

# The simpler way: envisioning a sustainable society in an age of limits

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## 1. Overview

Although it is widely understood that the global economy is currently unsustainable, few people seem to understand how far beyond sustainable limits it is. Fewer still seem to grasp what it would take for the global population to live within the sustainable carrying capacity of the planet. The most developed regions of the world have greatly exceeded levels of resource use and ecological impact that could be maintained or spread to all people, and as a result we are rapidly moving towards catastrophic planetary breakdown (WWF, 2018; Steffan et al, 2015; Ehrlich, 2013). The alarming global problems threatening humanity today include climate change; the pollution of air, soils, rivers, and oceans; deforestation and severe biodiversity loss; resource and topsoil depletion; and conflicts over access to scarce resources. From a social perspective, billions of people, mostly in the Third World, still suffer under conditions of deprivation (Hickel, 2017), while quality of life deteriorates even for many living high-impact, consumerist lifestyles in the richest countries (Lane, 2000). The global economic system and the cultures of consumption it celebrates are failing both people and planet.

It will be argued that these interconnected problems cannot be solved unless we move toward an economics of sufficiency, which means, among other things, that rates of production, consumption and resource use in rich countries must be dramatically reduced, probably by 80-90% or more (see Section 2 below). These reductions cannot be achieved merely by “greening production” through piecemeal efficiency improvements or technological innovation, and they cannot be achieved in a society that is governed by market forces or driven by the insatiable quest for material affluence or the limitless increase in GDP. In other words, a sustainable economy must be a post-growth and post-capitalist economy. But what does that actually mean?

We contend that the only way sustainability can be achieved is through a radical transition to a “Simpler Way” society which would be defined by low but sufficient material living standards, renewable energy, highly localised or “bioregional” production, egalitarian approaches to wealth distribution, participatory democratic practices of self-governance, and major degrowth to a zero-growth economy (Trainer, 2010; Alexander, 2015). We do not argue that this transition is likely, only that it signifies the only way for human civilisation to operate viably on our finite planet. Fortunately, there are many social and ecological reasons to believe that this transition is in the interests of humanity, both rich and poor, but this requires reimagining the good life beyond consumer culture and embracing ways of living that are outwardly simple, but inwardly rich. Although we will surely raise more questions than we can answer, this short article seeks to provide more detail on this vision of a just and sustainable society and briefly highlight the implications this perspective has on questions of transition strategy.

## 2. The global predicament

It is important to indicate briefly why the reductions in resource and energy use must be dramatic and far greater than most people appreciate. Only then can an adequate response be formulated. Consider the following outline of the global predicament from a “limits to growth” perspective.

The commonly cited “Ecological Footprint” index shows that to provide the average Australian with food, settlement area, water and energy takes about 7gha of productive land (Global Footprint Network, 2018). If by 2050 the expected 9.8 billion people were to have risen to the present “living standard” in Australia, and the planet's amount of productive land remains the same as it is today (which is doubtful), then the amount available per capita would be in the order of 1.25 gha. In other words, Australians today are making ecological demands per capita that are about six times what would be possible for all people to make. It follows that the impacts of affluent living standards would need to be reduced by more than 80% to meet the sustainability criteria of the Ecological Footprint analysis.<sup>167</sup>

Wiedmann et al. (2015a) state an even more striking conclusion: the per person consumption of the ten highest iron ore and aluminum consuming nations is around 80 times that of all the rest. On a finite planet facing ecological limits, these disparities in consumption and impacts are plainly unjust and unsustainable, and they begin to indicate the degree of reductions needed to achieve sustainability and distributive equity. Moreover, what if humanity leaves a fair share of the planet for other species? The “Living Planet Report 2018” (WWF, 2018) concludes that between 1970 and the present, the populations of vertebrate species have declined on average by 60% due to human economic activity, leading to some writers to speak of the “Sixth Great Extinction”.

