

"Growth is Going to Stop, for One Reason or Another"

Dennis Meadows - Author of "The Limits to Growth".... interview....

Juan Bordera – Ferran Puig Vilar

Runaway inflation. Double-digit. War. Increasingly severe energy problems. Earlier and more powerful heat waves. Arrests of scientists. Border massacres. Setbacks in women's rights at the - supposed - the peak of the Empire, taking us back 50 years... Just 50 years. Does all this have any connection? Actually, yes.

It is 50 years since the publication of one of the most important works of the 20th century, *The Limits to Growth*. That report was commissioned by MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), which, as early as 1972, warned that the planet had limits and little time to face the shock against them. That is why Dennis Meadows (USA, 1942), one of the two principal authors of the study, has been giving interviews for media such as *Le Monde* or the *Suddeutsche Zeitung*. It was an honour to interview him for CTXT.



Photo provided by the interviewee

JB/FPV: On the 50th anniversary of the report's publication, one of the standard scenarios of your model is still very similar and consistent with reality; in it, you predicted that growth would come to a screeching halt around 2020. Is this what we are already experiencing? Was it a forecast or a prediction?

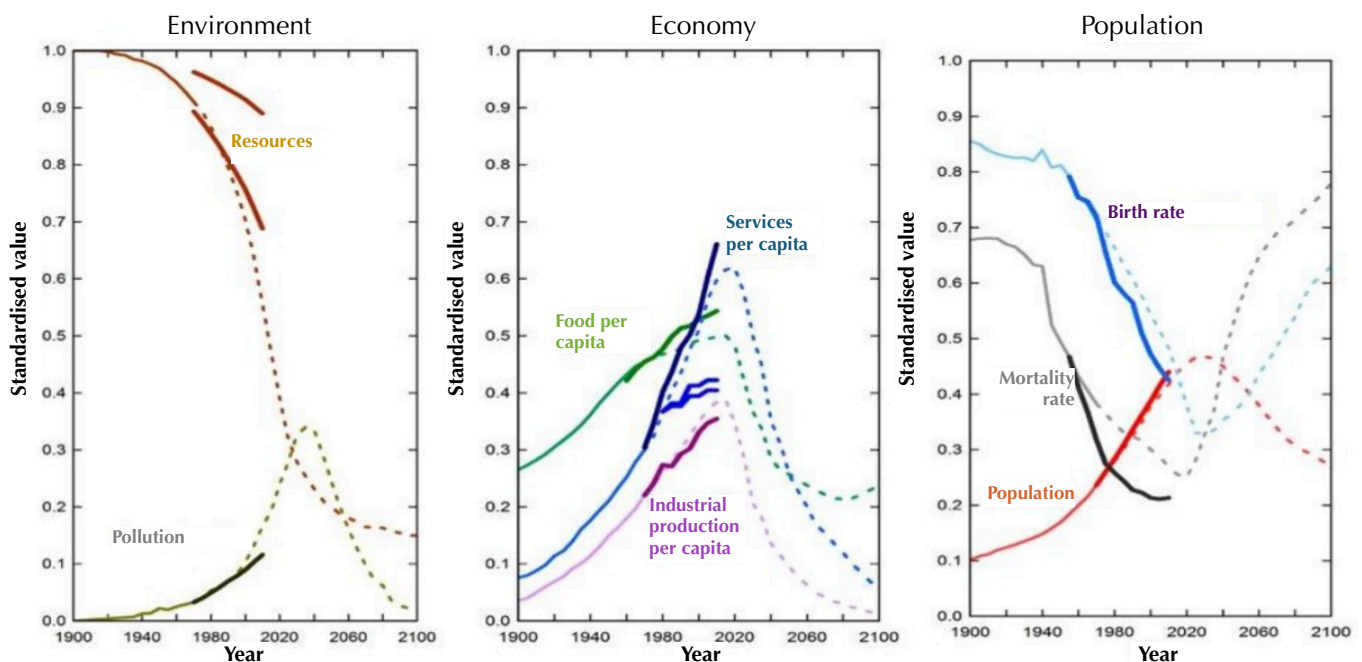
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True Democracy and Capitalism

DM: We didn't make predictions. We already said that it is impossible to accurately "predict" anything in which human behaviour is a factor; we did model 12 scenarios consistent with physical and social rules—twelve possible futures. One of them, the standard one, as you know, showed that growth was going to stop around 2020. Then all variables (industrial production, food production, etc.) would peak and in about 15 years, they would decline inexorably.

