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The environmental crisis - Who is to be blamed?

Commentary by Leon Hugo & Jean Hugo, 15 September 2025

Commentary

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1. INTRODUCTION

The environmental crisis is reaching a critical point. In August 2021, the United Nations issued a Code Red warning about an imminent 'no-return crisis', with global temperatures anticipated to rise to 3°C above that of the start of the industrial revolution – a situation described as the “environmental abyss” by the Secretary General (Gutiérrez, 2021). Subsequent scientific reports have reinforced this alarming outlook (Sakariyahu, 2024). Once the gradual intensification of environmental stress surpasses the resilience of natural systems, ecosystems will inevitably cross a tipping point, precipitating a rapid and irreversible collapse of living conditions worldwide.

2. HUMAN BEINGS VS NATURE

Nature has evolved as a balanced and resilient system. In the relatively short time that human beings have acted as temporary “ecological dominants”, this balance has been disrupted through resource extraction at a rate that exceeds nature’s inherent capacity to regenerate. With access to abundant resources (both matter and energy), humanity has pursued ever-increasing development, attempting to manage the earth artificially through technological interventions such as mining, construction, monocultures, fertilizers, irrigation, and so on. While renewable energy can be replenished, the same is not true for matter. According to the First Law of Thermodynamics, matter cannot be created (Schmitz, 2017). Ultimately, material resources will be depleted. In fact, the more additional energy human beings invest in exploiting nature, the faster this depletion becomes a reality. This trajectory is not sustainable. Nature itself will endure. What is at risk is not the survival of the planet, but the survival of humankind within it. There is, therefore, no “environmental crisis” for nature – only a human crisis.

2.1 The role of industry

The blame for environmental deterioration is generally laid upon industries that extract resources indiscriminately. Equally guilty are those who, in search of a growing system of economic development, allow soil erosion by overgrazing, water sources damaged by effluent from industries and cities, and techno-driven monocultural agriculture damaging the productivity of agricultural land. Mining and deforestation are also technical intensive activities that lead to widespread environmental damage. A comment by Dr Lilleheion on a plaque at the Christian Barnard hospital reads: “Whatever mankind can dream, research and technology can achieve.” As soon as shortage shows up, the production capacity of the earth is increased by means of extra energy input, fertilizers, irrigation, and more.¹ The system must be kept in production artificially by depleting resources and is thus ultimately unsustainable. Former US Vice President Al Gore is reported to having said that the actions of big oil companies amount to the moral equivalent of a war crime, the most serious crime of the post-World War Two era (Joubert, 2023). Such serious damage to nature is coined as ‘ecocide’ and should be regarded as the equivalent to homicide (Burak, 2020).

2.2 The role of governments

Despite harm being done to the environment, it is currently accepted that economies must grow in order to increase the standard of living. Governments

¹ The so-called Ratchet effect.

Emeritus Prof. Leon Hugo, Department of Geography, University of Pretoria, 68 Falcon Street, Durbanville, South Africa. ROR: <https://ror.org/00g0p6g84>, Email: Leonhugo7777@gmail.com, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-4745-417X>. *He has published 30 scientific articles and presented 70 conference papers internationally on sustainable land use and ecological applications.

Mr Jean Oosthuysen Hugo, Tshwane University of Technology, Editor/Filmmaker, EcoPlan cc, 110 Kruger Avenue, Selwyn, Roodepoort, South Africa. ROR: <https://ror.org/037mrss42>, Email: jeanhugo1000@gmail.com. *He has authored 10 publications on environmental issues and co-authored An ecological guide to sustainable land use in Southern Africa (2024).



Figure 1: Development or ecocide?

Source: Pixabay, [n.d.]

bear primary responsibility for the well-being of society. Legislation aimed at degrowth is unlikely to be pursued by democratically elected officials, as it risks diminishing electoral support. Although 89% of the global population favours stronger governmental action on environmental issues, this preference has not translated into increased political support for Green parties (Hertsgaard & Pope, 2025).