However, the problem of ecological overshoot is far more disturbing when we consider the fundamental commitment (even by rich nations) to ceaseless *growth* in production, consumption, trade, investment, “living standards”, wealth and GDP. If the Australian economy continues to grow by 3% p.a. and by 2050 the global population of 9.8 billion people achieved the same levels of GDP per capita, then total world economic output would be around 18 times the present amount. The Global Footprint Network (2018) finds that the *present* global economy already overshoots sustainable impacts by 70%, and yet the dominant economic paradigm is aiming to grow economic output many times over coming years and decades. This is, as Edward Abbey once said, “the ideology of the cancer cell.”

Rejection of the limits to growth position is usually based on the belief that technical advance will deal with the associated problems by way of “decoupling”; that is, by enabling continued increase in production and consumption globally while bringing environmental impacts down to sustainable levels (e.g. Breakthrough Institute, 2015). It is not difficult to show the extreme implausibility of this “technofix” approach. The above figures show the enormity of the reductions that would be required. For the growth economy to operate within the sustainable carrying capacity of the planet and leave a share of the planet for other species, impact rates per unit of GDP would arguably have to be cut by 90% or more by 2050.

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<sup>167</sup> Although the Ecological Footprint metric is an imperfect measure of planetary demand, many critics think it understates the levels of impact, so for present purposes it can be considered a conservative measure of ecological impact and overshoot.

What makes the decoupling vision even more implausible is that despite decades of extraordinary technological advance, global energy and resource use continues to rise steadily, not decline as the decoupling theory would imply. A litany of studies on decoupling show that efficiency gains within a globally growing economy have not led to, and will not lead to, reduced overall impacts, let alone reduce them sufficiently to achieve sustainability (Wiedmann et al., 2015b; Alexander, 2015; Ward et al., 2016; Trainer, 2016a).

If economists are serious about designing a sustainable economy that could work well for all people (and species), not just for a minority in the highly developed regions of the world, then the severity of this “limits to growth” perspective must be central in their accounts. It is wrong and indeed dangerous to assume the legitimacy of high-impact modes of living that could not possibly be shared by all people. However, presently ever-rising GDP per capita is the goal to which most people and all nations aspire, puffed up by fantasies of sufficient decoupling. This “green growth” approach is a recipe for ecological and thus humanitarian disaster. Whether we like it or not, humanity will have to deal with the implications of living in an age of pressing ecological limits.

Thus, the essential conclusion to be drawn from the limits to growth position is that the magnitude of ecological overshoot is so great that a transition to a sustainable society will require significant “degrowth” in the rich world to levels of per capita resource use that are likely to be in the region of one-tenth of present Australian per capita levels. Across the political spectrum, little attention has been given to the profound implications of this for social, economic, or political theory and practice (Trainer, 2019). Even some prominent figures in the schools of post-growth and steady state economics do not seem to appreciate what this degree of downshifting means in terms of the economics of sustainability, especially when we are talking about timescales needed to avoid dangerous climate change (see Anderson, 2015).

### **3. Vision and basic principles of the Simpler Way**

The following sections outline in general terms the kind of economy that we argue must be adopted in view of the limits to growth predicament. Few existing proposals for a new economy deal satisfactorily or explicitly, if at all, with the essential themes, principles and implications deriving from need to reduce impacts of affluent living standards by 90% or more. Even within the degrowth, eco-socialist and related movements there is a general failure to grasp the enormity of the consequences that follow if the limits to growth analysis and its implications are accepted.

Achieving the reductions necessary will include huge demand-side reductions (consuming less and differently) as well as significant efficiency gains (cleaner production), but primarily the task is to create a Simpler Way society that transcends the growth paradigm and systemically supports ways of living based on frugal but sufficient material living standards. Sometimes the rejection of growth economics or consumerist lifestyles are broadly stated by those who appreciate the limits to growth predicament, but rarely is the alternative form of economy this implies unpacked in any detail. This is problematic, because without a relatively clear vision of where we need to end up, our theories of transition cannot know *to where* we must transition.

### **3.1. Globalised production and distribution vs. the Simpler Way**

In order to begin unpacking our vision of an alternative society, consider a simple example of egg production, from which broader lessons can be derived. A study by Trainer, Malik, and Lenzen (2018) presents an analysis comparing the supply of eggs via the normal industrial / supermarket path with a local cooperative supply path. The dollar and energy costs of the former were found to be in the order of 50 to 200 times larger than those of the latter. Such achievements are due to the smallness of scale, proximity, self-sufficiency, cooperation and integration of communities, which makes it possible to totally eliminate many costly inputs, to recycle “wastes”, to benefit from “co-products”, and to administer via spontaneous and informal social interaction.

