GENEVA GLOBAL INITIATIVE

BACKGROUND PAPER

THE IMPEDIMENT

Thanks to genetic and cultural evolution we have become the earth's superlative limit jumpers – as reflected in the explosion of our numbers and the extent of the complex socio-economic systems through which we interact and sustain ourselves. But we still are a biological species. And, like all other biological organisms, we are wired to be fruitful and multiply until we can't; until we reach the limits of the resources our habitat can provide (food/energy, drinkable water, breathable air, space, etc.)

Contrary to our less sapient cousins, our superior cognitive capacity allows us to see, and even analyse in quite some detail, that we are part of a system designed to grow. The modern human system has evolved by using an abundance of resources: lush forests, seas and rivers teeming with fish, fertile soils and concentrated, portable, continuously available fossil energy.

Aided by technology, we have now burned our way through most of what has thus far been discovered while maintaining and expanding our demands. We can also see that the system is dependent on growth with no reverse gear provided, while the resource base is shrinking and we increasingly experience the consequences of our discharged waste. Yet our analytical abilities do not render us capable of consciously choosing to change course: to stop growing, to simplify our enterprise, or to diminish our impact.

For many of those who clearly see the path as unsustainable, it may appear that the logical, even advantageous, thing to do would be to reverse course—to reorganize,

scale down and "de-grow" our consumptive engine as a carefully managed, pre-emptive response. We already know that a contraction is looming; dictated not by any of us but by the laws of physics and the imperative of resource constraints. Why not approach de-growth on our terms rather than undergo the disorder of having them imposed upon us?

However, this only feeds into the illusion of human control. Unfortunately, our capacity for pre-emptive measures is undermined for reasons both structural and behavioural. Structurally, we did not design our civilisation. It is self-organised. Its dynamic, complex, globalized and integrated structure is both beyond our understanding and our control as it emerged as a response to external resource availability, always expanding to maximize its ability to continue.

Individually or as groups, we may have some potential to have impact in niches, but those niches do not exist in isolation: they themselves are sustained by the integration with the rest of civilization. Were we to attempt to 'de-grow' any given niche by reducing energy and resource inputs, we would encounter an array of destabilizing consequences, some predictable, some not, that would undermine even our ability to exact a meaningful influence on the whole, and even maintain the most basic foundations of human welfare.

This reflects the reality that economic and complexity growth are irreversible processes that lock in structural dependencies as they evolve. The past is always with us, just as continually reducing food and fluid inputs will never reverse an adult into a toddler.

Seen through a behavioural lens, a few enlightened individuals might opt for "voluntary simplicity"; small groups or communities can and sometimes do work together to reduce their ecological footprint. Yet it is doubtful that any large and complex society will ever voluntarily opt for simplicity and de- growth, as that would entail a series of rather unpleasant choices and equally unpleasant consequences that no nation is equipped to handle while remaining socially and politically stable.

If, by some sort of miracle, a society were to reach somehow the point of maturity, wisdom and harmony required to make such a conscious choice, and if it were to fully accept its consequences and suffer through them in a peaceful way, then no doubt other groups, societies or nations would immediately grab any unused resources either for their own growth or simply to sustain a little longer their deteriorating systems.

And, no doubt, parts of such an enlightened society would either jump ship, or try to game the system to push the consequences of de-growth onto others, or openly revolt against the new economic policy. Destined for failure, any "enlightened" change of course would rapidly be overturned.

However, there is also little doubt that the ideas of stopping growth and reversing course will draw increasing appeal, perhaps especially in academic circles, for being one of the few concepts that explicitly goes to the heart of our collective predicament. As society struggles, we can count on a flourishing of books, citations, networking, websites, conferences, movies, and social movements based around promotion of de-growth.

For all of their merits, they will most likely have zero impact on reality. There is plenty of precedent: "nature conservation," "sustainable development," "ecological economics," various "social justice movements," "climate mobilizations." etc., are all catch phrases with their adherents that have failed, or only marginally influenced the way modern development unfolds. All of them, laudable in their intent, are understandable efforts of the sapient minds to merely grapple with, and somehow effect change in the course of parts of the reality that surrounds them but no significant consequence on the general trajectory.

The implications of growing resource, environmental, and socio- economic stresses, and their interactions through and increasingly vulnerable civilization make a large-scale discontinuity, of collapse, more and more likely. That is, a rapid simplification of the complexity of our system with dramatically reduced capacity to use energy and other resources. We will experience it as a major disruption in the flow of money, goods, services, and resources upon which our societies have become dependent. Therefore, given our manifest inability to change course, we must learn instead to face impending collapse head on, understanding the socio-political environment as we near it and anticipating the major disruptions. We must urgently learn to think like risk managers.

We have a declining window of opportunity to set aside false hopes, understand our predicament and begin contingency planning. Wise actions now could have an immense impact on human security in times of severe crisis, and provide us with a firmer sense of how to proceed wisely into the longer future.

The most rational approach is to "brace for impact"—to install the airbags, train the crews that could inflate them, and to ensure that ambulances are fuelled up and waiting — providing ourselves with maximum life-support capacity during the perilous period of disruption and transition. Or, to use another metaphor: if we know that the ship is going down, then human survival depends not on its course or speed but the quantity and quality of its lifeboats. A design of these has to begin as soon as possible at international, national and local levels, even though those recognizing the need for them are astonishingly few right now.