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PERSPECTIVE

Changing perceptions of barriers to sustainability: Population, consumerism and power politics

George Martine[1]

Abstract

This paper examines shifting perceptions of the primary barriers to global sustainability, focusing on three key dimensions: population growth, consumerism and power politics. While population growth has historically been viewed as a critical threat, its actual impact is mediated by unequal patterns of production and consumption. Consumerism, driven by globalised capitalism, emerges as a more decisive factor, entrenched in unsustainable development models. However, the most pressing obstacle today is the rise of denialist power politics, exemplified by the rhetoric and actions of leaders like Donald Trump, which undermine multilateral agreements and environmental policies. Drawing on scientific data, historical analysis and geopolitical critique, the paper argues that avoiding socio-ecological collapse requires urgent systemic and cultural transformations. It concludes that the narrowing window for effective action demands radical innovations in global governance and redefinitions of progress beyond material growth.

Keywords

Sustainability, consumerism, power politics, population growth, climate crisis.

1 Technical Director, Dhemos Consulting. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5876-2540; Email: georgerlmartine@gmail.com

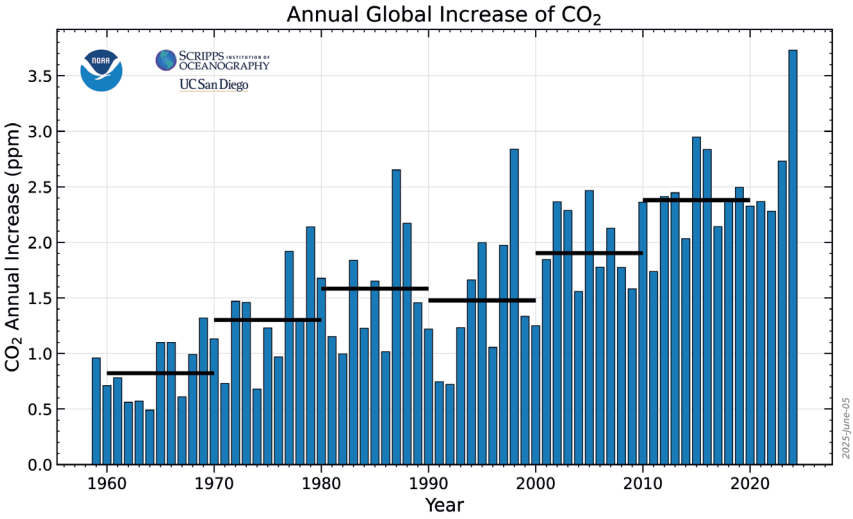
A vulnerable planet

Climate change and its implications comprise a matter of extraordinary importance and urgency for the future of human life on this planet. In 2024 alone, some 393 hazard-related 'natural' disasters impacted 167.2 million people; they caused 17,753 fatalities and economic losses of US$241.95 billion (Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters 2025). The scientific evidence regarding the origins, intensification and dire consequences of ongoing environmental transformations is overwhelming, despite the mystifying efforts of a powerful lobby that refutes such knowledge. The essential fact is that our civilisation is running on an unsustainable path – the increasing use of fossil fuel energy for the purposes of producing and consuming more stuff, in a process that is construed as 'development' (Hinkle 2020, *passim*). Consequently, as shown in Figure 1, the proportion of carbon dioxide in the Earth's atmosphere is growing steadily and was accelerated to new heights in 2024, when it grew by an unsustainable 3.75 parts per million, or about 50% more than in pre-industrial times.

In the short term, this process is multiplying the frequency and potency of 'natural' catastrophes – such as extreme heat, cyclones, tornadoes, hurricanes, wildfires, floods, tsunamis, droughts and pollution. Over the medium term, biodiversity loss, melting ice caps and sea level rises, declines in agricultural production, food and water insecurity, heat-related illnesses and the disruption of economic activities are all inevitable under the present course of our civilisation. Escalation of this devastating framework is expected to soon reach tipping points that will obstruct the planet's capacity to provide humankind an ambiance for a sustainable future. Moreover, the worst impacts will be felt on people in the world's more vulnerable regions, marked by poverty, inequality and instability. The need for global outlooks and actions aimed at reducing the threat of ecological chaos is eminent, but has not materialised into effective and viable policies.

Reversing this course and achieving sustainability is still possible by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and improving carbon removal technologies, but this would require a significant quickening of global awareness and effective action – commodities that are currently at a low ebb. Nevertheless, ignoring global environmental limits is extremely hazardous, given that several intertwined planetary boundaries are already under threat, as repeatedly warned by, *inter alia*, the Stockholm Resilience Centre (Richardson et al. 2023) and the Science Based Targets (2023).