For instance, the typical supermarket egg has vast and complex global supply chains involving distant shipping fleets, agribusiness, trucking and thus roads and petroleum, warehousing, chemicals for disease control, infrastructures, supermarkets, storage, packaging, marketing, legal services, the finance, advertising and insurance industries, waste removal and dumping, computers, a commuting workforce, and expensively trained personnel. It also involves damage to ecosystems, especially via carbon emissions and agribusiness effects including the non-return of nutrients to soils.

However, eggs supplied via worker cooperatives within integrated settlements based on local production can avoid almost all these costs, while enabling immediate use of all “wastes”. Permaculture design ensures that elements in a system are highly self-maintaining, perform many functions at the same time, and that all “wastes” become valued resources (Holmgren, 2018). For instance, recycling of kitchen scraps along with free ranging can meet total poultry nutrient needs. Poultry and other animal manures, including human, can be directly fed into nearby methane digesters or compost heaps, thereby eliminating the need for inputs to village food production from the fertiliser industry. Essentially no transport is required, given local production is geared to meeting local needs, using mostly local resources. Poultry perform multiple functions automatically, including providing meat, fertilising orchards, cleaning up garden beds and fruit fly larvae, producing the next generation of chicks, and maintaining fire breaks. Monitoring and maintenance of systems can be totally informal, via spontaneous discussion and action within the community. In addition, cooperative care of poultry and other animals adds to amenity and leisure resources and facilitates community bonding.

This example is indicative of how localised modes of production, supply, and consumption can radically reduce energy and resources demands, while providing various benefits (e.g. healthier food, better treatment of animals, enjoyable production, etc.). The same approach can be applied to most other domains of social and economic life, including other food items, dwelling construction, clothing supply, many services, as well as providing leisure, entertainment and education. The “Remaking Settlements” study (Trainer, 2016b) explores the potential when applied to an outer suburb of Sydney, finding that radical restructuring might enable almost all food needs to be met within the suburb while enabling many other material and social benefits. These include eliminating unemployment, avoiding the need for a sewer system, dramatically reducing the need for transport for work and income, and creating thousands of person-hours of community improvement per week via voluntary working bees and committees.

The foregoing discussion has been of theoretical possibilities, but the claims are supported by evidence from actual communities functioning along the lines being advocated. Lockyer’s

(2017) study of the Dancing Rabbit Eco-village in Missouri found the following per capita use rates compared with national US averages. Car use, 8%; distance driven, 10%; liquid fuel use, 6%; solid waste generated, 18%; proportion of solid waste recycled on site, 34%; electricity use 18%, with three times as much electricity sent to the grid as is used; water use, 23%, with two-thirds of this collected from village roofs. Furthermore, the community's quality of life indicators align with the evidence from other studies of eco-villages; e.g., 81% of respondents rate happiness with life situation at 7/10 or better, and almost all say life had improved since moving to the community. (For similar findings see Grinde et al., 2017; Alexander and Ussher, 2012.) Another way of putting these findings is that it takes remarkably little in the way of monetary or resource expenditure to ensure a highly satisfying lifestyle, if communities accept materially simple ways and are organised to this end. A materially simple life can be a spiritually richer life. (For further supporting argument and evidence, see Trainer 2016b; 2013.) We argue that a just and sustainable society cannot be achieved unless these highly communal, localised, self-sufficient and frugal ways become the norm.

#### **4. Implications for specific aspects of the Simpler Way economy**

The following sub-sections briefly sketch various ways that sectors of an integrated Simpler Way economy could function to yield high levels of sustainability, economic justice and quality of life. It focuses primarily on aspects of the neighbourhood and town levels. Implications for the national and international levels are briefly considered later.

##### **4.1. The local geography of the economy**

Dealing adequately with the dual challenges of climate change and fossil energy depletion implies significantly reducing energy demand compared to current levels in the rich nations and meeting that reduced demand with renewables (Alexander and Floyd, 2018). Given the close connection between energy and economy, an energy descent future implies moving away from the energy-intensive modes of globalised production and distribution and toward highly local production, using mostly local resources.

