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### OPINION

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# Why a consumer society can't fix the climate

Ted Trainer

Policy makers throughout the industrialized world generally assume that humankind can solve serious global problems by adopting better technologies and regulations—without questioning the viability of consumer-capitalist societies. This faith is mistaken. The big problems, particularly climate change, are so serious that they cannot be solved without unprecedented and extremely radical change, including abandoning the obsession with economic growth, market systems, and high living standards.

The fundamental cause of the global problems threatening humanity is a grossly unsustainable level of over-consumption. The per-capita rates at which people living in rich countries are using up resources are far beyond levels that can be kept up for long or that could be extended to all the world's nations. Yet most people fail to grasp the magnitude of

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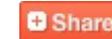
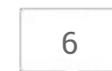
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the overshoot or its significance. The reductions required are so big that they cannot possibly be achieved within a consumer-capitalist society. Among the factors that policy makers are ignoring are standards of living, available land, carbon emissions, and economic growth.

**Living standards.** Many resources are already alarmingly scarce, yet a minority of the world's people are currently using the majority of these resources. If the standard of living in countries such as Australia and the United States were to be extended to the entire world's population, which is expected to top 9 billion by 2050, production rates for most resources would have to be *7 to 10 times* as great as they are now.

**Land availability.** The per-capita area of productive land needed to supply one Australian with food, water, settlements, and energy is about seven hectares (or 17 acres), according to [ecological footprint data](#) published by the World Wildlife Federation in 2012. But when the world population reaches 9 billion, the per capita area of productive land available worldwide will be less than 0.8 hectare. In other words, the Australian "footprint" is already *nine times* as big as that which will be possible for all.

**Carbon emissions.** In the four years since a team of European scientists warned that burning only half of the world's proven, economically recoverable fossil fuel reserves would [push temperatures well beyond the danger level](#), global emissions have only continued to rise. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's recent fifth report says that to have a reasonable chance of keeping global temperature rise below 2 degrees Celsius we must reduce net anthropogenic emissions to zero well before 2050. Despite rosy projections for running the world on [renewable energy alone](#), my analysis shows, in detail, that [replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy sources would not be affordable](#) because of the built-in redundancy and energy-storage capability that would be required.

**Economic growth.** These kinds of figures show that major global problems cannot be solved unless the wealthiest countries face up to enormous reductions in per-capita resource use. However, these countries are obsessed with *raising* levels of production and consumption as fast as possible, and without any upper limit. The supreme, never-questioned goal is continuous economic growth. But for the world's population to achieve Australian

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living standards by 2050, given an annual economic growth rate of 3 percent, total world production and consumption would have to be more than *30 times as great* in 2050 as they are now.

In addition to the problem of unsustainable resource and ecological impacts, there is the extremely unjust nature of the global economy. It operates mainly according to market principles, which means that scarce goods go to those who can pay most for them, rather than to those in greatest need. Even more important, in a market economy what is developed is what is most profitable in the market, not what is most needed. So the “development” that takes place in the Third World is mostly of industries that benefit corporations and rich-world consumers, rather than the billions of people living in poverty.

Simply put, it is not possible to have a just and sustainable consumer-capitalist society that provides all people with increasingly affluent lifestyles. Unless the fundamental structures and systems of modern society are scrapped and replaced, the problems they are causing cannot be solved.

The magnitude of the over-consumption problem calls for a radical alternative to consumer-capitalist society, which I label “The Simpler Way.” This would involve people organizing frugal but sufficient material lifestyles within mostly local economies made up of small farms and firms, using local resources and labor to meet local needs. There would be no economic growth, and the GDP would be a small fraction of its present level.

The biggest changes would have to be in the political and cultural realms, including participatory self-government to ensure that the local economy would be geared to providing a high quality of life for all. The Simpler Way could not be run from afar, so it is incompatible with big-state socialism. Most problematic of all, it could not work without the willing acceptance of frugal and self-sufficient lifestyles, strong collectivism, and a desire to give and to nurture.

These are not predictions, and they are not utopian dreams. If the limits are as coercive as I

have argued, a sustainable and just world cannot be conceived other than in terms of some kind of Simpler Way. The literature supporting this “limits to growth” perspective has become overwhelmingly convincing in recent decades, but the mainstream refuses to attend to it. Hardly anyone recognizes that the pursuit of affluence and growth is an enormous, suicidal mistake.

Even if the magnitude and nature of the change required was recognized, modern political institutions and cultural traditions are not up to the task. In our winner-take-all society there is little willingness to share the costs of the readjustment fairly or sensibly. It is not surprising, therefore, that proposals for relatively minor reforms are resisted fiercely. What, then, are the chances of making enormous changes such as phasing out all fossil fuel power generation?

It is likely that we will continue to accelerate toward catastrophic collapse. However, there are people working to build the beginnings of a simpler way in their communities, with the hope that these groups will be sufficiently well established to provide a base for reconstruction when existing systems begin to fail. There are small but thriving “[Transition Towns](#),” and movements known as [Voluntary Simplicity](#), [Permaculture](#), and the [Slow Movement](#). At this stage, most of these are only implementing reforms within consumer-capitalist society, but they provide the best hope for developing communities that will eventually take control of their own fate and build highly self-sufficient local economies.

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