



By: **Ferry Biedermann**

We're only getting worse at dealing with global systemic risk



The World Health Organisation's recent **report** on the worrying increase of antimicrobial resistance, AMR, is but the latest signal that our global systems are not up to scratch. With at least three systemic, slow-burning threats converging on humanity, the world is late to take action.

AMR, climate change and artificial superintelligence, ASI, all pose relatively imminent and growing dangers to humanity. On the first two there's widespread scientific consensus, and the last one is too threatening to take a bet on.

While there is plenty of warning on all three issues, the obstacles to dealing with them only seem to be multiplying.

The same appears to be true for other familiar doom scenarios, such as nuclear war and global pandemics, or even threats to the global financial, energy and information infrastructure.

The cost, inconvenience and ideology of ignoring risk

Climate change in particular suffers from increased politicisation and from being used as a wedge issue by populists. AMR vigilance and countermeasures appear to be mostly collateral damage.

This comes as particularly the US, but also other countries, are scaling down development aid and support for international organisations.

The risk of superintelligence might sit oddly alongside these two 'natural' man-made phenomena. Yes, we have caused global warming, but it's now taking on a life of its own in nature, which is quite abstract.

The same with AMR; we're causing it but it's something that bacteria develop.

Heedless techno-optimism is as much a part of the current political and economic picture as climate change scepticism and AMR soft-peddalling

Artificial superintelligence is not here yet, but we're racing to create it in our computers without many safeguards. This is happening even though it's a high-risk endeavour on a par with engineering viruses or genetic experiments that can seriously harm humanity. For these, a much larger safety consensus exists.

Heedless techno-optimism is as much a part of the current political and economic picture as climate change scepticism and AMR soft-peddalling.

The cost and inconvenience, and the international cooperation needed for addressing such issues are directly at odds with both the ideological mindset and the pie-in-the-sky wealth fantasies of populists and tech-bros alike.

The costs of inaction

While the WHO report didn't single out inaction or underfunding in at-risk countries in its report, it did illustrate the wider problem. Commitment to act often doesn't translate into actual action.

The report noted that while more countries had joined the global AMR monitoring system, GLASS, many didn't in fact file **reports**. "48% of countries did not report data to GLASS in 2023, and about half of the reporting countries still lacked the systems to generate reliable data."

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In this light, the dismantling of USAID and the defunding by not only the US but also other rich nations of the UN and much development aid should ring extra alarm bells.

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In the US, Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Junior has acknowledged the severity of the problem but, as usual, muddies the water with unhelpful rhetoric.

His anti-vaccine stance is seen as not helpful to the AMR issue, and he has yet to **schedule** a meeting of the President's Advisory Council on Combating Antibiotic-Resistant Bacteria (PACCARB), despite urgent calls to do so.

Short-term solutions to long-term crises

Besides dismantling USAID, the Trump administration has for the second time **pulled** the US out of the Paris Climate Agreement. That also means the US will not be **present** at the upcoming COP30 meeting in Brazil. Another blow to the global effort on climate change.

The US absence will not only be felt in practical terms, such as funding and leadership. It also signals a huge abdication of responsibility on the part of one of the world's biggest polluters.

This is happening at a moment that we're in danger of crossing several tipping points, as a recent report from 160 climate scientists **indicated**.

It warned that one such tipping point, the irreversible die-back of warm-water coral reefs, might already be reached. Others, such as the melting of polar ice sheets, are not far off.

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The world is experiencing summers that are much hotter than ever before, and damage from droughts and floods is unprecedented, leading to locations in the UK becoming uninsurable.

Yet, on the basis of national climate plans, we're facing more than three degrees Celsius warming this century, rather than the well below 2 degrees that's the target in the Paris Agreement.

With ongoing cost-of-living pressures, high debt, demands for higher defence spending and a multitude of other pressures, many of the world's richer nations are turning towards short-term solutions.

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Ignoring systemic risks

Apart from costing money, these issues also require a high level of international cooperation and consensus, which many governments now oppose on an ideological level.

Not only has the Trump administration pulled out of the Paris Climate Agreement, it has also given notice that it is withdrawing from the WHO, affecting, among other things, the fight against AMR.



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Deaths from climate change number in the tens of thousands and AMR already in the millions. This cannot be said about AI, although the use of algorithms in war is advancing.

AI has in fact the potential to design new drugs and save lives in other ways. But instead of ensuring a positive balance, a world preoccupied with other things is wishing away this systemic risk too.

The current moment is particularly bleak, and the global populist turn absolutely plays a role, but many of these issues have been ignored or not been taken seriously enough for decades under more centrist leadership in many countries. Here, complacency rather than ideology might play a part.

The failure of the UK and US to sign the Paris Declaration on inclusive, sustainable and safe AI earlier this year is a case in point. Both countries went against a vast international consensus at a summit where safety had already been relegated down the list of priorities.

The US aims to “win” the AI race, while Keir Starmer wants the UK to become an “AI superpower”. Neither prioritises regulations. On the contrary, it is seen as being in the way of the pot of gold at the end of the AI rainbow.

In 2023, the UK proudly chaired the first AI safety summit at Bletchley Park. The final declaration, while emphasising the technology’s potential benefits for humankind, also carried several warnings. “There is potential for serious, even catastrophic, harm, either deliberate or unintentional, stemming from the most significant capabilities of these AI models.”

It further stressed the importance of international cooperation to mitigate the danger. What a difference less than two years has made.