Given the commitment to materially simple lifestyles and to simplified local supply systems, far less would need to be produced than at present (in rich nations) and most of the goods and services one would need in everyday life would come from within at most a few kilometres of where one lived. Most people could get to work on foot or on a bicycle, although a few would need to travel further, mostly in buses or trains powered by electricity or biofuels (the greatly reduced distances and regularity of travel would make these modes financially and ecologically affordable). Community vehicles might be available for occasional use when needed (e.g. moving bricks or timber to a construction site). Every household owning a private automobile, even if electric, has no place in a sustainable economy (Alexander and Gleeson, 2019). Because very little transport would be needed, many roads and car parks could be dug up or converted to different uses, significantly increasing space in cities for local gardens, orchards, forests or woodlots, animal pens, or fish ponds. Very little air travel would be needed.

Economic self-sufficiency (or rather collective sufficiency) should be seen in terms of concentric circles. In the centre will be the most important economic and social unit of all, the highly productive and highly self-sufficient household (see Holmgren, 2018; Trainer, 2016b).

Even in the present economy more than half the work done takes place there, although most of it is unpaid. The household would be embedded within the neighbourhood economy, involving free goods from commons, sharing/gifting surpluses, mutual assistance, cooperatives, swapping and bartering, working bees and committees, and including many small enterprises, co-operatives and household hobby production.

The next circles out would include the suburb, and then the town or city (Alexander and Gleeson, 2019). Ideally the area surrounding the settlement would contain its dairy, timber plantation, grain and grazing lands. Several towns might be found within a region, maybe ten km across, including a few factories producing items such as fridges, bicycles, and radios for local use and for export to the wider economy. As noted further below, few resources or commodities would need to come from the state and national economic sectors, and very little from overseas, perhaps only items such as high tech medical or computer equipment or resources needed for essential energy infrastructure (e.g. solar panels). There would need to be no reduction in research and development of appropriate technology in a Simpler Way society, since so many resources would be saved by avoiding wasteful consumption and production. For example, there would be little need for marketing expenditure in a Simpler Way society, so the trillion dollars per annum currently spent on advertising (WARC, 2016) could be redirected to better uses, such as funding the transition to renewable energy. No effort would be made to persuade people to purchase and consume.

#### **4.2. Sectors of the new economy**

One of the (overlapping) sectors of the new economy would still use money. It could include a large domain in which market forces were allowed to operate (although in the long-term future we might decide we do not need the market.) One sector would be fully planned and under participatory social control (e.g. for provision of water, energy, housing, and health care). One would involve non-profit community cooperatives. One large sector would not involve money. It would include household production, barter arrangements, mutual aid, working bees, cooperatives, the gifting of surpluses, and free goods from the commons.

The commons would be extensive, including the public fruit and nut orchards, clay pits, fish ponds, herb patches, woodlots and various supply systems, for instance via poultry, honey and fish farming cooperatives. Many buildings such as community centres, craft rooms, store sheds, pond and windmills and especially neighbourhood workshops would be constructed and managed as community property. As many of these as needed would be crammed into space created by the elimination of most roads and car parks, and also located just outside settled areas.

Probably the largest sector would be made up of small privately-owned firms and farms. These would best be thought of as the tools which people used to make their social contribution and draw a stable, sufficient income via a secure livelihood. They would not be capitalist enterprises. They would not involve investment of capital by people who need to do no work, to make money, to invest again. Their value would be in giving many families and small groups the freedom to enjoy owning their venture and exercising their skills, and running it in the way they wished. Privately owned firms would be required to keep within socially determined guidelines monitored by the town assembly.

The zero-growth economy we are describing would automatically eliminate almost all the financial sector, primarily because, as few realise, interest could no longer be charged on

loans. If a loan is to be repaid plus interest the borrower must create more “value” than was borrowed, meaning there will be economic growth. Thus rich people could no longer receive large incomes from “investments” and without having to do any work for them. Banks would therefore do little more than hold savings and lend some of them out for an administrative fee. A corollary is that banks would no longer create money via the fractional reserve system. In a zero-growth economy no new money needs to be created and put into circulation.