Figure 1. The proportion of carbon dioxide in the Earth's atmosphere



SOURCE: NOAA VIA LAN ET AL. 2025

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Current science warns us that humankind has a small window of opportunity – perhaps two to three decades – for reversing the present course by taking significant steps towards sustainability and thus avoid passing 'the point of no return' (Hansen et al. 2025). Reputable gauges, such as the Ecological Footprint indicator – which estimates that we are currently using the planet's resources at a rate that is 1.75 times what would be sustainable – convincingly reiterate the fact that humankind is mining much more of the Earth's resources than is sustainable (Global Footprint Network s.d.). This process is created by, and further promotes, inequality. Thus, according to Schöngart et al. (2025), 'We found that the wealthiest

10% contributed 6.5 times more to global warming than the average, with the top 1% and 0.1% contributing 20 and 76 times more, respectively.' Huge carbon emissions from the richest segments of contemporary society are destroying the world we know, but the impacts are hardest on people living in poverty, especially in the Global South, who have the least resources to protect themselves (Khalfan et al. 2023).

This wanton and unequal exploitation of our planet's capacity undermines the resilience of the very ecosystems on which humanity depends and endangers the continuity of our modern 'way of life'. It is estimated that more than half of the human-made greenhouse warming is caused by deforestation and the burning of fossil fuels (Hansen et al. 2025). This is a dire warning, but it also points out a pathway of needed actions to reverse our unsustainable course. Nevertheless, as increasingly observed, powerful lobbies and decision-makers not only refute the scientific evidence but also promote the evisceration of even the most basic initiatives that can help shield the world from environmental chaos.

What are the main causes of our civilisation's charge towards this environmental debacle? Over the last six decades, mounting recognition of environmental threats has led to differing perceptions as to the main obstacles and pathways to sustainability. The primary concern of these analyses and actions have shifted drastically over time.

Starting in the 1960s, much attention was focused on the imminent and adverse impacts that *population growth* was bound to have on environmental resources. This topic remains high on the list of issues that are commonly discussed in any popular debate about the environmental crisis but, as will be shown here, the concern with growth alone does not necessarily lead to effective policies for reducing environmental stress in the immediate future, although it is critical for longer term human welfare.

Initial surges of environmental awareness also gave rise to a concern with throughput growth and *consumerism* as of the late 1960s. This showed that exploiting natural resources and energy while transforming them into wastes for the purpose of achieving economic growth constitutes the very core of our much-desired 'development' – and thus of environmental threats. Increasing

consumption is an essential stimulus for this generalised pursuit. The critical importance of these processes has been greatly enhanced by the globalisation of production and consumption.

However, the greatest menace to environmental well-being for future generations now stems from recent *power politics*[2] that negate both the climate threat and the need for effective action in the environmental sphere, while also annihilating the existing collaborative framework for effective global action. This paper will deal with the relative importance of these three threats to sustainability in the current historical moment.[3]

Population growth and size

Although all population dynamics – growth, distribution and composition – are relevant to sustainability, most policy attention has been focused on population growth. Other aspects of population dynamics and their consequences for the environment – such as the effects that the demographic transition, changing age structures and urbanisation have had on human society – are also important, but their analysis would take us too far afield in a paper that centres on the main issues that have delayed effective actions towards sustainability.[4]

Shortly after World War Two, social scientists observed a rapid rise of population growth in 'underdeveloped' countries and perceived this trend as an impediment to those countries' economic expansion, while also providing a favourable ambiance for the spread of Communism. Hence, in the context of the Cold War, geopolitical motives led to the imposition of population control measures as a means of promoting market-based development in such countries.[5] Some decades later, however, the recognition of a near-zero correlation between population growth and *per capita* economic growth eventually deflated such

2 Power politics' here refers to efforts aimed at prioritising self-interests to the detriment of others and to the disposition to use aggression to protect such interests. For a contemporary discussion see Goddard et al. (2024), *passim*.

3 This text builds on several years of research and action on various aspects of sustainability. A list of main articles produced can be found at https://docs.google.com/document/d/1_v9fWC2dCf4dqsWF28UtGoUSsCxGTBZy/edit?tab=t.0.

4 For a preliminary discussion of the relations between the composition and spatial distribution of population on the one hand and environmental issues on the other, see Martine (2009).

5 Cf. Martine (2024) for a review of the trajectory of population control policies.

aggressive stances towards the reduction of population growth (Bongaarts and Hodgson 2022: 85).

Meanwhile, the linkages between population and environment in the context of development began to receive considerable scholarly and public attention, leading to the popular belief that demographic growth needed to be sharply curtailed in order to promote sustainability. Biologists and ecologists began to take over the neo-Malthusian flag in the 1960s, and have continued to draw attention to the detrimental impacts of population growth on sustainability. It is true that the world's population has grown dramatically, from around 2.5 billion to 8.2 billion between 1950 and 2025. Moreover, it is undeniable that, *ceteris paribus*, a larger population imposes greater constraints on nature's resources. Nevertheless, the apparently obvious correlation between population growth and environmental impacts is anything but direct (Bradshaw and Brook 2014).