Is this similar to what we are experiencing now? I would say yes. The world is showing more and more consequences of a crash against the limits.

We took great pains, already in 1972, to make it clear that after the peak of any variable, everything becomes even more unpredictable because factors come into play that could not be accounted for in our model. Once we get to this point, it is obvious that we will be driven more by psychological, social and political factors than by physical constraints.



JB/FPV: I have heard you call climate change a "symptom" of what exactly?

DM: It is essential to recognise that climate change, inflation, and food shortages are sometimes seen as problems but are, in fact, symptoms of a more significant problem.

Just as a persistent headache can sometimes be a symptom of cancer, many current difficulties are symptoms of levels of

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material consumption that have grown beyond the planet's limits. Of course, symptoms are important. A headache deserves a response. However, an aspirin may temporarily make the patient feel better, but it

does not solve the underlying problem. The uncontrolled growth of cancer cells in the body must be treated.

You can't sustain the growth by, say, tackling problems one by one. Even if we solve climate change, we will encounter the next problem by continuing to grow, whether it is a shortage of water, food or other crucial resources. Growth is going to stop for one reason or another.

At this point, by delaying the necessary action, we can no longer avoid serious climate change. Whatever we do. But there are always degrees.

JB/FPV: The myth of progress, that technology will come to the rescue, is one of the most paralysing ideas for dealing with the real problem: degrowth is inevitable because this is not a technical problem. Perhaps, may we need a cultural, moral and ethical change?

DM: Yes, absolutely, that was one of the crucial points of our work half a century ago. Ideally, technology can give you more time, but it won't solve the problem. It can give you the leeway, the opportunity to make the political and social changes that are necessary. But as long as you have a system that relies on growth to solve every problem, technology cannot prevent you from overstepping many crucial boundaries, as we are already see.

JB/FPV: Despite your work's tremendous usefulness and importance, you and your colleagues were heavily criticised. This continues to happen to anyone who steps outside the dominant discourse: the "happycracy". Is there a social impossibility to talk about certain issues because they make you the doomsayer, the bitter pessimist?

DM: I was very naïve in the seventies when we launched the book. I was trained as a scientist, and I was under the impression that we produced unquestionable data by using the scientific method. If we showed it to people, then this would be enough to bring about a change in people's outlook and actions. That was naïve, to say the least.

There are two ways of dealing with these situations: in one, you collect data and then decide what conclusions are consistent with the data, the scientific way. In the other, very common, you decide which conclusions are important, and you look for data that fits and supports your "conclusions". This is what happens with climate deniers, for example.

I have not tried to win these debates between pessimists and optimists, with these kinds of people. When someone comes to me in anger and accuses me of whatever, I simply say, "I hope you're right", and move on.

JB/FPV: There is a tendency in systems, companies and people towards self-preservation, often based on short-term perspectives that do not allow us to move forward in the long term. How can we fight against these inertia and habits?

DM: Yes, the only way to manage this is to broaden the temporal and spatial horizon. And then see the potential costs and benefits in perspective. One example: the pandemic and the management in my country [the US] has been pitiful, very short-sighted. If you don't extend vaccines to the whole space and the rest of the world, they are not as useful.

How do you extend that time frame? With the next generations. Most people have legitimate, genuine concerns about the future of their children, nieces, nephews, and grandchildren.

JB/FPV: In Spain, we have had good news lately regarding degrowth: the first citizens' assembly for the climate has chosen among its 172 measures the need to educate people about degrowth, and several politicians - including the

Minister of Consumer Affairs - have made statements in favour of opening up this unavoidable debate, and the IPCC increasingly includes this word in its reports.

Are we closer to a social Tipping Point - as Timothy Lenton often says - or will we have to wait for the crises for this to become even more evident before we react?

DM: The answer to both questions is yes. We are closer to a positive social tipping point, but on the other hand, I fear that we will have to wait for the worsening of the crises to react. And it is even worse: if you had described our current situation to us in, say, the year 2000, we would have thought this was already a catastrophic crisis. We are the frog that does not jump out of the pot overcooked. Unfortunately, I think that is our situation.

