



# **BRIEF 1: HOPE AND CHANGE IN THE ANTHROPOCENE**

Hope is a fundament for change. It is a subject studied across disciplines, and it is increasingly recognised as vital for shifting towards sustainable trajectories. We argue that there is an unexplored potential in studying the empirics of hope, and we need your help. What dimensions and roles of hope are insufficiently captured in current discourse, and how can they be combined to support knowledge and action in the Anthropocene?

### Hope in the Anthropocene

The 'Anthropocene' concept signifies a world where humans are impacting the planet on multiple scales and magnitudes<sup>1</sup>. Scientific reports document increasing climate instability, a deteriorating biosphere on which humans intimately depend, and how these changes reinforce patterns of inequity. Amidst this 'bleak' news, one may be tempted to assume that hope in the Anthropocene is for the naïve and ill-informed. But are the sciences paying sufficient attention to the role of hope and its empirics toward a safe and just future for all?<sup>2-4</sup>

Our species has the ability to envision and enact change, and humans have historically engaged with and solved exceptional challenges. Can the Anthropocene generate human agency at new scales? Tentative observations across systems, sectors, and regions suggest that there is ongoing mobilisation to change the Anthropocene trajectory towards biosphere stewardship. Observations are derived from changes in energy and transport systems, sustainability and justice discourses in society, target settings to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, corporate reporting standards, financial incentives, and increased social movements and action linking climate, biodiversity and social justice issues. These observations can be considered 'signs of hope' in the Anthropocene.

#### What is hope?

Hope is different from optimism in that it is not a blind conviction that everything is getting better<sup>5,6</sup>. Consequently, hope risks disappointment and has no guarantees<sup>7</sup>. Hope may come with setbacks and be slow in its unfolding<sup>8</sup>, and carry melancholy and grief in bleak landscapes of the Anthropocene<sup>9,10</sup>. Hope can also be adaptive, used as a response to changes in socio-ecological system (SES)<sup>11</sup>.

In psychology, there is a rich body of literature on hope, its cognitive and emotional dimensions – and how hope can help navigate the present and the future<sup>12-14</sup>. Psychologists who study hope in the context of climate change, describe hope as an evocation that triggers action by offering a positive vision of the future<sup>15</sup> and motivates collective pro-environmental action<sup>13,16</sup>. Hope can enable solution-oriented thinking and is 'applied' through identifying and implementing practical measures towards a positive outcome<sup>17</sup>.

In the humanities, the inquiry of hope primarily concerns what hope is and its use in navigating everyday life: hope entails possibilities. The philosopher Ernst Bloch discussed hope as an account that exists in the *not-yet*, which consequently '…makes people broad instead of confining them' and '…requires people to throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong'<sup>18</sup>. Hope is an active attending to 'what lurks in the interstices'<sup>19</sup> and therefore goes beyond a feeling or emotion. For Eagleton<sup>20</sup>, a hopeful individual '…is not in the first place one who enjoys certain sensations, but one who is predisposed to act and respond affirmatively with regard to the future'. In this sense, rather than a feeling, hope is a virtue which is cultivated through practice. The notion of hope as a practice is inherently experimental and involves 'tinkering' with the present<sup>9</sup>.





## Being aware of the risks of hope

There are also risks associated with hope. Ojala<sup>13,21</sup> has warned that hope can be used as a coping mechanism and psychological comfort in dealing with uncertainty. If hope is exclusively valued for the feel-good emotions it may evoke, or if hope is based on denial, it may lead to unrealistic expectations and, ultimately, the preservation of the status quo. In this sense, hope can be unconstructive because it promotes passivity and a lack of practical action.

There is also the risk of reinforcing inequality when one's hope comes at the expense of that of others. An example is the hope enacted for a decarbonised world through reforestation that comes with land-grabbing from indigenous communities. In a complex, ambivalent world where values differ among social groups, it is essential to promote what anthropologist Ghassan Hage coined as 'the politics of co-hoping'. He suggested that dealing with the tension in hope could possibly be responded to with an ethic of hope that embraces multiple cultural and political experiences and openness to plurality<sup>22</sup>.

### Towards the empirics of hope

Engaging empirically with hope means looking at it through observation and experiences. How could we go about engaging empirically with hope in the Anthropocene? What are the benefits? Does it call for paying special attention to certain approaches and characteristics? Here are some potential roles of the empirics of hope.

- Studying hope requires deep but open attentiveness to the world, specifically to the emergent forces that oppose the nature of social damage, e.g. by 'document[ing] remarkable things that are not remarked upon and in doing so creates an archive of emergent alternatives, directions or possibilities'<sup>23</sup>.
- Hope in practice involves '...attentive witnessing, taking in what is happening, interpreting its meaning and the possible gifts to the future that might emerge'<sup>24</sup>.
- Practising hope demands an inventory of hopeful openings and turns of events as a necessary accompaniment to the (already well documented) inventory of trouble, damage and wreckage in the Anthropocene, so we can mobilise towards living with the trouble and suturing those damages<sup>23</sup>.
- Noticing and telling 'stories of enabling entanglements' is crucial in the empirics of hope as they ultimately lead to 'a generative change' and 'a different kind of politics'<sup>19</sup>.
- Hope can work as a method, practised by uniting different forms of knowing and deliberately used as a political persuasion on how to approach the present. Hope has a repetitive quality and potential to be reproduced by the virtue of making it *known*<sup>25</sup>.
- Hope can also be stimulated by acknowledging what has not happened. In Hope in the Dark<sup>6</sup>, Solnit argues that many things that are now intact, still there, undestroyed, are a result of social movement.

We invite you to reflect on the following questions: What is hope to you? How is it discussed in your discipline? What has made you hopeful during your career? What are the changes you have observed within your field of expertise? What are the barriers to hope? What are good examples of change towards 'hopeful' Anthropocenes? Please share additional ideas here: <u>bit.ly/Brief\_1\_Hope\_Change\_Anthropocene</u>.





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