One popular formula, which intended to encapsulate the threats posed by population growth (Ehrlich and Holdren 1971), suggested that:

Environmental Impact = Population x Affluence x Technology

This had the merit of pointing out that all three main factors – population, affluence and technology – have to be considered simultaneously in appraising the factors underlying environmental change. Nevertheless, this formulation failed to consider that each element in this equation, as well as the interactions between them, depend on a much more complex constellation of social, political, economic and institutional factors (*inter alia*: Lutz 1994; McNicoll 1995; Martine 1996).

The opinion that environmental crises stem from 'overpopulation' in low-income countries is still rampant, especially in the popular parlance. Attacking environmental issues from a demographic growth standpoint is intuitively appealing as it appears immensely easier than trying to deal with the causes of global environmental damage that are rooted in our very model of civilisation. There is a danger that 'population' ends up being a scapegoat – an offender that is readily associated with 'irrational' or 'outdated' reproductive patterns, and thus one that could apparently be dealt with much more easily than other more complex geopolitical factors (Martine 2025). Persistence of this simplism detracts

political attention from the structural dynamics that underlie our trajectory towards unsustainability. At the same time, the issue of population growth continues to generate highly-charged political emotions across countries and, consequently, it tends to be ignored in multilateral initiatives such as the IPCC and IPBES, as well as in major environmental charities such as Greenpeace and Oxfam.

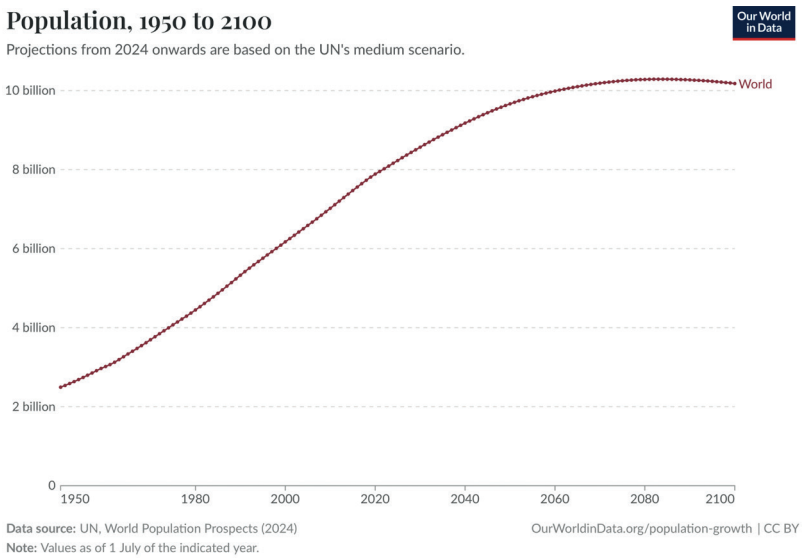
On the other hand, economists have argued that the impact of population/environment relations is primarily dependent on the concrete politico-economic realities that mark the current development scenario in specified contexts, rather than on population growth rates *per se*. Such debates between optimists and pessimists as to the relative consequences of population dynamics on the economy and on the environment were intensified and persist to this day. Population growth continues to attract attention, but the context is now different. Instead of being perceived as a hindrance to economic growth, it is now viewed primarily in relation to its impacts on environmental issues. Ultimately, though the advantage of a smaller population for environmental welfare is intuitively insightful, a systematic concern with population size as a major cause of environmental chaos does not generate effective policies in this domain, for three reasons.

First, disparities in the respective timing of population growth and environmental dynamics are critical. Thus, on the one hand, major environmental problems need to be resolved in the short term in order to avoid ecological chaos. On the other, reducing population growth, even under draconian policies, is a longer-term process that is not amenable to short-term results, due to the forces of demographic inertia wherein the demographic dynamics of previous generations inevitably continue to influence current rates of growth (Martine 2025). In this context, if one is optimistic about the world's chances of resolving its most critical environmental threats in the relatively short term, then reducing population growth rates now is crucial for long-term human welfare. A more pessimistic outlook on the probable ineffectiveness of environmental measures to be adopted before reaching irreversible tipping points would suggest the need to focus greater attention on other structural factors now; otherwise, 'long-term human welfare' could be very problematic.

Second, as shown in Figure 2, global growth rates have already undergone a remarkable structural decline from a peak of 2.3 per cent per year in 1963 to less

than 1 per cent today. Moreover, they are unlikely to experience a resurgence of growth in the foreseeable future. On the contrary, the combination of ongoing fertility declines, even in poor and high-fertility countries, the escalation of widespread political and economic strife, the increasing frequency and intensity of environmental disasters, and the predicted onslaught of further global pandemics, would suggest even further 'natural' declines in global demographic growth rates in the proximate future.

