

To Anthropocene expert, transformative change is in the hands of the Global South

Laura Pereira has a Brazilian name, but is actually South African of Portuguese descent. To her, the Anthropocene is not only a new epoch where humans have become a geological force, but also a time for change to humanity – not necessarily linked to catastrophe if we act collectively and fast enough to avoid it. And the global South has a crucial role in that.

The zoologist is also a specialist in Ecology and Law, and studied the capacity of the private food sector in South Africa and Brazil to adapt to climate change in her doctoral years at Oxford University. Currently she's an Environment and Sustainability expert at the School of Arts and Social Sciences at the City University in London and studies how we could have healthier and more equitable food systems in the Anthropocene.

She's also one of the research leaders of the [Seeds of Good Anthropocenes](#) project, which maps little known initiatives of social and ecological transformations that aim to reach sustainable development around the world. They range from social movements to new technologies and take place in regions as diverse as Kenya, Colombia, New Zealand, Canada and Palestine – and counting.

This August was the Anthropocene month at the Museum of Tomorrow – and the interview follows a series of activities and discussions the Museum has promoted on the theme.

We generally relate the Anthropocene to the idea of the end: the end of resources, the end of biodiversity, of the world, of humanity itself. These are very scatological, catastrophic views. How is a good Anthropocene possible? And what made you look for seeds of good Anthropocenes?

The notion of Anthropocene has been, as you said, very much framed within dystopic ideas of environmental change. The current trajectory around which we find ourselves on the planet is a story that's really easy to tell but very difficult to fight against a negative version of it.

So if you think about change over time or complex system dynamics, we're not going to survive. We're not going to go back to a time when humans weren't driving changes in the planet. The question is: could we actually use this force for better rather than the negative impact that we're currently having? Considering that we're stuck in a system where the Anthropocene is inevitable, can we act in more sustainable, more equitable and desirable ways?

It's very difficult to act towards achieving the goals we set ourselves – the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and the climate change agenda for example – within the context of an Anthropocene that is only viewed as negative because it's a very disempowering message: everything is going to be disastrous and life, impossible to live, while we're trying to achieve SDGs or objectives alike. We need to actually think of a potentially desirable future within the context of the Anthropocene and the drivers of change that we know are locked into our system.

So humans seeing themselves as one species among others instead of the only dominating species could help in that sense?

I think that the notion of humans as separate from nature as the dominant species fits in a very western scientific framing, which only occurred after the Enlightenment – but there are many cultures around the world that actually don't see that kind of separation among the species – recognizing them and giving them credibility is an important aspect of moving into the future.

Can you tell us a little more about the project “Seeds of Good Anthropocenes”? How has it changed your view on this new epoch?

The whole premise behind the project was to see if we could start creating radical but more desirable views of the future, based on existing things that are happening now. Think of a transformative change – the industrial revolution in Europe, for example. It wasn't something that people were necessarily aiming for, but a lot of the tools or the seeds of that future already existed – so it was about putting them together.

So the idea of this project is to think if we can use the same tools of earlier changes to help us think or create more desirable futures – based on things that people are already currently doing.

In the same way you couldn't have foreseen the industrial revolution, the transformative change that's going to help us achieve sustainable patterns is probably similar – and difficult for us to understand. Are there different tools that we can use to at least help us think about that?

There's a combination of the main aim – achieving these different futures in different contexts – but at the same time gathering ideas of some of the positive change that is happening around the world, according to different people. So these are the two main objectives. There's a third objective, which is to bring some of these changemakers together into workshops to discuss more creative futures and see how the combination of these interesting ideas, people and ways of thinking could actually have positive impact. You wouldn't necessarily think of it as a sum, as 1+1+1 equals 3, but of how you could have something different, and bring in these different people into the same space.

The emphasis on Global South is striking. What's the role of this portion of the globe in shaping a better Anthropocene?

I'm biased because I'm South African, but do I think most of the transformative change actually has to come from the South. The Global North, or at least the West, is very locked into existing paradigms and ways of thinking – the post-Enlightenment scientific thought – and with that comes a very particular way of thinking about the solutions to the changes that we've had. So, at the one side the Western civilization development has created this global notion of what sustainable development means – and also a lot of the problems that we're trying to retrospectively fix now around this idea of development.

Whereas if you look into the Global South, first – there's a lot more diversity. A lot more capacity to move into a future that is fundamentally different to the one that has been constructed by the Global North through this conception of development – and so I do think that's where most of the potential really is. In the different ways of seeing and being.

And secondly, when it comes to innovation, I think there's a lot more creativity. A lot of the innovation work – whether it's social innovation, scarcity-induced innovation, or inclusive innovation – is about the engineering of a few people sitting on developing country contexts at large. That's where a lot of this exciting innovation is coming from.

And the values underpinning that – which are not around research and development's profits deriving notions of innovation but actually much more about wellbeing of the people or planet-focused innovation – are also emerging much more from Southern contexts.