Although international agreements abound, legislation is failing in the drive towards sustainable living. The Club of Rome (Meadows *et al.*, 1972) first initiated international concern. In 1992, humanity started to seriously pay attention to the problem by way of the Rio Declaration (UNFCCC, 2015). In 2000, the UN member states adopted the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (UN, 2000) to save the earth. In 2012, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN, 2012) were accepted by the UN as a global framework for sustainability. But, at the 28th COP meeting in 2023, the leaders could not provide proof of substantial progress. Notwithstanding agreements, 3 billion people still live on less than US\$2 (R40) a day; not enough to buy a loaf of bread (Hugo & Hugo, 2023:16).

It is argued that industry is guilty of environmental degradation and that governments are not effective in addressing the problem. Does this imply that there remains no viable prospect for a solution?

2.3 The role of human consumerism

The real problem, however, lies with the driving force for resources by people. It is the urge to satisfy the 'supply:demand' equation that drives the exploitation of limited and sensitive resources with its concomitant degradation of the environment. Demand creates supply, and supply stimulates demand. The one drives the other – a self-destructive (one-directional) positive feedback system that is temporarily very productive but cannot go on forever on an earth with limited resources.

How can such a downward spiral be broken?

In 2018, the drought in the Western Cape emphasised the problem of how to convince people to adapt a resource conservation attitude. Stern warnings to reduce water usage did not have the necessary effect. With dam levels down at 30% of their capacity, and a dry summer approaching, the amount of water was limited to 50 li/p/day. The

financial and convenience issues (the realisation that they will be financially penalised and not have water to flush their toilets) made people change their attitude towards conserving water. The vast majority of the population will underscore the concept of conservation, barring it does not affect their convenience. They will react positively if the cliché NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) applies. This needs to change to NIMBI (Now I Must Become Involved) (Hugo & Hugo, 2023:12). This unwillingness to align with nature's constraints reflects a troubling and dangerous arrogance. If humanity is to collectively move toward a genuinely hopeful future, it is imperative to critically reassess the prevailing notion of such a future, which is erroneously equated with an ever-increasing standard of living measured in terms of material possessions.

At the root of the ecological crisis lies the unchecked pursuit of wealth, comfort, and competitive superiority. Mollison (1978) asserts that, in a finite world, the accumulation of wealth beyond one's needs constitutes a profound moral failing.

3. SOLUTION

Radical and unpopular measures are required.

3.1 Simplistic living

It is not industry and the capitalist system that are to be primarily blamed but the people themselves who are driving the demand for supply, to which the capitalist industrialists are only too willing to oblige with increased production and surging wealth. Mahatma Ghandi is reported to have said that the earth has enough resources for people's need but not for their greed.²

The challenge lies in motivating populations to reduce resource consumption and adopt sustainable living standards. Such changes would require radical measures unlikely to gain support, especially among affluent groups with

² www.environmentics.co.za

significant economic and political influence. The Cape Town water crisis suggested that widespread behavioural change occurs only when necessity leaves no alternative.

When people realise that they have no choice or rather, that they *do* have a choice – either to carry on living in denial for the next decade or willingly induce economic degrowth – they will have to accept and implement simplistic living.

Despite the move toward smart cities such as The Line in Saudi Arabia, living conditions in cities are deteriorating worldwide. Instead of pursuing ‘landscapes of hope’ (Hugo, 2025), measured by a rising standard of living, many urban areas are increasingly defined by environmental degradation, congestion, air pollution, homelessness, noise, stress, and social unrest. “The western world is burned out. Fast pace living, with multiple jobs moonlighting, needing a second car ... (and so on)” (Norman, 2025:19). Divorce rates are 23% higher in urban environments than in rural populations. The same tendency occurs in the case of juvenile delinquency (Gautier, Svarer & Teulings, 2009). With urban populations projected to increase by nearly 2.5 billion people by 2050, the challenge of providing sustainable living conditions is huge.

3.2 Eco-sustainable settlements

When living conditions become difficult, social unrest results which can devastate the economy. Alternatively, a localised privately driven Green economy will have to start timeously to develop, from bottom up, where individuals and local community groups will of necessity (realising the urgency), not out of moral conviction, but to have food on their tables, and to have public services rendered, organise themselves into self-sustainable local privately driven circular economies. By way of cooperation and by sharing expertise and other services, communities will need to connect with each other to form relatively independent neighbourhoods and towns connected to the

rural countryside for food, and to cities for sophisticated services (such as tertiary education, legal, technical, and scientific expertise and medical support) that they cannot produce in-house.