It should therefore come as no surprise that the economy being described is one in which there is no aggregate growth, and all important functions are decided by rational social decisions. Cooperation not competition is the supreme principle, there is no interest paid, and little is left to market forces. In short, a degrowth transition to a Simpler Way society is not compatible with a capitalist economy.

#### **4.3. The craft economy**

Many goods would be produced in households and very small firms by artisan producers. The main reason for this is that artisan or craft production is enjoyable; producing in factories is not. Given that the volume of production in a frugal degrowth economy would be far lower than it is now, people who delight in making pottery, furniture, clothing, toys etc. might provide most of the goods the community needs.

Production of most of these goods would only need to replace breakages and wear, meaning production would not need to meet the shifting needs of fashion. It would make sense for some items to be mass-produced in factories, such as work shoes and boots. Automated corporations can produce much more “cheaply”, but the required scale necessitates long distance transport of inputs and finished goods, and provides little or no satisfaction for workers. Living simply and obtaining many things without the need for money makes it more likely that we would be happy to pay more for well-made and durable goods.

#### **4.4. Social control of the economy**

There cannot be a satisfactory economy unless there is the collective power to make sure that the things produced are those that should be produced, so that all people have their needs met, social cohesion and morale are kept in good condition, the environment is cared for, and development is socially desirable. A free enterprise or capitalist economy will not do these things. Markets ignore need, justice, morality, social benefit and ecological values. They can do no other because they allocate scarce things according to “effective demand”, i.e., those who offer to pay more money for an item get it. Millions of people die every year not due to scarcity of resources but because the provision of food and water is determined by what will maximise the profits of those who supply them. Markets therefore are incapable of doing anything other than allocating scarce resources to the rich and developing the most profitable industries as distinct from those that are most needed.

Polanyi was among those who have stressed this fundamental mistake in the economy we have had since *The Great Transformation* (1944). In ancient and in medieval times all one’s behaviour was expected to be governed by a general moral code, which for instance prohibited taking advantage of another person’s misfortune. But Polanyi and others have pointed out that with the advent of capitalism the rules governing economic behavior became separated from the general code, enabling entrepreneurs to ruin their competitors or pounce on a fire sale, and to concern themselves only with whether or not monetary benefits to

themselves could be secured. Damage caused to others or to society or to ecosystems need no longer be considered. Polanyi pointed out that unless “market forces” were kept under social control, society and the environment would eventually be destroyed. That explains most of what is wrong with the world today.

Therefore, especially in a context of very scarce resources, desirable outcomes will not be possible unless the main economic functions are under social control, that is, determined by careful discussion and deliberate, rational decision making and collectively defined regulation. However, it will be emphasised below that this must be carried out by participatory democratic means, not by centralised bureaucracies.

The town or suburb, through informal deliberations and committees, and ultimately its local assemblies, must be in control of shaping the local economy. The citizens will be clearly aware that their fate depends on whether or not their settlement works well and has established the arrangements that enable it to provide basic necessities. If some needs are not being met then the town will realise that it must take action, for instance set up a cooperative to plug the gap. If private enterprise and the market can meet the need then the town would be relieved not to have to deal with the problem. Thus, although the town council or committee would have a lot to attend to, it would be wise to take a minimalist approach, dealing with and fixing only those things that need attention.

The over-riding concerns would be to maximise town self-sufficiency and thus resilience, and to ensure that many essential needs are provided for as locally as possible, using local resources. Thus the town must work out how to make sure that everybody has a livelihood, a way of making a valued contribution through enjoyable productive activity. There is no excuse for unemployment; that is only found in deeply flawed societies. There is much to do and many cooperatives and working bees needing people. Indeed, the main form of tax payment would be giving time to the working bees building and maintaining local infrastructures, harvesting from the commons, and providing many services. Only a little tax in the form of money would be needed to pay for maintenance of town systems, and for national government revenue.

Significant monetary inequality would cease to be an issue. It would be of no consequence whether or not one had a high income or great monetary wealth, and there would be little or no point in seeking these. One’s “wealth” – the richness of one’s life – would depend primarily on one’s community resources and all would have equal access to these.