Figure 2. Population growth rate, 1950 to 2100



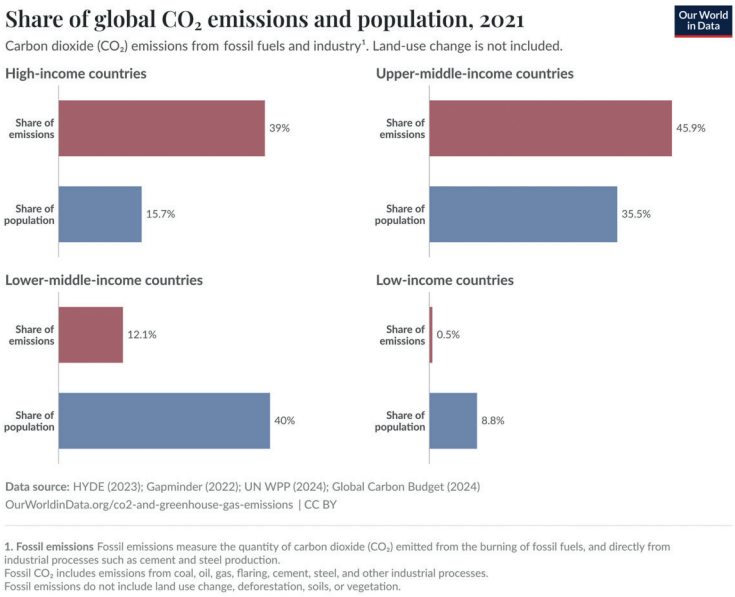
SOURCE: OUR WORLD IN DATA – RITCHIE ET AL. 2023 (CC BY 4.0)

Third, and more importantly, the actual impact of population groups on the environment is determined, not by sheer numbers, but by their relative patterns and levels of production and consumption associated with the current model of development. High population growth rates are typical of poorer population groups that have a smaller *per capita* ecological footprint than higher income countries; they do not consume, pollute or degrade in the manner, or at the rate, of the more developed countries. As shown in Figure 3, higher levels of CO_2 emissions are associated with high income and low fertility population

groups across the globe. Nevertheless, as the ecological footprint of poor countries enlarges through highly pursued 'development', their population size, accumulated during high fertility regimes, will also significantly impact global sustainability.

Ultimately, whether or not the world´s population stabilises at 7 or 10 billion, the challenge of how to achieve a high quality of life for all, or even for a majority of all peoples, given ongoing conditions of environmental degradation and inequality, will be extremely difficult (O'Neill et al. 2018). Reducing population growth is critical for longer term sustainability but it is a long-term project, even under more drastic efforts. Population and consumption are inseparable in environmental impact, but only present action can change present consumption and future population size and hence future total consumption or throughput.

Figure 3. Global CO_2 emissions by income group



SOURCE: OUR WORLD IN DATA – RITCHIE ET AL. 2023 (CC BY 4.0)

It is evident that past historical fertility patterns exert a significant influence on contemporary emission levels; however, birth control measures do not retroactively alter population size or its environmental impact (Martine 2025). For instance, despite the implementation of rigorous fertility reduction initiatives and the achievement of more moderate *per capita* emissions, China's current emissions exceed those of the United States and the European Union combined. Likewise, India, while exhibiting relatively low *per capita* emissions, ranks as the third highest in total emissions globally.

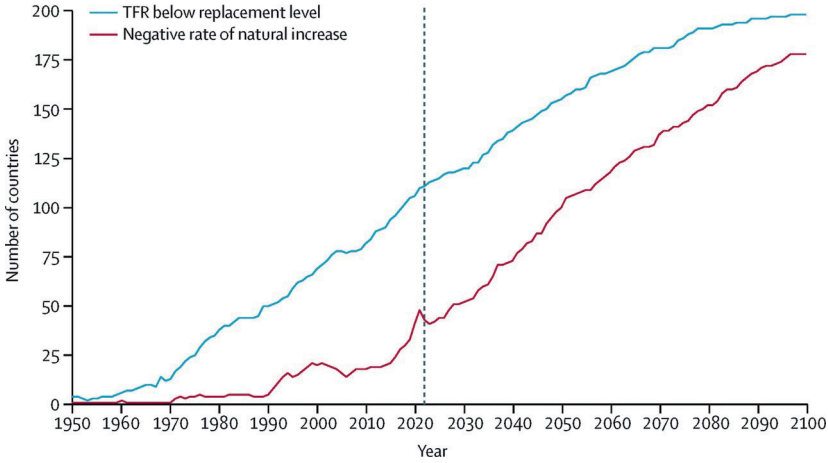
This situation underscores the critical point that current population growth rates will only be pertinent to long-term sustainability IF society manages to decouple development from resource consumption in the coming decades. However, the prospects for achieving such a decoupling in the near future appear minimal given the existing geopolitical circumstances.

