

Come On!

Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker • Anders Wijkman

Come On!

Capitalism, Short-termism, Population and the Destruction of the Planet

A Report to the Club of Rome

by Ernst von Weizsäcker and Anders Wijkman, co-authors in cooperation
with 34 more Members of the Club of Rome
prepared for the Club of Rome's 50th Anniversary in 2018



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Preface

In the years since its founding in 1968, there have been more than 40 reports to the Club of Rome. The first report, *The Limits to Growth*, catapulted the Club of Rome, and the authors of *Limits*, into the global limelight. The book served as a shock to a world as yet largely unaware of the long-term effects of continued growth in what we now call the human ecological footprint. Aurelio Peccei, founder and then president of the Club of Rome, saw the responsibility of addressing the suite of problems facing the world, what he called the predicament of mankind, but was astonished to learn from the *Limits* report that these problems could all be tied to the consequences of humankind's desire for endless growth on a finite planet. The message from the bold young team at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was that if growth continued unabated at the present pace, shrinking resources and heavy pollution would lead to an ultimate collapse of world systems.

Certainly, today's computer models are much more advanced than the World3 model used by the 1972 team. Some aspects of economic growth during the almost five decades that have passed – like innovation – were not fully taken into account. But the central message of *Limits* is as valid today as it was in 1972. The world of today is facing many of the challenges that were anticipated in the 1970s: climate change, scarcity of fertile soils, and massive species extinction. Furthermore, the planetary social situation remains extremely unsatisfactory, with some four billion people living in very tenuous economic conditions or being threatened by natural disasters or wars. New estimates warn that more than 50 million people will be forced every year to leave their home and emigrate. Where can they go? In 2017, there are already 60 million refugees in the world!

Simultaneously, however, modern societies have acquired an amount of economic wealth, scientific knowledge, and technological capacities that should enable to fund and implement most of the transformations that *The Limits to Growth* saw as paramount in terms of creating a sustainable world.

We, the Executive Committee of the Club of Rome, gratefully acknowledge the merits and message of *The Limits to Growth*, as well as that of the other very valuable reports that have been written to the Club of Rome. Moreover, we remember the bold step taken in 1991 by Alexander King, Aurelio Peccei's successor as

president of the Club of Rome, who published *The First Global Revolution*, a book, coauthored by Bertrand Schneider, then the club's secretary general. In contrast to other reports, *The First Global Revolution* was presented as a report by the Council of the Club of Rome (the equivalent to today's Executive Committee of the Club of Rome). King and Schneider realized that the end of the Cold War opened huge new opportunities that could lead to a peaceful and prospering world. This optimistic book brought the Club of Rome back into the limelight, albeit less so than had *The Limits to Growth*.

The world is again in a critical situation. We see the need for a bold new beginning. This time, however, we believe it is particularly important to look at the philosophical roots of the current state of the world. We must question the legitimacy of the ethos of materialistic selfishness that is currently the most powerful driving force in the world, and we welcome Pope Francis's initiative in addressing a deeper-lying crisis of values, a central issue which the Club of Rome identified many years ago. The time has come, we believe, for a new Enlightenment or for otherwise overturning current habits of thought and action that only consider the short term. We acknowledge the strong approach taken by the United Nations in their 2015 formulation of the 2030 Agenda, comprising 17 Sustainable Development Goals to be implemented over the next 15 years. However, unless the destructive driving forces of purely materialistic economic growth are tamed, we cannot escape the fear that 15 years from now the world will be in an even harsher ecological situation than it is today.

From this perspective, the committee wholeheartedly supports the initiative taken by our current copresidents in composing and coordinating a new and ambitious report that addresses the predicament of humankind from the perspective of today's realities.

And now, a word of explanation for the surprising title. "Come on" has several different meanings in the English language. In casual language, it is often spelled "C'mon" and means "don't try to fool me." We consider this the meaning for Chaps. 1 and 2 of the book. We don't want to be fooled by the usual descriptions of the state of the world and the usual, corresponding answers, which can make things worse, not better. And we don't want to be fooled by outdated philosophies. Another meaning of the title is thoroughly optimistic: "Come on, join us!" This is the meaning for Chap. 3 of the book, which we consider an exciting journey of real solutions. Clearly, the architecture of the book comprises both meanings but in the indicated order. (To be sure, also some more meanings, including somewhat dirty ones, of "Come on" exist, but they have no relevance for us!)

June 2017. The Executive Committee of the Club of Rome.

Susana Chacón, Enrico Giovannini, Alexander Likhotal, Hunter L. Lovins, Graeme Maxton, Sheila Murray, Roberto Peccei, Jørgen Randers, Reto Ringger, Joan Rosàs Xicota, Ernst von Weizsäcker, Anders Wijkman, and Ricardo Díez Hochleitner (Honorary Member).

Executive Summary

The human-dominated world can still have a prosperous future for all. This requires making sure that we do not continue to degrade our planet. We firmly believe this is possible, but it becomes increasingly difficult to achieve, the longer we wait to act appropriately. Current trends are in no way sustainable. Continued conventional growth leads to massive collisions with natural planetary boundaries. The economy under the dictates of the financial system with its seduction to speculation tends to lead to widening gaps in terms of wealth and income.

World population must be stabilized soon, not just for environmental but also for compelling social and economic reasons. Many people see the world in a state of disarray, confusion, and uncertainty. Deep social inequalities, failed states, wars and civil wars, unemployment, and mass migrations have left hundreds of millions of people in a state of fear and despair.

