

## Sustainable Development and *The Limits to Growth* Debate

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In my article yesterday, I outlined some of the factors which led to the setting up of The United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro.

Even before that global event, a small group of thinkers were beginning to ask the question, whether there are upper limits to the Earth's capacity to cope with human activity? One of the first books to systematically address the issue was called *Limits to Growth*. It was published in 1972.<sup>1</sup> The book's various chapters addressed a variety of economic, social and ecological issues from the perspective of sustainability, beginning with the notion of 'overshoot.' This term refers to whether human activity at this moment in time has overshot the capacity of the Earth and some vital ecosystems to renew. Another chapter attempted to identify the main forces driving the dynamics of growth in a finite world. Other chapters looked at the impact of technology on sustainable development and considered how to move from the current unsustainable framework of development to a sustainable way of living on the planet.

Some commentators, particularly those from a neo-liberal economic background, challenged both the methodology used in the study and some of its predictions. When the price of oil fell back in the early 1980s, and the economic policies of both Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Regan in the U.S. seemed to produce both jobs and wealth, the limits to growth debate appeared to evaporate. For the next 15 years, especially after the demise of most centrally-planned Marxist economies in the late 1980s, the market was king! Nevertheless, the main significance of the *Limits to Growth* was that it focused people's attention on the fact that the earth is finite, and cannot sustain continuous depletion of resources and the irreversible destruction of ecosystems. It challenged one of the main assumptions of the economic-development model which had been in vogue almost since the beginning of the industrial revolution in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century by asking a crucial question: How the 5.6 billion people living on the planet in 1970 and the 9 billion who will be

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<sup>1</sup> *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* by D.H. Meadows, Donella H. Meadows and et al (Paperback - Jun 1979)

living on the planet in 2050, will be able to aspire to the present standards of affluence enjoyed by the majority of people living in the Minority world and by the elite and middle class in the Majority world without destroying the earth? In reality some of the demands which humans are currently making on the planet have already breached important limits in the biosphere and done irreversible damage. The truth is that continuous spiralling demands are not possible in a finite world.

Thirty years later, the authors produced a book called *Beyond the Limits* which confirmed most of the predictions of the earlier book.<sup>2</sup> It went on to warn that humanity had already overshot the limits of the Earth's support capacity. Other researchers such as Mathis Wackernagel have developed new measures which calculate the impact humans have on the planet. He called it the 'human ecological foot print.' This was defined as the land area which would be required to produce the resources (grain, food, wood, fish and urban land) for 9 billion people and absorb the emissions from industry globally. According to this measure, global society had overshot our ecological foot print by 20 per cent by 1990 and humans have continued this upward curve ever since.

Unfortunately, few people in government, international agencies or in the economic disciplines have understood the real importance of these findings. In fact, governments have played their part in developing a consumerist culture by promoting economic growth above everything else. After the terrorist attacks on New York in September 2001, President George W Bush exhorted the American people to go out and shop to stimulate the economy. In 2009, after the near collapse of the global financial system, governments around the world poured \$2.8 trillion in stimulus packages to stimulate consumption.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, since the financial crisis of 2008, many commentators are hoping the world economy will move quickly out of recession into a prolonged period of economic growth through increased levels of production and consumption. Recently, I was listening to an economic commentator talking on radio about the global economy and the possibilities for recovery. According to him, even though there were some signs of recovery, the global economy was still rather

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<sup>2</sup> Donella Meadows, Jorgen Randers, Dennis Meadows 2004, *Limits to Growth The 30 Year Update*, Chelsea Green Publishing Company, White River Junction, Vermont.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid page 18.

unhealthy. It would need sustained growth in 2010 and 2011, to return to full health. The economist had no understanding of the fact that this growth-oriented economy is plundering the natural world in an extensive and, now often irreversible way. He wasn't aware of the irony of using a health metaphor about an economic system which is impoverishing people and destroying the planet. He also seems to be unaware of the fact that, although the government can bail out commercial banks which made extraordinarily irresponsible lending decisions, no one can bail out ecosystems which are irreversibly damaged. For example, if commercial pressure and lack of regulation facilitates the overfishing of blue-fin tuna in the North Atlantic to the point of their extinction, no amount of money can resurrect this fish. Furthermore, those of us who have worked in economically poor countries know that economic growth is often at the expense of the poor who are paid a pittance for manufacturing the wide array of goods that we now use. Constant economic growth is also destroying the fruitfulness of the Earth.