JB/FPV: According to the [HANDY](#) model - another system dynamics model - a key parameter in causing collapses is inequality, which grows in parallel with the lack of trust between peers, another major reason for collapses. The design of our economic system makes both of them increase every year. And it makes it impossible to adjust to the limits because the elite - who are often detached from reality and therefore do not detect the alarms - are the ones who serve as a model. How to untangle such a mess?

DM: Truth is not found in a few equations. It is found in history. And our history over thousands of years shows that the powerful seek more power and have an easier time finding it because of their situation. It's a positive feedback loop. This is called "success for the already successful" in system dynamics. We rarely deviate from this phenomenon.

No one can untangle this tangle. I don't think any action or law can do that. In a few cultures, however, evolved redistribution mechanisms have been seen. In the Northwest of the United States, some tribes have a custom called "Potlatch", a ceremony in which the chiefs of the tribe, the richest ones, gave away part of their possessions - I'm simplifying it, I'm sure. In Buddhism, there is also a tradition of material detachment in many of its practitioners. But these are rare exceptions. In our world, the tendency is to accumulate power, and, as you say, that helps to be detached from reality. It is then that there ends up being a collapse - also of power itself - and everything starts all over again. It's a process that happens in response to limits. And inequality is growing in all countries.

JB/FPV: To what extent are elites anticipating the mathematical need to reduce inequality, or are they only concerned about their survival?

DM: Well, you can't really talk about 'elites'. Some elites are concerned and do their best to reduce inequality; some don't even think about it - probably the majority - and others are certainly working to make it bigger and bigger. There is undoubtedly no trend toward reducing inequality. And it is sometimes said that growth helps to bring wealth to everyone, which, seeing how growth and inequality rates have risen simultaneously, is patently untrue.

JB/FPV: Do you see more concern about the collapse of civilisation in today's power, economic and political circles, or are they still concerned with short-term profits as usual?

DM: I am not in power circles, so I can't answer that. I'm an 80-year-old retired professor. It is the 50th anniversary of *The Limits to Growth*, and except for interviews about a book that still arouses interest, there is not as much attention as it might seem.

JB/FPV: Given the spatial and temporal myopia with respect to boundaries, don't you think the modern worldview is obsolete, and could you suggest some philosophical ideas for a transition to a new cosmology?

DM: Thank you for imagining that I can have the capacity to do such things. That the current way of looking at the world is obsolete is evident just by looking at the news. Hardly anyone can be happy with the state of the world.

In a new cosmology, there is a vast diversity of philosophies and spiritual practices, many consistent with how the world works. Any that are going to work have to recognise our interaction and dependence with the natural world. We have already discussed the widespread myth that technology will lead us to overcome any obstacle. We see it with the climate challenge: there is this thing called Carbon Capture and Sequestration (CCS). Despite the irrefutable fact that it is cheaper, quicker and easier to reduce energy consumption, the tendency is to look for the technological solution that will allow us to do what we can no longer do without causing severe damage. It is a total fantasy. The best we can say about CCS is that it is an idea that will make a few people a lot of money.

JB/FPV: We're on a treadmill speeding up quickly. You know, those treadmills where you're running, but you're not going anywhere. That's what we're doing. As we're making bad decisions that throw us into crises that, by force, shorten our time perspective, everything becomes reactive as we accelerate. That, in turn, helps us make more bad decisions because we narrow our time horizons more and more. It is a vicious circle.

DM: I think we will see more changes in the next 20 years than we have seen in the last 100. I don't want what I'm about to say to happen. Still, I think it's most likely: that there will be significant disasters due to climate chaos and the depletion of fossil fuels, which will return humanity to more decentralised and disconnected states. Slowly, cultures will evolve that are more prepared for the situation. Only then, I believe, will an appropriate "new cosmology" emerge.

JB/FPV: Do you think a coalition of gifted elites could change the course of events?

DM: Gifted elites? Sounds like an oxymoron to me.

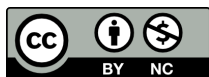


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- ❖ **About the author: Dennis Meadows** is an American scientist, professor emeritus of Systems Management, and former director of the Institute for Policy and Social Science Research at the University of New Hampshire. He is widely known for co-authoring the report *The Limits to Growth*. **Juan Bordera** is a scriptwriter, journalist and activist at Extinction Rebellion and València en Transició. **Ferran Puig Vilar** is a qualified Telecommunications Engineer and a practising scientific and technical journalist.
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