

# What If the Problem Isn't Policy, But Us?

OpEd by Ose E. Imoukhuede

We are not short of plans.

Governments announce new climate targets. Regulators scramble to keep pace with artificial intelligence. Corporations publish sustainability reports thick with commitments and timelines. Universities launch ethics centers. Think tanks issue white papers by the week.

And yet instability deepens. Emissions continue to test planetary limits. Technological power races ahead of our ability to guide it. Institutional trust declines across democracies and autocracies alike. The more frameworks we build, the more fragile the world feels.

What if the problem isn't a lack of policy? What if it is a lag in the development of the people writing it?

Modern governance rests on an implicit assumption: that systemic reform can compensate for interior misalignment. If a market fails, redesign incentives. If technology disrupts, regulate it. If emissions rise, set higher targets. The architecture grows more complex; the machinery more sophisticated.

But policies always reflect the consciousness of their authors. Systems replicate the priorities of their designers. Innovation amplifies the maturity, or immaturity of those who deploy it.

This is not a moral accusation. It is a structural observation.

The sustainability crisis is usually framed as technological or economic. We debate carbon pricing, grid storage, data governance, supply chains and industrial policy. These are necessary conversations. But beneath them lies a quieter challenge: a developmental gap between the scale of our power and the depth of our self-governance.

Human history has moved through thresholds before. There was a time when survival was governed largely by instinct and immediate reaction. Over centuries, law, custom and institution emerged with structures that disciplined impulse and allowed complex societies to form. That was not merely political evolution; it was a progression of the human capacity to regulate itself in the interest of continuity.

Today we stand at another inflection point.



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Our tools have become planetary. A line of code can influence elections. A policy shift can move global markets. A supply chain decision can alter ecosystems across continents. Yet our decision-making rhythms remain short-term, reactive and often partisan. We have built instruments of immense reach without cultivating an equal expansion of our interior discipline.

When technological capacity exceeds interior governance, imbalance follows.

Consider climate policy. In many countries, ambitious emission targets are announced without parallel investments in grid redesign, storage capacity or workforce transition. Mandates arrive faster than cultural readiness or industrial planning. The backlash is predictable. The political pendulum swings. The credibility of environmental action suffers.

Or consider artificial intelligence. Breakthroughs move from lab to marketplace in months. Regulation follows after disruption. Ethical debate trails commercial deployment. Labor markets absorb shocks before retraining systems are prepared. Innovation outruns reflection.

In each case, the sequence is similar: expansion first, alignment later; outer expression first and then attempts at inner order.

We tend to treat sustainability as an output; the final step after innovation and policy. But sustainability, properly understood, is endurance. It is the capacity of a system to remain coherent beyond the tenure of its architects. That requires a different sequence.

Before policy, there must be recognition of structural realities: ecological limits, geographic constraints, social cohesion thresholds, biological boundaries. Before innovation scales, there must be a long-horizon assessment: how will this technology alter institutional trust, generational stability, civic agency? Before expansion, there must be restraint, not paralysis, but a disciplined approach.

This is not an argument against growth, or against technological progress. It is an argument for integration based on enduring balance.

We often speak of smart cities, smart grids and smart algorithms. We speak less about leaders whose interior governance matches the scale of their authority. Yet no regulatory regime can permanently compensate for a deficit in human judgment. No



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sustainability metric can endure if it is routinely subordinated to short-term, often transactional advantage.

If the sustainability crisis is partly anthropological, a challenge of human development, then reform must include institutionalized disciplines of restraint and reflection. Leadership retreats should not be symbolic exercises but structured arenas for long-horizon thinking. Major policies should undergo generational stress tests before implementation. Technological deployment should be sequenced through societal readiness assessments, not merely market demand.

This is not utopian. It is pragmatic. Civilizations that exceeded ecological limits have collapsed. Institutions that ignored structural constraints have destabilized. Technological leaps without ethical boundaries have produced imbalances that took decades to correct.

The question is not whether we can design better systems. We can. The question is whether we can cultivate the maturity required to guide them.

The next era will not be defined solely by more powerful machines or more ambitious climate pledges. It will be defined by whether human beings can develop a level of interior governance proportionate to the tools they deploy.

If we continue to treat sustainability as a branding exercise or a regulatory add-on, instability will persist. But if we recognize that endurance begins within, that policy is only as stable as the consciousness that prescribes it, we may yet align our ambition with the structural realities that sustain life.

We do not lack intelligence. We do not lack resources. We do not even lack frameworks.

What we may lack is a collective willingness to mature as quickly as our technologies have.

If the problem isn't policy, but us, then the solution begins within us as well.