This implies that separate semi-sustainable and self-sufficient settlements will have to develop in rural areas. This might even be applicable to existing semi-urban and urban areas on the outskirts of cities as well as in new township developments.

Will it be possible to gradually, organically overturn the current flow of people to overcrowded cities into a reverse movement of inhabitants moving from the poor living conditions to the semi-urban rural areas, where sustainability and higher quality of life can be obtained, albeit with the implication of fewer facilities and less luxury living?

This process of self-determination and simplistic living based on reduced demand and local entrepreneurship is not so farfetched as it seems to be at first glance. This is captured in the saying by Mother Theresa: “We must live more simply so that others can simply live”.



Figure 2: Excessive wealth cannot be sustained next to poverty

Source: Credit left image: RedWolf, [n.d.]. Credit right image: Yusuf, [n.d]

4. CONCEPTUALISING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

Current urban neighbourhoods are characterised by homes separated by security fences with little communication between neighbours.

The *cliché* states: “It takes a village to raise a child”. The creation of smaller neighbourhoods with inter-communication between people as a necessity for success will have its limitations as far as comfort and conveniences are concerned, but it will increase social and physical safety and have much release from stress of modern urban living. This way of life will have its limitations as far as comfort is concerned but have less stress of modern urban living. Unless a significant portion would adopt it, the whole of humanity will in any case suffer. It is only through a critical recognition of the shortcomings inherent in our global systems, policies, and developmental frameworks – and through a conscious relinquishment of the anthropocentric notion of ‘development’ based on self-centred dominion over nature – that both individuals and corporate actors will begin to assume genuine responsibility for shaping a sustainable future.



Figure 3: Family-friendly modest living vs luxury mansion (Credit A Pexels)

Source: Credit left image: RDNE Stock project, [n.d.]; Credit right image: Vakhtbovycn, [n.d.]

Does this amount to a systemic impasse?

5. PRAGMATIC ISSUES FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

Small-scale regenerative food production in gardens, green belts, and open land around settlements, assisted by local entrepreneurship in technology, commerce, education, health services and other community needs, can go a long way in creating

sustainable living conditions. Food production will play a major role in the success of this development. Mollison (1978), the champion of permaculture, is well-known for the concept of small units being self-sufficient. Regenerative agriculture, including vertical farming, factory farming, and many other new techniques, can renew the food production cycle. Recycling of all resources will be crucial. Independency from regional electrical and water supply for light industrial workshops and homes is feasible. As mentioned, specialised service (e.g., higher education, legal, medical) will require connection with cities.

This argument does not call for the wholesale invention of a new urban paradigm. Rather, it proposes that strategic decentralisation may offer a viable means of alleviating the mounting pressures on contemporary urban systems and mitigating their current trajectory of unsustainable development. A synergy between first-world capitalist-driven economy and third-world way of life is to be investigated. By leveraging local resources and fostering community cooperation, such initiatives can create resilient, self-sustaining economies that are less reliant on external inputs. For meaningful application it is imperative to develop context-specific models grounded in rigorous, site-based scientific analysis.

Is this too radical a concept?
Does humanity have a choice?

6. EXAMPLES OF ECO-SUSTAINABLE SETTLEMENTS

Traditional (indigenous) rural communities used to live in harmony with nature with very little, if any, luxury items. This process towards eco-sustainability through decentralisation, mutual privately driven cooperation, facilitating a degrowth economy, is both feasible and already observable in various successful local communities. In South Africa, Transnet, Post Office, schools, and so on have been supplanted by local private

initiatives. Other services such as private schooling are successful. Road and neighbourhood cleaning and repairs are steadily taking over the municipalities' functions. Private community policing is a long-standing service, due to ineffective police services. The incorporation of retired citizens in informal schooling assistance and various other community services is growing. A system called time banking, skill swapping, or service exchange networks run on the basis that, instead of paying with money for services, people contribute their skills, knowledge, or time and, in return, they can receive other members' services. Such a system – e.g., the Cape Town Talent Exchange (CTTE) – has 7,000 participants covering a vast array of expertise. It strengthens community bonds and assists many who do not have disposable income. One can debate to what extent such life will be worse off to a modern capitalist “high pitch” lifestyle, characterised by luxury living and stress of keeping up with a lifestyle of affluence.