The challenges of recent demographic trends

It is critical to note that while the relations between population growth and the environment continue to be significant, they are presently taking on, for pragmatic and political reasons, a very different configuration from that in earlier periods of rapid demographic growth. As shown in Figure 4, the trend towards below-replacement fertility rates is now being generalised across a wide range of countries, bringing with it serious challenges in terms of a shrinking labour force, higher dependency ratios, and stress on health and social security programs.

This evolution of population growth trends has sparked a different set of concerns and priorities in recent times. To address the challenges associated with declining birth rates, numerous developed nations are actually implementing *pro-natalist* policies. So far, these initiatives have had limited success, due to a multitude of factors – including the disenfranchisement of women, the significant opportunity costs associated with raising children in contemporary society, and the enhanced access to effective reproductive health information and practices. Observation of such negative rates of natural increase in more developed countries also brings into play another demographic dynamic of enhanced importance – namely, international migration.

Figure 4. Number of countries and territories with TFR below replacement level (2·1) and with a negative rate of natural increase, 1950–2100



SOURCE: GBD 2021 FERTILITY AND FORECASTING COLLABORATORS 2024

Indeed, in view of these global disparities in population growth rates, international migration from countries with high fertility rates could indeed serve to mitigate the population declines experienced in those with low fertility rates, thus generating substantial advantages for both sending and receiving nations in coming decades. As articulated in the *Wilson Quarterly*, 'global migration provides unequivocal economic benefits to receiving and sending countries, and to the migrants, with few if any of the cultural, criminal, or other alleged costs often cited against it' (Goldstone 2024). Nonetheless, as cautioned in a recent article in *The Lancet* (GBD 2021 Fertility and Forecasting Collaborators 2024), 'this approach will only work if there is a shift in current public and political attitudes towards immigration in many lower-fertility countries and if there are sufficient incentives in place for people to migrate from higher-fertility countries … This underscores the importance of developing ethical and effective immigration policies with global cooperation.'

Unfortunately, such a critical shift in mindsets and policy appears highly improbable in the near future, given the current rise of ethnocentrism and xenophobia in

countries that are most affected by fertility and growth declines. The reluctance of most developed countries to embrace immigration, despite declining growth and labour shortages, is remarkable. For instance, in the USA, Gallup polls indicate that, as recently as 2020, some 77 per cent of the American populace viewed immigration positively (ibid.); however, this perspective has shifted dramatically during the last few years due to the incendiary rhetoric and actions of right wing political figures who have somehow convinced a discontented electorate that the presence of immigrants is what prevents them from reaching deserved levels of prosperity.

Simultaneously, the prospect of a rapid global decline in fertility has recently enveloped issues of birth control within ultra-conservative and racially sensitive political settings, such as in the contemporary USA. Within this framework, more stringent policies restricting access to reproductive health services and abortion have been instituted with the ultimate goal of increasing fertility rates – among white people. Yet, this could well defeat its own purpose since restricted access to fertility control will primarily affect lower classes, in which non-white groups have a higher relative participation. Pro-natalist advocates now assert that larger families are beneficial not only for individuals but also for societal well-being. Elon Musk, a prominent proponent of this ideology who has, so far, sired some 14 children with multiple partners, aligns with thinkers like Simon (1981), who argue that there are no environmental constraints to economic growth and that perceived scarcity is illusory since human ingenuity within a market framework can address all environmental challenges.

Such a reaction to the alleged economic and racial disadvantages posed by the observed decline of birth rates among white women represents a significant societal regression. Historically, declining fertility rates have been associated with enhanced women's autonomy, increased education and labour force participation, as well as the overall advancement of gender equality. This fundamental progress stands at risk of being undone in the current political landscape. Attention to reproductive health is essential for women's health and gender equity, but should not be perceived as an instrument of population control. Moreover, when combined with negationist attitudes toward environmental issues, these attacks on the ability of women and families to control fertility precipitate a reversal of the broader concern with the adverse environmental impacts of unchecked population growth.

The concern with decreasing birth rates in the USA and other developed countries also brings to the fore another important demographic trend: longevity. People all over the world are living longer than before and mortality is increasingly concentrated in older age groups. Yet, basic approaches to dealing with the ageing process have not evolved in accordance to its relevance. Formal retirement ages remain well below productive life expectancy, thereby stressing social security and pension plans while also foregoing the contributions that a trained and experienced labour force could still make. On a world level, more than one third of the population is already aged over 60, with this proportion being even greater in richer countries. As recently argued by Alves (2025), this overall trend could also be perceived in positive terms. Thus, 'if the growing proportion of healthy elderly people is accompanied by social inclusion and their active and collaborative insertion in society, the elderly population will no longer be seen as a burden and their contribution will be recognised' (author's translation).

In summary, population size and growth continue to represent a significant variable in the population/environment equation, but 'population' should not be considered as a simple homogenic unit and 'population dynamics' do not constitute a self-standing influence. The advantages and disadvantages of growth are dependent on other socioeconomic and political configurations that are differentially perceived in developed and undeveloped national contexts. In any event, as argued above, with the exception of wars and cataclysms, growth and size are clearly not amenable to drastic policies or radical changes over the short term.[6] The probable evolution of demographic size is likely to be governed by the broader sweep of variable societal changes, rather than by the will of pro-natalists or controlists.