Only if the town has control over its own fate can decisions take into account all the relevant considerations and prevent outcomes being determined solely by what will maximise monetary returns to those with money to spend or invest. Often it will be obvious that considerations such as equity, environment, aesthetics and the public good should outweigh those that a market system would focus on.

#### ***4.5. How will the control be exercised?***

Few if any would want the social control and regulation of the economy to be exercised by large, authoritarian, centralised state bureaucracies, but in the economy under discussion that is not only avoidable, it is impossible. In a world of very limited resources, a sustainable society will have to be made up mostly of many small and highly self-sufficient and self-governing community economies. These will have to be run as participatory democracies –



they cannot be run effectively any other way. They will not make viable decisions unless people familiar with the situation make those decisions. There will be few paid bureaucrats or councils, because in a world of scarce resources not much paid government will be affordable. Therefore, most policy formation and management of “public works” will have to be carried out by local citizens, by committees and town assemblies, and by voluntary working bees. The right decisions for the town will not be made or implemented unless arrived at and supported by conscientious citizens. Fortunately the small and simplified economies which do not grow and are largely cooperative will make it easier for the social control to be exercised via participatory democratic processes; that is, by spontaneous informal discussion leading to decisions by town assemblies.

Many and possibly most of the economic activities would not need any formal control. Informal discussion would sort out whether too many tomatoes were planted last year. In addition the many committees would study and advise on issues such as the best apple varieties to plant when the parking lot is dug up. Adjustments, repairs and research would primarily be carried out spontaneously by citizens who knew their fate depended on good maintenance of systems and who enjoyed keeping their town in good shape. These are the kinds of “administrative” practices that make many eco-villages function well without paid politicians or bureaucrats.

If it became clear that, for instance, there were more bakeries than was sensible, the community would have to work out the best solution for all concerned. This might include helping some people to transfer to other necessary activities. No firm would be allowed to go bankrupt; the town needs to look after all its members and make good use of all its resources. It would have its own bank and “business incubator” i.e. a panel of experienced advisers, and its working bees would help firms to set up or modify premises. All would understand that their town could not thrive unless all take collective responsibility for making sure that it does, and unless it looks after everyone. Thus, there would be a profoundly different ethos compared with today; it would be seen as “our economy” – ours to keep in good shape and to provide for the community.

Obviously there would be a need to think carefully about desirable limits to social control, and to minimise interference with freedoms. Ideally the concern would be to take remedial action only where social needs were not being met. This would mostly be a matter of plugging gaps rather than blocking or coercing. Two factors would make the control task easier: firstly, the economy would not be complex; and secondly, it would be driven not by profit or market forces but by citizens who prioritised the common good.

#### **4.6. Work**

The corollary of radical economic degrowth is that far less work and production would take place, especially in the formal economy, and many of the things that were needed would be produced in far less resource-expensive ways. For example, food supply would require little work to produce trucks to bring food to towns. As has been explained, there would be no involuntary unemployment. The town would make sure that all who wanted work had a share of the work that needed doing.

Because the amount of work to be done for money would be dramatically reduced, most people might only need to do work one or two days per week, although much of their time would be going into productive use within the household, commons and working bees and

committees. Some people, such as professionals, could choose to work full time for money, perhaps paying more monetary tax than those who paid by working bee contributions.

Consumer-capitalist society has destroyed work. For most it is more or less a burden that has to be endured. It is hardly fulfilling or a source of anything valuable aside from the pay packet. In the new economy, alienation as Marx described it would be largely eliminated. Indeed, it could be argued that “work” as such could easily be totally eliminated in a Simpler Way society. In eco-villages, members generally produce via their enjoyable small farm or craft activities and contributions to working bees, which are usually experienced as forms of leisure activity. Potters see their products benefiting and being appreciated by others. Working bees can turn work that would be boring or otherwise unpleasant in capitalist society into enjoyable and socially bonding festivals. Thus the distinction between work and play might completely disappear. People would generally be more active in their working lives, contributing to fitness and health and therefore minimising need for expensive healthcare. It is notable that Cuban’s have better health than citizens of the US, despite spending around one tenth on healthcare (O’Hanlon and Harvey, 2017).

