WE MUST MOVE TO THE SIMPLER WAY.

THE GLOBAL SITUATION, THE SUSTAINABLE ALTERNATIVE SOCIETY, AND THE TRANSITION TO IT.

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NB. This is a 6 page account; for the detailed 27 page account see http://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/tsw/02-The-Simpler-Way.html

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The way of life we have in rich countries is grossly unjust and unsustainable and we must face up to radical change. There is no possibility of the "living standards" of all people on earth ever rising to rich world per capita levels of consumption of energy, minerals, timber, water, food, phosphorous etc. These rates of consumption are generating numerous alarming global problems, now threatening our survival. Yet most people have no idea how far we are beyond a sustainable levels of resource use and environmental impact. There is a massive refusal to even think about the situation we are in.

Consider some basic aspects of our situation:-

- If all 9 billion people soon to be living on earth were to consume resources at the present per capita rate in rich countries, world annual resource production rates would have to be about 8 times as great as they are now. All estimated potentially recoverable resources of fossil fuels (assuming 2t tones of coal) would be exhausted in about 18 years.

- If all 9 billion were to have the present US timber use per person, the forest area harvested would have to be 3 to 4 times all the forest area on the planet.

- If 9 billion were to have a North American diet 4.5 billion ha of cropland would be required, but there are only 1.4 billion ha of cropland in use, and this is likely to decline.

- Several geologists have recently begun to claim that global petroleum supply will peak within a decade, and be down to half the present level by about 2030. In view of our heavy dependence on liquid fuels this prospect is alarming.

- One of the most worrying resource problems is water. Demand far exceeds supply in 80 countries. Water tables are falling as we pump and use more water than falls as rain. In fact 480 million people are fed by irrigation drawing stored ground water in excess of the rainfall replenishment rate. How will these people be fed when the tables are too low?

- If 9 billion people were to use minerals at the present per capita US rate of use, estimated potentially recoverable resources then 1/3 of the 36 most used minerals would be completely exhausted in about 30 years.

- "Footprint analysis" indicates that the amount of productive land required to provide one person in Australia with food, water, energy and settlement area is about 7-8 ha. The US figure is closer to 12 ha. If 8 billion people were to live as Australians do, approximately 70 billion ha of productive land would be required. However the total amount available on the planet is only in the region of 8 billion ha.

- Atmospheric scientists have estimated that if the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is to be kept below twice the pre-industrial level annual emissions must be in the region of 9 billion tones. (Enting, 1994.) For a world population of 9 billion this means a per capita limit of 1 tonne p. a. Yet the present Australian per capita rate of emission from fuel burning alone is 16 tonnes, and when land clearing is added it is 27 tonnes!

The point which such figures makes glaringly obvious is that **we are not just a little beyond sustainable levels of resource demand and ecological impact – we are far beyond sustainable levels.** Rich world ways, systems and living standards" are grossly unsustainable, and can never be extended to all the world's people. We must face up to dramatic reductions in our present per capita levels of production and consumption.

Now add the absurd commitment to economic growth.

The main worry is not the present levels of resource use and ecological impact. The biggest worry is the levels we will rise to given the obsession with constantly increasing levels of production. The supreme goal in all countries is to raise incomes, "living standards" and the GDP as much as possible, constantly and without any notion of a limit.

Few economists or politicians would be satisfied with 3% rate of economic growth. If we assume a) a 4% p.a. economic growth, b) a population of 9 billion, c) all the world's people rising to the "living standards" we in the rich world would have in 2070 given 4% growth until then, **the total volume of world economic output would be 120 times as great as it is now**. Even if we assume only 3% growth in rich countries and the Third World rising only to the present "living standards" of the rich countries, the multiple is 14.

So even though the present levels of production and consumption are grossly unsustainable the determination to have continual increase in income and economic output will multiply these many times in coming decades. Yet it is impossible to get people or governments to even think about this "limits to growth" critique of our situation.

But what about technical advance?

