

## Viewpoint: 'Imposing impoverishment' — How European leadership has failed by promoting ideological solutions to sustainability challenges in farming

**I**t is hard to find anyone with anything positive to say about 2022: economic, social, ethical, political, geopolitical success stories were rare; suffering and setbacks commonplace. Where was the leadership to claim success, to inspire and to portray the best of humanity? Our outlook for the future has dimmed and expectations were repeatedly tempered by the claim that “It was not as bad as we feared”. The main recurring theme in 2022 was failure: failure of leaders to manage risks and protect their populations; failure of leaders to provide societal goods and benefits; failure of leaders to focus on the needs and interests of its citizens; failure of leaders to provide peace and security. What a train wreck of a year.

During the pandemic, I made the [observation](#) that Western leaders had lost their capacity to manage risks with no foresight, no scenario-building to identify hazards ahead of time, no capacity to manage exposures and no trust in empowering their populations to protect themselves. Most European countries did nothing until COVID-19 overwhelmed their hospitals and then imposed precautionary lockdowns. In 2022 we saw this continued lack of risk management – of reacting to public fear by taking precaution rather than ‘pro-acting’ to protect public goods and benefits.

What were some of the clear leadership failures in 2022?

- The Russian invasion of the Ukraine was hardly a surprise (even the Risk-Monger [warned](#) this would likely happen two months in advance) and yet very little was done to try to prevent the first major war in Europe in 30 years. Little was done to prepare for the consequences of a war, including the largest movement of refugees since the Second World War (fortunately members of the public opened up their homes and wallets to support the millions fleeing bombardment). The most disgraceful lack of leadership came from the Europeans declaring “targeted sanctions” on Russia – only blocking trade in what they could do without while continuing to finance the Russian war machine.
- A good part of the global economy is expected to enter into a recession in the coming year due to the insane practice of printing money to hand out to publics suffering in lockdowns. If leaders had been responsible financial risk managers, such a resort would not have been necessary and corrective actions taken earlier. Even central bankers can’t manage risks and are merely following each other and causing further pain.
- 2022 saw a clear failure to implement a rational energy transition policy in Europe. Driven by ideology, governments were shutting down nuclear reactors while geopolitical conflict put strains on energy sources. Western leaders talked tough on Russia while having no alternative energy strategy and looking helpless and foolish when Moscow finally decided to cut off their gas supply. Middle-class families in 21st century Europe have started to huddle in single warm-rooms to save energy this winter while developing countries have once again had to put their ambitions for progress on hold due to soaring energy costs and arbitrary fossil-fuel restrictions imposed by the West.
- I cannot begin to understand the COVID-19 policy failure that strickened China in 2022, causing immense hardship and affecting a good part of the global supply chain. Failure to implement a

proper vaccination strategy, followed by a mind-numbing attempt to enforce a zero-COVID strategy against more transmissible variants, to the sudden lifting of all restrictions at the first sign of organised protests, the Chinese leadership only managed one achievement: the complete loss of public trust. In any other country, such ineptitude would lead to a government downfall.

- In the last year, Western governments continued to promote an ideological purified food and agriculture strategy that prioritised vulnerability and food inflation. Like the energy crisis, made by enforcing a simplistic environmental dogma on a complex system, the food and farming crisis has been developing over the last decade with the removal of technologies while offering no viable alternatives. Sri Lanka is the first case of a government that fell due to their blind, pro-organic idealism having a direct effect on food security and the economy. As the global food security crises spread, war in the world's breadbasket only worsened an already untenable position, but the main suffering from this failure in leadership will be those struggling to survive in developing countries.

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## **Ideology over Realpolitik**

Many failures have been due to leaders stubbornly holding to their ideology rather than seeking pragmatic solutions, compromise and engagement as circumstances evolve (Realpolitik).

- Vladimir Putin spent more than two decades building a cult of personality only to pilfer his place in history on a conviction that Ukraine is part of Russia, his belief that their corrupt leaders would flee the country and his superior army would conquer the country in a few days. Rather than wake up to reality and seek a pragmatic exit strategy, Putin continues to randomly throw Russian conscripts and armaments at Ukrainian towns thinking the world would grow weary and just give up. Putin's singular success has been to make Volodymyr Zelensky a hero – the one leader to emerge in Europe in an otherwise burnt political wasteland.
- Frans Timmermans, the European Commission Vice-President responsible for the Green Deal, has been a disgrace of a leader. He failed to compromise on his green dogma, ignored warnings from his own scientists and used the tragic consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine to reinforce his anti-industry ideology. When the European Union energy crisis started to hurt consumers, Timmermans crowed that this would not have been an issue if the EU had invested more in wind and solar a decade ago. When global food prices were skyrocketing in the aftermath of the Russian invasion and a blockade of the world's breadbasket, Timmermans attacked industry for trying to use the conflict to try to undermine the intransigent targets of his Farm2Fork strategy. In response, the European Commission expressed their [feeling](#) that agroecology (and a lot of food aid) would be a better solution.
- 2022's hat trick of UK leaders have all fallen due to their failure to see beyond their dogma. Johnson fixated on Brexit over responsible governance. Truss, briefly, put growth over financial stability. Sunak will suffer from his obsession with fiscal prudence and sealed borders. Some are predicting (hoping) the UK will U-turn on Europe but addressing failed policies involves both humility and

honesty.

