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Sustainability, round two: A new ecological radicality

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In their last “Current Column” from 19 October 2009, the authors - Lars Schmidt (DIE, Bonn) and Prof. Dr. Pierre Ibisch (University of Applied Sciences, Eberswalde) - called for a new, appropriately complex conception of sustainability. The vision of a carbon-free, solar-power-driven growth, they argue, is an illusion, a castle in the air built without reference to thermodynamics. The aim, their provocative thesis goes, must not to combat poverty, indeed, the paramount concern today must be to combat growth.

Bonn, 30 November 2009. Actually, we might think, it is not all that hard to understand: On Earth, a planet of limited size, with limited resources, growth of subsystems must, at some point, inevitably run up against limits. Not at all, the reply is likely to be, the Earth is an open system – energy is fed in from the outside, and this is energy that the sun has provided for billions of years, and in virtually inexhaustible quantities. The rejoinder: Man lives not by air and sunbeams alone. It is only plant-like organisms (as well as certain bacteria) that are able, thanks to photosynthesis, to make direct use of the sun’s energy. All animal consumers – including humankind itself – are dependent on solar energy made available to them indirectly, by plants, in the form of organic carbohydrates. Moreover, plants are fundamental components of the Earth’s ecosystems, and these latter in turn provide us with a multiplicity of ecosystem functions, creating the conditions we need to live. Mankind’s growth is stifling the world’s sound and functional ecosystems, and they, for their part, are increasingly curtailed in their ability to provide ecosystem services for growing populations with growing needs. We are consuming the very life-support systems on which we depend.

A society that, for a protracted period of time, overstrains and degrades the capacity of the ecosystems that sustain it will, one day, inevitably, find itself in the midst of a profound transformation process. In the extreme case this will lead to collapse, that is, the dissolution of structures and features that serve to define complex human societies: from political institutions to integrative mechanisms of culture, such e.g. as moral-ethical systems. Collapse or disaggregation of complex human societies – these are processes that are, or should be, familiar to us from history, although, thanks to the large measure of isolation of the societies concerned, they remained local or regional in scope. But today, in view of anthropogenic global environmental change, in conjunction with the intensive process of global amalgamation and the interdependency of nearly all subsystems of human societies to which it has led, it has become terrifyingly plausible that the result of any continued overstepping of the ecological limits set to us could be a lethal domino effect, a set of mutually reinforcing events leading to collapse.

The principal culprit behind today’s global sustainability crisis is our dominant capitalist development model, which dances mainly to the tune of (economic) growth. Regardless of economic model, though, growth is of course, and always has been, driven by the fundamental needs of a growing world population. However, capitalist economic development inflates to unheard-of levels the resource consumption of this very same growing world population. Growth is not only the condition for capitalism, it is its be-all and end all. While other prominent development models, like socialism, may claim to offer a more socially compatible alternative to the dominant growth paradigm, the socialist model is in no way acceptable in ecological terms. While socialist countries have shown a tendency to grow more slowly, they have proven far more inefficient when it comes to energy and resource consumption per unit of output.



Untrammelled by global rules, financial capitalism is now obeying rules of its own making. In the interest of the upper income brackets, the owners of capital assets, it is propelling the real economy to ever greater rates of growth, accelerating the degradation of ecosystems, and draining human societies of their the integrity. So are we, plainly and simply, victims of capitalism? But no, for who of us could claim to be immune to the allurements of a constantly growing access to resources, mobility, freedom?! Why, we can travel the world, purchase goods from all of its nooks and crannies, acquire knowledge virtually for a song, and when its is entertainment, diversion, that we need, we have only to plug into the burgeoning new media – what was once a privilege of the ruling elites has now, in the twinkling of an eye as it were, become a mass phenomenon. And its not only the fun we may have in consuming. After all, people able to underpin their status with certain symbols have always enjoyed privileges.

With a view to sustaining high rates of economic growth, we have, cashing in on globalisation, exported this model, making use of globally networked information systems to foment, worldwide, material desires that, at least to start out with, had nothing at all to do with cultural givens and now, and above all, stand in no reasonable relation to basic human needs. While it is true that, as early as in the 1990s, only 0.6% of those forced to live on less than one dollar per day benefited from global economic growth, even these losers of the system are now, thanks to revolutionary improvements in access to media and information technology, better and better able to gauge their situation. They are benefiting, in ways that can be expressed only in cynical terms, from worldwide economic growth and the globalisation that goes hand in hand with it by being spoon-fed with the hope that they, too, may be able to escape the misery in which they are forced live today.