Such enormous multiples rule out any realistic possibility that technical advance can enable us to continue the pursuit of growth and affluence while greater energy efficiency, recycling effort, pollution control etc eliminates the resource and ecological impacts. Obviously the "Factor Four" reduction Amory Lovins claims technical advance would make possible would fall far short of what was required.

The crucial assumption made by those who assume that radical change will not be required is that renewable energy sources can be substituted for fossil fuels. For a detailed argument that this assumption is mistaken see Trainer, 2003.

Think about global problems in these limits terms.

This "limits to growth" perspective is essential if we are to understand the most serious global problems facing us:

- The environmental problem is basically due to the fact that far too much producing and consuming is going on, taking too many resources from nature and dumping too many wastes into nature.

- Resource depletion is obviously due to producing and consuming at unsustainable rates.

- Third World poverty and underdevelopment are inevitable if a few living in rich countries insist on taking far more of the world's resouces than all could have. The Third World can never develop to rich world ways, because there are far too few resources for that.

- Conflict and war are increasingly inevitable if all aspire to rich world rates of consumption, and if rich countries insist on growth, on a planet with limited resources. Rich countries must support repressive regimes willing to keep their economies to the policies that enable our corporations to ship out cheap resources, use Third World land for export crops, exploit cheap labour etc. We must be prepared to supply arms to factions promising to rule in our interests, and to invade and run countries that threaten to follow policies contrary to our interests. Our rich world "living standards" could not be as high as they are if a great deal of repression and violence was not taking place, and rich countries contribute significantly to this. **If we are determined to remain affluent we should remain heavily armed!**

It is also a grossly unjust society.

We in rich countries could not have anywhere near our present "living standards" if we were not taking far more than our fair share of world resources. Our per capita consumption of items such as petroleum is around 17 times that of the poorest half of he world's people. The rich 1/5 of the world's people are consuming around 3/4 of the resources produced. Many people get so little that

malnutrition affects 1.2 billion people and more than that number have dangerously dirty water to drink. Three billion live on $2 per day or less. Conditions for the world's poorest are deteriorating.

This grotesque injustice is primarily due to the fact that the global economy operates on market principles. In a market need is totally irrelevant and ignored; things go mostly to those who are richer, because they can offer to pay more for them. Thus we in rich countries get almost all of the scarce oil and timber traded, while billions of people in desperate need get none. This explains why one third of the world's grain is fed to animals in rich countries while around 30,000 children die every day because they have insufficient food and clean water.

Even more importantly, the market system explains why Third World development is so very inappropriate to the needs of Third World people. What is developed is not what is needed; it is always what will make most profit for the few people with capital to invest. Thus there is development of export plantations and cosmetic factories but not development of farms and firms in which poor people can produce for themselves the things they need. Many countries like Haiti and Tuvalu get no development at all because it does not suit anyone with capital to develop anything there…even though they have the land, water, talent and labour to produce most of the things they need for a good quality of life.

Even when transnational corporations do invest, wages can be 15-20c an hour. Compare the miniscule benefit such workers get from conventional development with what they could be getting from an approach to development which enabled them to take all the benefit from their labour, applied via mostly cooperative local firms to producing the things they most need

The "Structural Adjustment Packages" inflicted on poor countries are now the main mechanisms forcing them to do things that benefit the rich countries. "Assistance" is given to indebted countries on the condition that they de-regulate and eliminate protection and subsidies assisting their people, cut government spending on welfare, etc., open their economies to more foreign investment, devalue their currencies (making their exports cheaper for us, and increasing what they must pay us for their imports), sell off their public enterprises, and increase the freedom for market forces to operate. All this is a bonanza for our corporations and for people who shop in rich world supermarkets; they can buy up firms cheaply and have greater and less restricted access to the cheap labour, the markets, the forests and the land…and the repayment of loans to our banks is the supreme goal of the Packages.