The well-known *Kibbutzem* in Israel are examples. A few others, of which there are many, may suffice.

The no-name ‘island’ of 16 people in Germany illustrates how people can form a cohesive interdependent

community, share conveniences and livelihood products and have hardly any contact with the world around them. They are off grid with own water source, limited medical facilities, primary educational and technical services.

The *ReGen Village* community (The Netherlands) with 203 houses is designed as a self-sustaining neighbourhood: energy, water, food, waste almost completely cyclical, car-free, pedestrian- and bike-friendly, a software operating system tech platform to manage systems (energy, water, food production, waste) using AI, sensors, and so on, permaculture, agroforestry, vegetable gardens, greenhouses, landscape designed to support fauna and flora (Urbannext, [n.d.]).

Chamois, Italy, with 99 inhabitants built a cableway as the only means of connection with the outside world (Errichiello, 2022:video).

A South African example of a near self-sufficient community is the town of *Orania*, where the population of 2,800 lives relatively independent from the economy of the rest of the country. It has its own local authority, no crime, police, nor prison facilities as well as a separate schooling system, and (limited) medical services. Hardly any produce



Figure 4: ‘No-name’ eco-sustainable village, Germany

Source: BBC global, [n.d.]

is imported. The people from all levels of society perform their own manual labour with a resultant unemployment rate of 2%, compared to the 34% of the country. It runs a local cooperative bank with its own monetary system, called the Ora. They have a strong focus on green practices. The sharing of facilities (e.g., a bicycle-sharing system) forms a link in reducing living costs. Volunteers carry out chores such as removal of trash and repairing roads and other infrastructure voluntarily for the good of the community at large. It is a non-declining small town that shows the potential of simplistic living and self-servicing.

These examples serve only as illustrations. An all-inclusive generic model for all settlements is obviously not attainable. Each settlement's design should be site-specific, based on various parameters such as its geographic, climatological and socio-economic conditions.

7. CONCLUSION

The core issue is whether effective circular economies, based on simplistic living, creating conditions where everyone can live a safe, healthy, and fulfilling life, can be established. Technically, the establishment of eco-friendly settlements is possible. The real challenge for the suggested system to succeed is to convince the large middle-class, capital-strong sector of the population, who represents approximately 50% of the population and who is driving the production market by their demand, to accept a realistic (less luxury) standard of living for survival and a higher level of quality of life. This necessitates a change of heart from capitalist theory, striving for unabated development, arguing that creating wealth is required to produce more wealth through job creation. Notwithstanding much charity support from the super-rich top monetary giants (1% of the population) which are known for excessive luxury living, art collections, classic cars, private jets, ocean cruisers, private islands, and multiple mansions, relatively

little of their capital reaches the needy by way of upliftment into survival mode. Instead of using the argument that wealth is needed to create jobs (e.g., building of luxury yachts), it should be for investing in agricultural and education upliftment.

It is required to contemplate a radical alternative hypothesis to resolve our problematic future. According to Fuggle and Rabie (1992:7), "[d]evelopments in environmental conservation must take place in ethical and moral realms just as much as in ecological and technical fields..."

But how can people have a change of heart?

Hypotheses based on spirituality are unacceptable in natural science circles. Yet, it is an axiomatic statement that the spiritual realm, where things cannot be touched or measured, and not visible to the human eye, is as realistic as that of the physical world (Vinney, 2024). As the reality of the spiritual realm cannot be denied, and 80% (approximately 64 billion) of humanity adheres to the conviction that a deity influences people's thinking and way of living, academics should be honest and willing to include spirituality in their hypotheses. Rorabacher (1973: 35) explains that, during the Middle Ages, the church became the state authority, and religious thinking played a significant role in shaping human behaviour and environmental perception. "Thus, religion became the most dynamic formative influence, undeniably spawning a characteristic world view, or environmental perception among the people". Communities of faith have historically been influential in mobilising public sentiment and action on various social issues. Can the global religious movements create that which the scientific community is failing to accomplish?

In the spirit of mutual love and cooperation, of companionship and shared values, there is hope for the future. If not, necessity will enforce human beings to adapt to the natural laws of sustainable living.

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