Within this framework, the process of aging constitutes another demographic dynamic that – along with immigration – should eventually be perceived in a new context, handled with an enlightened vision and transformed into a positive trend for humankind. As concerns fertility decline, it would seem probable that comprehensive societal changes prompted by long-term low fertility will eventually refocus the cultural significance of reproduction and reduce its cost for childbearing, in what might be termed as a process of 'long-term social

6 Lump sum monetary stimuli, such as those currently being offered by the Trump administration, have negligible impacts since they do not even begin to cover the costs of having and bringing up children.

rationality'.[7] Recent history has shown that wars, disasters and high mortality do tend to increase fertility levels temporarily. The same general stimuli could eventually change attitudes to childbearing and/or diminish the resistance to immigration in the context of a prolonged demographic dearth in low-fertility countries. The provision of robust social, healthcare and day-care systems, as well as cheaper housing and advanced social security capable of reversing the socio-economic costs of bearing and raising children, could eventually help to overturn the current declining birth rates, in the context of changing societal attitudes. This will not occur if, as in the current context of the USA, safety nets are systematically removed.

Throughput growth and consumerism

Modern capitalism is driven by humankind's increasing desire for material goods. As summarised by Higgs, 'Over the course of the 20th century, capitalism preserved its momentum by molding the ordinary person into a consumer with an unquenchable thirst for more stuff' (Higgs, s.d. online). Encouraging heightened levels of consumption to stimulate production lies at the heart of our development paradigm. Over the past century, the principal function of 'development' has been to safeguard, enable, implement, justify and defend economic growth and poverty alleviation through the widespread proliferation of an unsustainable model known as throughput growth – which entails the amplified extraction of materials and energy resources from the environment to manufacture goods and provide services (Daly and Cobb Jr. 1989; Goodland 1992). This paradigm is increasingly rooted in a dominant consumer culture, which not only exacerbates the drivers of climate change but also blinds societal understanding of its causes and appreciation of its effects, thus delaying the enactment of essential policy responses to mitigate its impacts.

The practice of throughput growth emerged in the early twentieth century, particularly among entrepreneurs in the United States, and was later emulated

7 As pertinently observed by the historian Toynbee, civilisations continue to grow only when they resolve one challenge and are met by another, in a continuous cycle of 'Challenge and Response'. Reduced fertility is the response to a radical shift in the value of children in modern-day society. It remains to be seen, given the current rapidly changing scenario, how and when societies will move towards reassessing progeniture and ageing, and whether adequate responses will be implemented in good time to meet the urgent threat of environmental chaos.

throughout the capitalist world. By the end of World War Two, the U.S. had established a vast industrial complex to support the war effort, and it was perceived that the abrupt dismantling of this system would threaten massive unemployment and economic recession. In response, strategies quickly evolved that prioritised mass consumption via throughput growth, thereby sustaining and expanding the efficient wartime productive framework (Assadourian 2010).

Propelled by innovative advertising campaigns and further energised by the formula of planned obsolescence – wherein the lifespan of a wide range of products and fashions is deliberately reduced in order to further accelerate production and consumption – throughput growth soon became the primary engine of the American economy. As early as 1955, Victor Lebow already remarked, 'Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption … We need things consumed, burned up, replaced and discarded at an ever-accelerating rate.' (Lebow 1955 *apud* Higgs s.d. online).

The success of consumerism as the core motivation of economic growth was quickly propagated on a world scale. It gave form, content and vigour to economic life and thereby promoted one of the greatest socioeconomic transformations in history. Its attractiveness was magnified through massive advertisement campaigns that convinced people to 'buy more stuff' than was really needed. In the process, consumerism eventually redefined the main objective of humankind's life pursuit. With increasing power and scope since the mid-twentieth century, this system has been inducing people to consume and thereby define the contours of their search for happiness, as well as the determinants of their status as individuals or social groups.

In short, the struggle to achieve happiness and social status through consumerism motivates people to increase their income in order to achieve contentment and social acceptability through the purchase of goods and services. The irony is that, although consumerism leads people to believe that well-being and success stem from ever higher consumption levels, they are never actually satiated in their quest.[8] That is, consuming more does not necessarily mean a better quality of life.

8 For a classic psychological assessment of buying for pleasure, see Kasser (2002).

The marginal utility of income tends to diminish and increased consumption does not guarantee happiness (Easterlin 2001; Assadourian 2010; Helliwell, Layard and Sachs 2012).