Perversely enough, there is, in the developing countries, another development at work that serves to integrate poor people into the global system of economic and ecological degradation, though without doing much to improve their concrete living conditions. Neither the security of people's supply of food and other basic social services nor their physical and psychological health will necessarily improve when people are forced to transition from the rural poverty of subsistence farmers to the urban poverty of unskilled labourers. But urbanisation and industrialisation will force large and growing shares of the population to consume more fossil energies, e.g. for purposes of mobility or food preparation, in this way magnifying, as a general rule, the ecological footprint of those who are unable to benefit in any real sense from economic growth.

At the same time, it is the world's poorest people who are hardest hit by the negative impacts of economic growth – no access to drinking water, rising production risks, and so on, as consequences of climate change, desertification, degradation of arable land, and loss of food security. And the richer the rich grow, the larger the number of marginalised people. Following a – relatively brief – period of time in which the number of people affected by hunger declined, a turning point now seems to have been reached, precisely in developing countries, and despite continuing growth in economic performance and food production.

Growth reduces poverty, yes; but only up to a certain point. The various crises with which we are currently faced – biodiversity crisis, climate crisis, land crisis, fishery crisis... – clearly indicate that we can plainly and simply not afford to advocate growth as a means of reducing poverty in developing and emerging countries without at the same time reducing our own ecological footprint in the industrialised countries. Otherwise we would be nearing, with giant steps, the concrete risk of collapse or disaggregation of the anthroposystem. In the sense of an equal right to development, and with a view to considerations ranging from the moral-ethical to



security issues, there is no alternative to a massive reduction of the industrialised countries' ecological footprint.

And the idea that we can reduce our ecological footprint simply by reducing greenhouse gas emissions is a misunderstanding, purely and simply. A "Green New Deal," tangibly symbolised just about everywhere by wind turbines and solar collectors, is now to do the job. Regrettably, however, low-carbon development is not at all tantamount to sustainable development. While low-carbon development does serve to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the production of solar thermal power plants and wind turbines consumes large amounts of (fossil) energy and other natural resources. And looked at this way, low-carbon development will come nowhere near eliminating the growth problem and its drivers – population growth and capitalism/consumerism - and the need they necessarily imply to increase agricultural and industrial output.

While the inevitable consequence in agriculture is intensification or expansion of the land used for agricultural production, industrial production, and be it low-carbon, will inevitably increase the strain on water, land, and air, in this way posing a threat to human health and at the same time leading to growing scarcity of natural resources. Nor does low-carbon development do anything to stop or reduce rising water consumption and the overfishing of the world's oceans. In other words, what low-carbon growth means in effect is, the most part, harnessing alternative energies in order to be able to continue to grow. While growth and low-carbon development may well be compatible, this has nothing to do with sustainability.

The capitalist development model has enabled one part of the world's population to acquire, in a relatively brief period of time, virtually undreamed-of levels of prosperity. But we have, with unbelievable speed, now reached, indeed overstepped, the limits of our planet's carrying capacity and at the same time created enormous social inequality. What this tells us ultimately is that a growth-based development model is, in the truest sense of the word, no longer viable, even though there are still many people (and the strong and powerful in particularly large measure...) who continue to benefit from this system.

We for this reason need to take leave of our current model of growth: Efficiency and qualitative growth are simply not enough. But where are we headed, and what awaits us there? What, concretely, would the often-invoked post-growth society look like? And much more importantly, how are we to manage the transformation – and do so as gently and with as few serious conflicts as possible? Is a voluntary transformation realistic in the first place in democratic, liberal societies, or has the time come for us to start actively boycotting and sabotaging our own system, the system that furnishes us with the fun and the incomes we are supposed to think we need?

Seeking orientation in limits, boundaries, implies that there may be no taboos. We need to take a hard look at everything, without exception; indeed we have to learn to let go some of our most cherished "achievements." The path to a true sustainability is unlikely to be mastered successfully without a "new ecological radicality" - in the sense of "less old-style politics" and a consistent orientation to the functionality of the ecosystems that sustain us.

You will find more from the authors on the consistent application of this new ecological radicality in their third sustainability Column, set to appear in February 2010.