Yet for most Third World people the effects are catastrophic; (…see note 1 for many quotes from the vast literature documenting this .) Large numbers of people lose their livelihood, access to resources is transferred from them to the corporations and rich world consumers, and the protection and assistance their governments once provided is swept away. For the poorest people living conditions are significantly reduced.

These are the reasons **why many now regard conventional development as a form of plunder.** The Third World has been developed into a state whereby

their land and labour benefit the rich, not Third World people. Rich world "living standards" could not be anywhere near so high if the global economy was just.

Globalisation is rapidly accelerating these effects, since it is essentially about increasing the freedom for market forces to determine what happens; i.e.,, the freedom for transnational corporations to get access to markets, resources, labour, and firms previously protected for the benefit of local people. The effects are evident in accelerating global inequality. The corporate super rich are galloping to obscene levels of wealth. Less than 1% own most of the world's capital now

Conclusions on our situation.

These considerations of sustainability and global economic justice show that our predicament is extreme and cannot be solved without enormous and radical change in some fundamental elements in this society. There is no possibility of having an ecologically sustainable, just and morally satisfactory society if we allow market forces and the profit motive to be the major determinant of what happens, if we seek economic growth and ever-higher "living standards". We must face up to radical and extreme change in our systems, ways and values.

The Required Alternative; The Simpler Way.

Numerous people have discussed what would seem to be the inescapable implications from the foregoing analysis for the form that a sustainable and just society must take. The basic principles must be:

- Far simpler material living standards,

- High levels of self-sufficiency at household, national and especially neighbourhood and town levels, with relatively little travel, transport or trade. Mostly small, local economies in which most of the things we need are produced by local labour from local resources.

- Basically cooperative and participatory local systems,

- A quite different economic system, one not driven by market forces and profit, and in which there is far less work, production, and consumption, no growth…and a large cashless sector, including many free goods from local commons.

- Most problematic, a radically different culture, in which competitive and acquisitive individualism is replaced by frugal, self-sufficient collectivism.

Some of the elements within The Simpler Way are voluntary community working bees – committees - town meetings – commons - many small firms, ponds, animals, farms, forests throughout settlements – participatory democracy at the local level – a neighbourhood workshops – many roads dug up – "edible landscapes" providing free fruit and nuts – being able to get to decentralised

workplaces by bicycle or on foot – having to work for money only one or two days a week – no unemployment – living with many artists and craftspeople – strong community.

Advocates of the Simpler Way believe that its many benefits and sources of satisfaction would provide a much higher quality of life than most people experience in consumer society.

Many would say that the chances of achieving such a huge transition are remote, but that is not central here. The crucial question is given our situation, can a sustainable a just society be conceived in any other way than as some form of Simpler Way?

Over the past 20 years many small groups throughout the world have begun to build settlements and systems more or less of the kind required, many of them explicitly as examples intended to persuade the mainstream that there is an alternative that is sustainable, just and attractive. The fate of the planet depends on how effective this movement becomes in the next two decades.

Those who wish to contribute to the transition to The Simpler Way should firstly work hard at getting this perspective onto the agenda of public discussion. Most important however is helping to establish ventures such as community gardens and workshops which can eventually develop into the new cooperative, self-sufficient local economies that people can turn to when the mainstream runs into increasingly serious problems, such as petroleum scarcity.

R. L. Erickson, (1973), "Crustal abundance of elements and mineral reserves and resources", in D. A. Brobst and W. P. Pratt, Eds., United States Mineral Resources, Geological Survey Professional Paper 820.

Enting, I, Wigley, T., and Haimann, M, (1994), Technical Paper 31; Future Emissions and Concentrations of Carbon Dioxide, CSIRO Division of Atmospheric Research, Melbourne.

Trainer,T. (F. E.), (2003b), “Renewable Energy; The limits?”, http://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/tsw/D72.RENEWABLE.ENERGY.html

Note 1.
http://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/tsw/DocsTHIRDWORLD.html#STGRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT PACKAGES

For detailed material on these themes see The Simpler Way website,

http://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/tsw/