The United Nations has unanimously adopted the *2030 Agenda*, which is meant to address these challenges. However, a successful implementation of the agenda's 11 socioeconomic goals could more than likely destroy its three ecological goals, which are to stabilize the climate, restore the oceans, and halt biodiversity loss. The only way to avoid this to happen would be by adopting an integrated approach to policymaking, leaving behind today's silo-based structures.

Chapter 1 of this book offers a diagnosis of the non-sustainable trends of our time, of what has been termed the "Anthropocene" – the age of human domination of all aspects of this planet, including its biogeochemical composition. A "prosperous future for all" requires that economic well-being be largely decoupled from the destruction of natural resources, especially in agriculture, and the pollution of the atmosphere. The book suggests that the legitimacy of full national sovereignty must be questioned concerning all matters that affect the entire globe.

Chapter 2 offers a deeper analysis, describing society's fundamental philosophical crisis at this juncture, starting with the encyclical letter *Laudato Sí* by Pope Francis. The foundations of today's religions and common beliefs, as well as our system of economics, stem from a time of the "empty world" (Herman Daly) and are inappropriate for our current "full world." Capitalism as we know it, with its

focus on short-term profit maximization, is moving us in the wrong direction – towards an increasingly destabilized climate and degraded ecosystems. In spite of all the knowledge we have today, we seem unable to change course, literally driving planet Earth to destruction. Ultimately, Chap. 2 suggests the need of a new Enlightenment, one that is fitting for the “full world” and for *sustainable* development. That enlightenment should embrace the virtues of *balance* instead of doctrine. We explicitly mention the balance between humans and nature, between short term and long term, and between public and private interests. Chapter 2 can be seen as the most revolutionary part of the book.

Can the planet’s beleaguered natural systems wait until all of human civilization has gone through the long process of a new Enlightenment? No, explains Chap. 3; we must act now. This is absolutely doable. We list an optimistic if slightly haphazard collection of opportunities that already exist: decentralized clean energy, sustainable jobs in every type of country, and a massive decoupling of human well-being from the use of fossil fuels, basic materials, and scarce minerals. Pragmatic policies including on the financial system are featured. Frame conditions must make sustainable technologies truly profitable and encourage investors to support long-term solutions.

The book closes with an invitation to readers and discussants to engage themselves in the many possible ways of creating a sustainable world society.

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This report is a multi-contributor book. We as lead authors very gratefully acknowledge the excellent contributions received, in draft form, from Nora Bateson (parts of Sect. 2.7), Mariana Bozesan (Sect. 3.13), Yi Heng Cheng (Sect. 3.17), Herman Daly (Sects. 1.12 and 2.6.2), Lars Engelhard (parts of Sect. 3.13), Herbie Girardet (Sects. 1.7.2 and 3.6), Maja Göpel (Sect. 1.1 and linking sections between the three chapters), Garry Jacobs and Heitor Gurgulino de Souza (Sects. 2.8 and 3.18), Volker Jäger and Christian Felber (Sect. 3.12.4) Karlson “Charlie” Hargroves (Sect. 3.9), Yoshitsugu Hayashi (Sect. 3.6.3), Hans Herren (Sects. 1.8 and 3.5), Kerryn Higgs (Sects. 1.9 and 3.11 and several other pieces), Ashok Khosla (Sect. 3.2), Gerhard Knies (Sect. 3.16.3), David Korten (Sect. 2.2), David Krieger (Sect. 1.6.2), Ida Kubiszewski and Robert Costanza (Sect. 3.14 and part of Sect. 1.12), Petra Künkel (Sect. 3.15), Ulrich Loening (essential comments on Sects. 2.6 and 2.7), Hunter Lovins (Sect. 3.1 and parts of Sects. 1.6 and 3.4), Graeme Maxton (Sects. 2.5 and 3.12.2), Gunter Pauli (Sect. 3.3), Roberto Peccei (Preface, Chap. 1, and structure), Jørgen Randers (Sects. 2.5 and 3.12.2), Kate Raworth (Sect. 3.12.1), Alfred Ritter (part of Sect. 3.5), Joan Rosàs Xicota (essential comments on Sects. 1.1.2 and 3.11), Agni Vlavianos Arvanitis (part of Sect. 3.6), and Mathis Wackernagel (part of Sect. 1.10). In all cases, we as authors applied modifications with a view of making the book coherent in substance and style. But without the valuable contributions, we would have been at a loss.

Kerryn Higgs, Mamphela Ramphele, Jørgen Randers, Alexander Likhotal, Ulrich Loening, David Korten, Irene Schöne, Mathis Wackernagel, and Jakob von Weizsäcker went through the trouble of looking at the entire manuscript or at least major parts of it and greatly helped us discovering weaknesses and omissions. Susana Chacón and Peter Victor made very important oral comments during a preparatory meeting on the book in May 2016. Verena Hermelingmeier accompanied the authors throughout the process of writing and helped in formulating major passages. Hans Kretschmer oversaw the quality of illustrations and where necessary secured printing permissions for them.

Toward the end, we engaged Holly Dressel as the main language editor for the entire book. It turned out she did a lot more than language editors do. She became a true contributor making the text a lot more readable and attractive, offering new phrases, and finding good references.

As authors, we are truly grateful to the members of the Executive Committee of the Club of Rome for accompanying and encouraging us in writing this book.

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Emmendingen, Germany, and Stockholm, Sweden, June 2017

Ernst von Weizsäcker and Anders Wijkman, Copresidents of the Club of Rome

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