Sustainable – our dilemma



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» As long as man was small in numbers and limited in technology, he could realistically regard the Earth as an infinite reservoir, an infinite source of inputs and an infinite cesspool for outputs. Today we can no longer make this assumption.

K.E. Boulding. Earth as a Space Ship. Washington State University Committee on Space Sciences. 1965

» While for a long time humanity had a lot of planet for few people, today there is less and less planet for more and more people.

If humanity does not want to bring about its own collapse, it must learn to manage its economy in a full world, on a single planet with limited resources. That is the new reality.

Translated from: Maja Göpel. 2020. Book: Unsere Welt neu denken. Eine Einladung.

» Today's belief and thinking patterns all come from the time of a world almost *empty* of people and are not suitable for today's world *full* of people.

Today, actually since the mid of the twentieth century, humanity lives in a full world. A hundred years ago there were around 1,700, by 1950 around 2,500 and today around 8,000 million people live on our planet.

The limits are tangible, palpable in almost everything people do. And yet the world continues to pursue a policy of growth, as if we were still living in the empty world of that time, when the abundance of natural resources on Earth seemed endless.

According to Weizsäcker v. Ernst Ulrich and Anders Wijkman. Book: Come on! - Capitalism, Short-Terminism, Population and the Destruction of the Planet. 2017

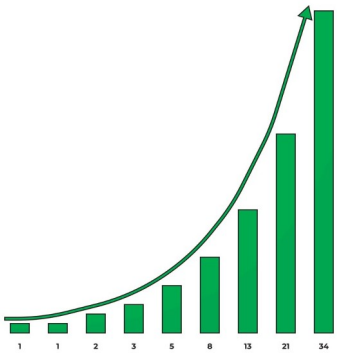
» Our institutions and governance have been designed for a world characterised by relative stability and progress, but they have not been designed to steer our society in times of rapid change, when widely held assumptions, such as the pursuit for growth, are turning against us.

Katy Wiese, Senior Policy Officer at the EEB. In: Andreas Budiman. The tricky path to financing our way out of the climate crisis. Meta from European Environmental Bureau EEB. April 5, 2023.

» All of us seem to be sleepwalking towards disaster with almost zero change in our consumption habits or lifestyle. Companies are walking back from their commitments, cheered loudly by their shareholders as they do so. Climate summits are falling short.

The tragic thing is that we have so many ideas, solutions, technologies and even the resources to address climate change substantially. What we lack is the leadership and collective will to implement them at scale and with speed.

Ravi Venkatesan. Social Entrepreneur and Writer. Post on LinkedIn. 30.12.2024



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» It's a dilemma: it does not work without growth, there is no completely green growth, and normal growth inevitably leads to ecological disaster.

Translated from: Ulrike Herrmann. Book: Goodbye, Kapitalismus: So kann der Übergang zu einer neuen Wirtschaftsordnung gelingen. 2022

» We have to face the growth dilemma that is

- Giving up on growing our current economy means the ***risk*** of economic and social collapse.
- Maintaining the conventional growth means the ***risk*** of destroying global ecosystems that are our basis of existence.

Tim Jackson. Book: Prosperity without Growth - Foundations for the economy of tomorrow. 2016

Exponential growth in key areas of society*) is triggering multiple crises in our time. We are clearly reaching our limits, because exponential growth also has a downside: sudden collapse and crash.

**) e.g. primary energy consumption, global economic power, world population, carbon dioxide emissions, water consumption, fertiliser consumption, ocean acidification, plastic production, urban population, international tourism and many more.*

» Many people in the global North have so far been drawing the wrong comparison. They look at their current, comparatively relaxed lives of prosperity and freedom and compare them with a complex transformation that, it seems, would involve a great deal of sacrifice, change and uncertainty.

The comparison is wrong because it relies on the utopia of continuing as before, which is not actually a viable alternative.

A more honest comparison would be between a society that stabilises today's exponential trends and the catastrophic social collapse that will occur if these trends are not stopped in time.

Translated from: Emanuel Deutschmann. Book.. Die Exponentialgesellschaft. Vom Ende des Wachstums zur Stabilisierung der Welt. 2025.

» In the fight against climate change, the dilemma is obvious:

On the one hand, consumption in an economy dependent on fossil fuels increases CO_2 emissions and also causes other environmental damage, such as biodiversity loss. The more people consume, the greater the impact on the environment.

On the other hand, the social system is based – economically, politically, and culturally – precisely on this consumption and its continued growth.

Beckert Jens. Book: How We Sold Our Future. The Failure to Fight Climate Change. 2025

» In the race for «more», we lose sight of the fact that «better» is a completely different objective.

Translated from Maja Göpel. Book: Werte. Ein Kompass für die Zukunft. 2025



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» We can talk about other things, we can look away, we can refuse to look up, but we cannot escape climate change.

Jonathan Freedland. Climate sceptics cheering as they melt in record temperatures? This heatwave is where satire has come to die. The Guardian 26 Jun 2026