#### ***4.7. The economy beyond the town or suburb***

The foregoing discussion has focused on the local economy, arguing that in a resource-scare world this must be the new basic economic unit if per capita impacts are to be reduced to sustainable levels. National and international economies will have a necessary role but they will be far smaller than at present and of much less significance. Their main function will be to enable the local economies to thrive, by providing those relatively few things they need but cannot conveniently produce in their local bioregion.

Despite the productive power of the local economy there will always be a relatively small number of important items the towns cannot produce for themselves, and some of these will have to come from large industries far away. How then might economic systems beyond the town level be organised? The basic concept must be the location within or close to towns of some small capacity to produce items for export to other towns within the national economy. For instance, it is not feasible for each town to produce its own refrigerators, so a few towns would specialise in the production of these or of components, making them available for purchase by other towns, thereby earning the export income needed to purchase similar items from the national economy.

The main economic role of the (remnant, small) “state” will be to organise the distribution and functioning of these industries, to ensure that all towns have the capacity to earn sufficient income from their exports into the national economy to pay for their purchases from it. It is unlikely that it would make sense for these exporting firms to be other than town cooperatives. The state and national governments would also have to attend to provision of infrastructures and systems enabling these supply chains, such as roads and railway networks, and finance, insurance and legal systems.

Some firms at this level would be large, such as those producing steel, cement and railway equipment. In a zero-growth economy with a very small GDP it is not clear why it would make sense for these firms to be privately owned. This would mean that issues to do with investment, innovation, efficiency, restructuring etc. would have to be dealt with via public ownership and management; i.e., some form of socialism.

#### **4.8. What role for the state in the transition?**

If enough communities manage to establish commitment to taking control of increasingly self-sufficient and self-managed local economies then before long their dependence on the national economy for those few but crucial inputs will force them to demand and then initiate radical change in that economy. They will insist that governments focus their attention on restructuring the national economy so that its primary role is to make sure the towns and settlements can get the basic inputs they must have but can't produce for themselves. If financial crises resurface in coming years, as is likely, national governments will be faced with the task of urgently enabling devastated workers and towns to grope towards local self-sufficiency, given that the industries they used to work in would have collapsed and could not be restored. Thus national governments will be forced to gear available national productive capacity to building the required alternative local structures and systems, including especially the training and demonstration facilities.

Central governments would quickly realise that they cannot implement the required changes. They could not construct or run viable local economies. They would have few resources and more importantly the right decisions can only be made and implemented by people who understand their specific conditions and have the necessary ideas, attitudes, social cohesion and morale.

Before long this pressure is likely to shift from submitting requests to the state to making demands on it, and then to taking increasing control of it. There will be increasing insistence that frivolous industries must be phased out so that scarce resources can be devoted to meeting fundamental town and regional needs. Meanwhile towns will be driven by necessity to bypass the centre and take initiatives such as setting up their own farms, energy supplies and factories, thus taking various functions out of the hands of the state. It will be increasingly recognised that the local level is the only one where the right decisions for highly self-sufficient communities can be made. Communities becoming familiar with taking control of their own fate will be growing less inclined to allow the centre to go on calling the shots.

The final step would be the grass roots pushing their way into the centre, that is taking direct control over the remaining state functions through the classic anarchist mechanisms whereby federations and delegations thrash out policy proposals which are brought back down to the town assembly level for endorsement. The increasing interest now in Citizen Initiated Referenda indicates how this is feasible. Some city budgets are now worked out by the CIR process. One of its merits is that decisions are not made, handed down and enforced from the top, so they are more likely to be widely accepted. The ultimate goal is to make sure that endorsement is carried out at the level of the town assemblies, and thus that representative government is replaced by direct participatory government.

Accordingly, a Simpler Way society would not be an eco-socialist economy, if that means a centrally-planned society governed by a strong centralised state. As has been detailed, a Simpler Way society would have to involve thoroughly participatory democratic decision making, spontaneity, subsidiarity, and rejection of hierarchy and professional rulers. Issues beyond the town level would be handled by sending delegates to meetings within federations. And the basic transitional strategy would be "prefiguring" the new world within the shell of the old. This economy can therefore be described as eco-anarchist.