Has it changed with the successive economic crises and fluctuations in countries of the global South, like Brazil? Could countries like Brazil, India and South Africa regain the importance that they had once in the global discussion around sustainable development?

I'd like to argue that nothing has fundamentally changed – because we're thinking of much longer timeframes than individual politics. If we talk about short-term politics, it's less about top-down political governance and more about bottom-up, people on the ground getting together and doing things around this idea of innovation.

So I'd still argue that in South Africa, Brazil, Mexico... in these countries where you have enough income to grant human wellbeing to a good part of the population (taking inequality and all the rest of things into account) there is innovation. They're not sitting in comfortable spaces like Scandinavia, where you're not confronted with the impacts of environmental changes and social inequality in a daily basis – neither in regions like the Sahel where it's harder to think of long-term sustainability applications because you're just trying to make it through to the next day.

It's in these countries in the middle that I think – irrespective of the government politics and economics – where a lot of the innovation potential around sustainable development actually lie. And this is over a long timeframe, so we're not talking about individual cycles. I think we get quite bogged down when we focus on the immediate, on the proximate, because that's where our thinking is. But the challenge of sustainable development is actually to get outside of that more short-term thinking and think about the long term – what is it that's actually going to take us where we want to be.

But not everyone take part in this process equally. How to engage marginalized populations in places where grassroots movements are not so strong?

It's the big challenge. Overcome marginalization and further the capacity for innovation. I think that the first step is to recognize the important role of those diverse ways of thinking as an opportunity space.

You think about marginalized groups – indigenous groups, women, the very poor – we have to value and recognize their potential as humans to actually think creatively about problems. And we should recognize that that diversity of perspective is critical if we're going to be able to achieve the kind of goals we need to. So I think there's a very active role that particularly the research community needs to play in bringing this innovative capacity and showcasing what these groups are doing, so they get the recognition that they deserve – that they aren't being seen as marginalized, weird or something that's against the way of doing things. But it is difficult. And there's a whole lot of power dynamics and notions of intellectual property and ways of engaging with these groups that is something very sensitive and needs to be handled extremely well. And I think that we just need to be very reflexive in constantly reminding ourselves that we don't know what that situation is like – and need to be attentive to that when we're working with these groups.

Could an all-encompassing treaty like the Paris accord be an actual, effective form of global climate governance? Should the countries of the Global South develop their own forms of dealing with climate change?

Governance is never easy and it happens in multiple levels. There are different gains that can be achieved at these different governance levels. Climate change was critical to get to the Paris agreement (even if no one thinks that it's actually going to do anything attached to it) and to still maintain a global treaty irrespective of the US pulling themselves out of it.

The agreement is very important as something that we are sparing together, in the same way that the Sustainable Development Goals and the Agenda 2030 are a global governance agenda. They're steering a goal that the planet needs to achieve if we're all going to make it through. But their implementation is going to be fundamentally different in different contexts, whether that's regionally, continentally or at the country level, at the local or district level.

See Brazil, for example, where the Northeast is completely different to São Paulo, which is different to the South. You can't even talk about the appropriate implementation of these different kinds of governance mechanisms at the Brazil level! So, similarly it's silly to talk about the global level being applicable for everyone. It is needed to understand that it's going to take different rights and different actors – not just nation-states, but also citizens, the private sector – to enact change.

Hence the focus on the notion of **governance** rather than public policy, for example. This is an important emphasis to make because it's about how each of us in our individual capacity act, how businesses and other actors play their roles – and also how these can talk to each other and ultimately reinforce rather than negate the impact.

It's complex, it's messy, and I think that's why we haven't been necessarily able to achieve it yet.

Could you point out one South-South initiative that could serve as inspiration for climate governance worldwide?

The Food Sovereignty movements of [La Via Campesina](#) (an international peasant movement present all over the world) have been a really interesting rallying point, an example of a network that grew very much from the margins. It goes very much in direct opposition to the dominant way of thinking about agriculture – that was appropriated by a variety of different traditional peoples particularly in the global South.

I've met farmers from Zimbabwe, from Mexico, Brazil... And I feel that as a network of South-South learning they've shared these ways of seeing, and through the recognition of this global networked movements, they're no longer marginalized. Because they're recognized within this broader sense. Even if they've been very marginalized in their own country, they could be doing things differently because there's this support network of understanding differences. It's not the only way of doing things, but I think it's a very strong example of South-South networking and learning.

On the other hand, it's also important to interrogate the notion of scale. We get very obsessed with trying to scale up everything: "how many people have been affecting?". Or scaling out: "is it possible to do this with this group and this other group? Can we replicate this in Rio?"

But what we found was the idea of scaling deep is actually better – it's about what are the underlying values or principles of this or that group. It's not about doing the same thing or getting more people or getting bigger – but it's about the actual relationship of principles that some of these projects have.

Interview given to Meghie Rodrigues, researcher of the Scientific Development Directorate of the Museum of Tomorrow