

What we're up against

Activists, journalists, and change makers around the world name and describe these as some of the greatest threats to a just and sustainable future. These definitions combine elements from different contexts and readings.

Authoritarianism: Leaders who come to power through elections – including Orban in Hungary, Trump in the US, Duterte in the Philippines – restructure institutions to concentrate power and decision-making within a small elite and pass draconian laws. Often centering a 'strong man' ruler, authoritarian governments seek to:

- neutralize the legislatures and media
- rely on the police, military, and surveillance to control information and dissent
- use fear and social division to polarize populations and undermine institutions in order to legitimize taking control
- promise to restore an idealized past and traditions
- use racist, xenophobic, anti-feminist, and homophobic narratives
- put women 'back in their place'
- demonize immigrants
- align with religious fundamentalist theocrats and cultural conservatives to promote the 'traditional family'
- limit access to abortion and birth control
- attack LGBTQ+ people as 'abnormal'

Extractivism: "Extractivism is a nonreciprocal, dominance-based relationship with the earth, one purely of taking. It is the opposite of stewardship, which involves taking but also taking care that regeneration and future life continue."¹ —Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything* (2014)

Extractivism usually:

- relies on collusion or complicity – often corrupt – between government, international financial institutions, corporations, and elites
- mobilises security, police, and armies to quell resistance, silence opposition, and detain defenders and rights organisers
- extracts natural resources and lowers wages and standards to produce goods and products at a maximum profit
- devalues women's labour and caregiving as essential ingredients of unequal and exploitative economies

Neoliberalism: A set of policy prescriptions, promoted by international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and the G8 countries since the 1980s, established the dominant free-market ideology of the late

¹ Klein, Naomi, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014

20th century. These policies include:

- deregulation
- liberalization of trade
- privatisation of public services
- elimination of subsidies to support local industry and agriculture
- weakening environmental, labour, and other standards

Neoliberalism asserts that private companies and finance with minimal or no government intervention will facilitate economic globalization and growth. But, in practice, it has led to:

- unchecked corporate power in increased collusion with governments and influence over policy
- obscenely low wages and poor labour standards
- the privatisation and dismantling of social safety nets
- hyper-exploitation of natural resources
- extreme economic inequity

Militarism: Governments increasingly rely on the police, security forces, and the use or threat of violence to resolve social conflict, address crime, and exert public control. They espouse a narrow notion of 'security' that centres control of people:

- the surveillance, policing, and silencing of dissent
- attacks on communities, journalists, human rights defenders, and their organisations
- control over populations through fear and intimidation.

As a growing sector of the global economy, and central to US foreign policy, the production and sale of weapons and security technology both for domestic and international conflicts are driving militarism. Investment in the weapons industry and military institutions involves:

- a shift in resources from public services (such as mental health, pandemic preparedness, climate crisis mitigation) to expanding the military and security sector, in collusion with sometimes corrupt and autocratic politicians
- unregulated global business subsidized by public funding, with exorbitant profits, vested interests, and minimal regulation
- a reduction in public safety and an increase in political repression

Surveillance: Governments, large corporations, and organised crime monitor people's activities and communication and use this information to manipulate, control, restrict, or profit from behaviour. Expanded powers of surveillance – using information and communication technology 'justified' by the threat of terrorism – have spawned 'surveillance capitalism' by large technology corporations with unparalleled access to data and capacities for tracking people.

Inequity and inequality: Economic and social disparities are created and reinforced by unfair advantages that some have over others. Inequality and inequity are structural, meaning that unfair access to resources and opportunities – such as health care, education, employment, and housing – is built into the social, economic, legal, and

political system. Globally, the gap between rich and poor has been growing for decades, further exacerbated by structural oppression based on location and identity (gender, race, ethnicity, class, caste, sexuality, age, ability).

Precarity: Tied mainly to the dismantling and rising costs of basic social services and support and the impact of extreme weather driven by climate change, this refers to the lack of secure or predictable means of survival. Millions of people lack income, employment, land, crops, and housing, leaving them highly vulnerable to destitution. Many workers face precarity due to low wages, long hours, poor working conditions, and the absence of secure contracts or benefits such as health care and child care, or sick or maternity leave.

Crisis of democracy: The validity and strength of democracy as a form of government is being challenged across the world, including inside the US and Europe. Democracy is “a system of decision-making, and governance is exercised directly or indirectly by the people, through a system of legislative, judicial, and executive checks and balances on power.”² Democratic governance relies on a degree of participation, and this is eroded when elections are manipulated through misinformation, electoral fraud, voter suppression, and violence. Meanwhile, large corporations and other ‘non-state actors’ co-opt elected leaders through campaign contributions, corruption, bribery, and slander. Behind the pretense of democracy, autocratic governments consolidate executive power, reduce oversight, and strengthen ‘security’.

Political and religious extremism: Around the globe, powerful political and religious organisations use religious doctrine to control the public agenda, institutionalize religion in the structures of the state, and consolidate power. Fundamentalist and theocratic groups span many religions, including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and localized religious traditions such as the ethno-religious Kenyan Mungiki movement and Nepali shamanism. Theocratic and religious political power has grown in recent years with coordinated attacks on ‘gender ideology’ (meaning LGBTQI and women’s rights) claiming they are a greater threat to families and society “than communism and Nazism.”³

Backlash: refers to the attempts by powerful actors to reverse political, social, economic, and environmental justice gains by dismantling rights and policies that protect more people and the planet. For example, conservative, right-wing, and religious extremists (among others) claim to ‘protect the family’ by reversing new gender and sexual rights and controlling women’s bodies and reproduction. The far-right and fundamentalists are well-organised in many governments and policy processes, including within the UN, and work in alignment with the Catholic Church, evangelical Christians, and the Islamic Brotherhood, for example.

See more definitions in JASS’ [Movement-Builder’s Dictionary](#).

² Feminist Movement Builders Dictionary, JASS, 2nd edition, 2012

³ <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/gender-ideology-fiction-could-do-real-harm>