What our leaders need in the coming year is more [Realpolitik](#) and less ideology. Hard decisions require pragmatic solutions, open stakeholder engagement, an acceptance of the best ideas and best available research and a willingness to compromise. I don't see that today in the present political arena hence 2023 will likely see further leadership failures and more suffering.

## **Precaution: Imposing impoverishment**

Many leaders have confused applying the precautionary principle with governing. Faced with a hard decision that could improve public goods and well-being with new technologies and innovations (but with a risk of negative consequences), there has been little incentive to take any political risks. Western prosperity and affluence has reduced the urgency to develop or innovate so inaction on new developments has become the norm. Precaution became the policy tool for weak leaders to avoid having to act, to send innovators back for more studies and to "Just say No!" to policies that involved risk-taking.

With precaution (better safe than sorry), leaders are never wrong or held accountable, just very often not right. But their inaction has serious consequences that these leaders cannot continue to sidestep. They are imposing impoverishment through their inaction.

**By saying "No" to carbon emissions** of any type in order to appear caring about the threat of global warming (and business leaders adopting this spirit in their ESG targets), many Western countries abandoned a proper energy transition policy instead posing as precautionary, green and future oriented. Energy prices in developed countries had risen dramatically even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine and financing of natural gas energy projects in developing countries were scrapped due to arbitrarily imposed ESG financing restrictions. Precautionary measures in the name of climate change have led to a massive increase of energy impoverished people leaving large vulnerable populations with little option but to spend the winter in the cold. Some might argue that implementing a zero-emissions strategy is brave leadership but you don't get there by simply banning the main "carbon" sources of energy or rejecting technologies like CCS.

**By saying “No” to agricultural innovations** (from gene editing to developments in pesticides and fertilisers), Western leaders have pretended to protect the health of consumers and the environment under the pretence of giving the (very small percentage of the) public what they want. Under Farm2Fork, the European Commission is even claiming that reducing pesticide and fertiliser use would contribute to the fight against climate change (without factoring in how the reduction of agricultural yield from a rapid imposition of organic farming practises would be accounted for). Threats to global food security and food inflation will hurt developing countries (socially, economically and politically) much more than the affluent Western rule-makers. Their solution for this injustice? Smallholders should adopt agroecological practices (ie, no ag-tech innovations, no industrial investments and no synthetic substances). The collapse of the food system in Sri Lanka (and eventually the government) should signal how such precautionary leadership failures play out.

**The New York Times**

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## ***Sri Lanka’s Plunge Into Organic Farming Brings Disaster***

The economically troubled country banned chemical fertilizers without preparing farmers, prompting a surge in food prices and worries about shortages.

**By saying “No” to nuclear energy**, European countries like Germany and Belgium have decommissioned their main zero-carbon source of baseload power production leading to a massive expansion in coal-fired energy production. How is this precaution-based inaction in any way considered intelligent?

nuclear plant at grafenrheinfeld

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### German nuclear power plant shut down

In short, reliance on the precautionary principle as the main governance tool has left most European leaders asleep at the wheel. A leadership of civil servants or functionaries means decisions are made in a reactive context (and only to save their asses). From leadership failures during the COVID-19 lockdowns, to mishandling the energy transition to generating food security crises, leaders took the easy way out claiming their inaction was made out of the abundance of caution.

In 2022 I had a front-row seat at such administrative inaction when my university, like so many others in Belgium, looked the other way as professors and administrators were [sexually abusing](#) students with impunity. The darkness of my last [year-end review](#), where I toyed with the idea of stepping back from the academe, reflected my then growing frustration with the inaction on the files I had submitted to my management. In this past year, once my boss was finally forced out, I resigned my post in a state of moral disgust.

## War-time leaders

So who, in 2022, was a world leader who actually led, inspired and progressed? Perhaps only Volodymyr Zelensky, an accidental leader who had greatness thrust upon him (and his leadership appears greater as he overshadows the shadows around him). He understands what is needed for Ukraine to survive; pity other world leaders lack the courage to fully support him. America is waiting for the next Joe DiMaggio while narcissists and anti-Semites create social media distractions. Europe, now plagued by petty corruption scandals, has a leadership merely crawling toward the end of their term (which cannot come soon enough).

French President Emmanuel Macron tried to lead but his efforts continually came up empty. He travelled to Russia to sit at a big table with Vladimir Putin – Nothing. He met with Joe Biden to try to get guarantees that the new “Inflation Reduction Act” would not impose unfair competition restrictions on European companies – Nothing. He showed up in Doha to cheer on France in the FIFA World Cup (when many Western countries boycotted the event on ethical grounds) – Nothing. But at least he tried. His one achievement in 2022 was to get re-elected by marginalising the traditional parties and enabling both the extreme right and far left. Congratulations!

The real leaders of 2022 were the citizens who stood up in the face of their government inaction. In the political arena, we saw in Sri Lanka how, first, farmers, then citizens stood up to remove their failed leadership. During the early days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, countless citizens opened their homes to refugees and their wallets to support the Ukrainian army. And I'll never forget the countless number of students who stood up to my school's administration to demand meaningful change.

Although history should draw many lessons from this year of relentless failure, 2022 was, at so many levels, a year to forget.

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