In retrospect, one might ask – how did this unsustainable model for modern civilisation attract support and become dominant so swiftly? The fact is that the motivation for consumption, which works effectively at the individual level, also has a strong capacity for mobilisation at the aggregate level. This explains its strength on the agenda not only of large corporations, but also of national governments and international development agencies. The very road to development and well-being proposed by governments and multilateral development agencies is to grow through ever-greater exploitation of natural resources in order to fulfil ever-increasing demands.

On the plus side, the success of consumerism as the central driver of our development paradigm has favoured job creation, poverty reduction and the widespread achievement of material well-being at previously unimagined levels worldwide. Nevertheless, the consumer culture, supported by the institutional machinery created around it to stimulate the production process and the generation of material wealth, compromises the planet's resources. Moreover, it has become so deeply rooted in the values and practices of our civilisation that it ends up manipulating people's behaviour without their noticing. As a result, awareness of the negative environmental consequences of the dominant consumerist culture is limited among the general populace, and unwelcome to policymakers. Consequently, negationist propaganda campaigns continue to deaden concern and comprehension of current global environmental menaces, while also encouraging the eradication of effective initiatives in this domain, as will be observed in the next section of this paper.

Ultimately, our development paradigm is not sustainable in the medium and long term, as has been amply demonstrated. Yet, given the undeniable success of this model in providing material welfare, no government, rich or poor, has dared to take effective measures that could threaten the continuation of this spiral. In the current context, attacking throughput growth invites political disaster. Suggesting cutbacks in consumption, when 'happiness' itself is predicated on having access to more goods, is an extremely unpopular approach and threatens

the very foundations of 'progress' and 'well-being' as they are defined today. It is no wonder that governments from all over the world, including 'leftists', defend the 'development' that will allow the population of their country to consume more and thereby raise its GNP – the widely-accredited indicator of success. Even international climate conferences hesitate to put a finger on this global environmental sore spot.

In the absence of a dramatic change in the concept of development and of the consumer culture that sustains it, the expansion of this system clearly catalyses a global ecological crisis.[9] This approach is devastating for the planet since it relies on the expanded farming of natural resources and the disposal of a greater volume of wastes, thereby generating cycles of increasingly grave environmental threats. The constant increase in consumption resulting from this quest boosts production and economic growth, generating, in the process, the various ecological problems that are emerging today. Thus, as aptly stated by Wilk (2017) – 'Without consumerism, there is no environmental crisis'.

Liberating humanity from the compulsion to consume unnecessarily would drastically alter the current trajectory of climate change. This will not be easy to achieve since consumerism is THE dominant culture of the twenty-first century, and since it is conducted, aided and abetted by THE dominant economic and political model. The real advances in material living standards achieved in the world by way of throughput growth prevent national governments and international development institutions from seriously challenging the model.

In this context, the cultural war over climate change and other environmental threats produced by throughput growth has a different nature and greater implications than the usual divergences between conservatives and liberals. It broaches issues that determine the core of our civilisation's beliefs and pursuits. People are born and raised in a world community that defines happiness, social status and success in terms of one's ability to acquire material goods. Accepting evidence as to the anthropogenic origins of an imminent climate change would

9 Degrowth and the circular economy, which involve using less of the world's resources for purposes of greater well-being, are often posited as an alternative model for development, but this has understandably garnered little political support (cf. Savini 2023). For a broad discussion of this and other proposed alternatives, cf. Belmonte-Ureña et al. (2021).

force humankind to review the lifestyles and patterns of behaviour that have conditioned individual actions since their birth. Changing these life-defining values makes it very difficult for people to reconfigure personal expectations and behaviour in light of a threat like climate change, which is still diffuse and poorly understood – despite the multiplication of intense 'natural' catastrophes.

Considering the enormous importance of technology in the very evolution and substance of consumer culture, it has also become easier to accept the negationists' propaganda and to buy into the belief that technological developments will eventually be able to sweep away all looming environmental problems – even if this involves shipping humans to Planet Mars. Thus, it is easy to understand the general predisposition to accept arguments that reassure society about its alleged guilt in climate events and that exonerate the population from changing its behaviour. For this reason, vigorous negationist propaganda campaigns, financed by the productive sectors that most contribute to environmental chaos, easily find fertile ground for their stances. Given the degree of ignorance of the general population regarding critical scientific and technological issues pertinent to environmental threats, any argument that defends the traditional consumerist society ends up being plausible and allows the use of radical means, even the provocation of trade and other types of wars, to ensure its continuity.

In sum, different to the *population growth* threat, wherein policies and impacts tend to be longer-term in nature, the perils of throughput growth are current, immense and here to stay – perhaps until the level of environmental chaos compels a drastic upheaval in our civilisation's *modus operandi*. Fundamental incompatibilities persist between the exigencies of the throughput growth model, on the one hand, and the adoption of environmentally sound domestic policies on the other.