#### **4.9. Is all this too unrealistic?**

The common response to this vision is that it is far too utopian; that it fails to recognise that humans are not capable of making such an alternative society work. This response reveals a serious misunderstanding. The argument has not been that this economy is going to be achieved, or that it is likely to be achieved. It is quite unlikely to be achieved. The argument has been that we had better try very hard to achieve it, because whether we like it or not, there is no other way to defuse the major global problems now threatening to destroy us.

Clearly the ways of living outlined in this article would not work in today's society, because they require quite different attitudes and values to those predominant now. In consumer-capitalist society most people are out to maximise their self-interest, see nothing wrong with competitive systems in which they might be one of the winners while many end up with less than enough, and would oppose the enlightened social regulation and restraint needed to ensure satisfactory outcomes for all. It is essential to realise that a satisfactory society cannot be designed for such people. Most make the mistaken assumption that we can have a peaceful, sustainable and just world while we all go on living affluently and competitively and continually striving to increase our "living standards" and GDP without limit. However, these are the core behaviours and goals that are causing global problems.

But are these dispositions too deeply entrenched to alter? An important feature of The Simpler Way is that while it *requires* values like moderation, frugality, sharing and cooperation, it also *rewards* them. A satisfactory life in a thriving community will not be possible unless there is cooperation and willing contribution and concern for the common good, but it will also be a situation in which those values and practices will be enjoyable. If the new ways can be established they will tend to be self-reinforcing. This suggests that, for those people who accept the general vision outlined in this paper, one of the primary goals is to help develop the social consciousness and understandings required for a sustainable economy to emerge. Until that consciousness emerges, the necessary system change to a Simpler Way society will not emerge. Thus what is required is essentially a cultural revolution, which would create the conditions needed to drive the necessary economic and political revolutions.

## **5. Conclusion**

There has been insufficient recognition of the way all the major global problems derive primarily from having exceeded the sustainable limits to growth. For instance the damage being inflicted on ecosystems can only increase unless we move to lifestyles and systems involving far lower per capita consumption than we are familiar with in the rich world. The soon to be 7+ billion people living in poorer countries can only receive a fair share of the planet's resources if those living in the rich countries reduce their consumption dramatically. Most armed conflict is to do with fierce competition to secure scarce resources and markets, meaning that if we insist on remaining affluent we will need to remain heavily armed. And the social cohesion and quality of life even in the richest countries will continue to deteriorate. These problems cannot be defused unless simpler lifestyles and systems are willingly embraced.

Several analysts have stressed the fragile house-of-cards nature of the global economy in our age of financial and ecological limits (see, for e.g., Korowicz, 2012; Morgan, 2013; Greer, 2008). Above all is its dependence on debt, now in excess of \$250 trillion, three or more times

global GDP and far higher than before the GFC. These considerations align with Marx's fundamental insight regarding the self-destructive contradictions built into the foundations of capitalism, even though he did not clearly envisage its resource limits.

In an oil dependent economy, it is highly likely that if the yield from shale oil production falters in the next decade or so a global debt crash of unprecedented proportions will suddenly impact. It might not be the final GFC; some envisage partial recovery initiating a "bumpy road down" or a slow "catabolic collapse" (Greer, 2008). But others foresee the end of civilisation and the die-off of billions. What is to be hoped for is a "Goldilocks depression" that falls short of catastrophic breakdown but is serious enough to jolt large numbers into recognising that the growth and greed system is not going to provide for them.

From the Simpler Way perspective little can be done to influence that trajectory. Strategically it is doubtful whether striving to reform consumer-capitalist society is a good investment of time and resources. It is locked on a suicidal path that its institutions and culture are incapable of recognising let alone altering. What is to be done instead is to work to prepare for the building of sensible systems as the existing system continues its deterioration. This involves what the anarchists call "prefiguring" – that is, building here-and-now the kinds of local lifestyles and systems sketched in the earlier sections of this paper. Many are striving to develop those ways within the Voluntary Simplicity, Eco-village, Permaculture, and Transition Towns movements. A smooth or successful transition is very unlikely, but these movements currently embody the most coherent strategy for working toward a resilient landing.

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