needle.

What could 'investing in our planet' mean for Trinidad and Tobago? Overall, it means the allocation of time and resources, by businesses, the government and civil society, into addressing the most pressing environmental and social issues that we face today. This could mean the uptake of green projects and initiatives that create solutions for negative environmental and social impacts on our society, but also finding ways to generate livelihoods out of the conservation, regeneration, and rehabilitation of our natural ecosystems, like our mangroves, mountains and oceans.

Investing in our planet also means being intentional with the initiatives that you, businesses, and the government support, and shifting behaviour and decision making to integrate sustainability. As we push environmental and societal considerations into the mainstream, thereby making 'sustainably' the default, we will find extractive, exploitative practices becoming abnormal, and even socially unacceptable.

To navigate this, all players in our society must understand the long-term impacts of their actions on society and the environment.



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The simplest example of single-use plastic waste demonstrates both the problem and the solution. Our global plastic problem originates from the way that we currently view our global resources, which is simply as 'resources' to be extracted, rather than as parts of the cycle of the Earth. Globally, plastic bottles are manufactured without consideration to what happens at the end of its life in landfills. Rather, processes and infrastructure in society and by manufacturers should be developed on principles of the circular economy where waste can be collected, recycled and re-distributed, thus reducing extraction of resources, energy, landfill space, and the associated negative effects on society.

Other initiatives include everything from reducing our carbon footprint and energy consumption, to enhancing non-motorized transport, to protecting and regenerating depleted ecosystems, to improving food waste management. Innovative thinking like this could be the difference between our societies failing and thriving. However, dreams and goals of achieving societal sustainability is a new, developing, but still underexplored terrain. In our next article, we will dive into some of the challenges we face in the Caribbean and who must lead the way in the uptake of these ideas in society. Hint: it's not a one-human show.

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