In the meantime, huge international negationist lobbies at all levels of government systematically contribute to the lack of knowledge and commitment to the environmental agenda. Their efforts have lately contributed to the election of an American president who condones and even promotes the exploitation of natural resources, while also dismissing initiatives aimed at benefiting the environment. This distressing turn of events takes throughput growth to extreme lengths and constitutes the greatest threat to sustainability, as discussed in the next section of this paper.

Power politics and the fate of sustainability

The intensification of development's impacts on the environment demands urgent and effective global-level actions to reverse the flow of current threats and thereby achieve long-term sustainability. Such an approach would require three fundamental preconditions: a) global environmental awareness; b) respect for environmental science; and c) the capacity by nations and their leaders to look beyond immediate, self-serving objectives toward long-term, collective well-being. Each of these prerequisites is in serious jeopardy in the present geopolitical context, wherein nationalistic priorities, authoritarian tendencies and disinformation campaigns increasingly dominate the political landscape.

Despite the quasi-universal commitment to consumer-based development, environmental issues – especially those stemming from the uncontrolled expansion of CO_2 emissions and their connection to climate change – have long been acknowledged as major 'market failures'. This recognition has prompted various 'technical' schemes designed to address the problem without fundamentally altering the dominant politico-economic model. Proposed solutions include: improving energy efficiency; investing in nuclear fusion as an alternative to costly or intermittently reliable renewable energy sources; transitioning to low-carbon economies through technological innovation; deploying geo-engineering interventions to absorb anthropogenic CO_2; deflecting solar radiation; cooling the atmosphere through aerosols; and, market-based strategies like carbon pricing, swaps, cap-and-trade systems, fee-and-dividend policies and complex negotiations over global emissions targets. It has been hoped that, singly or in combination, these initiatives would enable significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions without requiring a rethinking of global development or consumption patterns.

Though essential, the design and implementation of technological solutions to mitigate environmental threats are ultimately insufficient without supportive public awareness, political will, and the allocation of substantial financial and institutional resources for needed structural changes. Moreover, some technologies come with potentially harmful side effects. For instance, aerosols may help cool the Earth's atmosphere by reflecting solar radiation, but they also contribute to dangerous air pollution and adverse health outcomes.

More importantly, the climate crisis is not merely a technical dilemma – it is, at its core, a deeply political issue. It raises difficult questions about conflicting rights: the rights of individuals versus the collective good; the rights of the present generation versus obligations to future generations; the rights to consumption and development in richer countries versus the developmental aspirations of poorer nations. Such fundamental tensions must be addressed to meaningfully confront climate change.

The limited window of opportunity that experts suggest still exists before reaching dangerous climate tipping points is rapidly closing. A recent report by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO 2025) warns that the world could soon experience a year that is two degrees hotter than in the pre-industrial era. Yet this urgency remains insufficiently integrated into political discourse and policy-making. Reversing the global slide toward environmental unsustainability will require acknowledging the direct link between the dominant model of economic development and the intensification of ecological crises. It will also demand rethinking our metrics for success, moving beyond gross national product (GNP) and consumption levels as the sole indicators of achievement. A more just and sustainable paradigm would embrace human solidarity, prioritise the guarantee of basic rights for all, and promote compassion in the face of growing inequalities exacerbated by climate change. It would also necessitate an empathetic concern for the fate of future generations, rather than an obsession with quarterly growth or electoral cycles.

Unfortunately, there is little indication that major actors in the global system are currently attentive to these exigencies. Most governments and international development agencies remain tenaciously focused on throughput growth and material accumulation. Simultaneously, escalating global conflicts and a dysfunctional geopolitical climate hinder cooperation, even on matters of existential importance. In particular, the rise of authoritarian populism – and most notably the return of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States – has become a direct and formidable obstacle to global sustainability efforts.

As many political analysts and other scholars have documented, unchecked ambition, when paired with narcissism and demagoguery, can lead to extreme

and toxic outcomes.[10] Trump's second administration appears to be governed by precisely such impulses. His personal quest for power and admiration, now untethered from meaningful checks and balances, shapes his administration's approach to both national and international affairs. He has surrounded himself with sycophants, radical ideologues and media figures whose loyalty is personal rather than institutional, and who show little inclination to moderate or constrain his more dangerous impulses.

Trump's vision of global leadership appears grounded in domination, not cooperation. In a revealing 2025 interview with Parker and Scherer, Trump claimed to have rid himself of the legal and political constraints that limited him during his first term, adding ominously that 'this time, I run the country and the world'. His administration's efforts to extract payment from allies, wage reckless trade wars, and even flirt with territorial annexation have destabilised international relations and undermined American credibility. Meanwhile, his hopes of spawning a global wave of Trumpian governments have suffered significant setbacks, with far-right allies in Canada and Australia losing electoral ground, and European nations growing more unified in their opposition to his policies.

Domestically, Trump continues to erode democratic norms and institutions, attempting to delegitimise constitutional checks, attacking the independence of the judiciary, and openly entertaining the idea of seeking a third term. His administration has moved to dismantle vital sectors of the public service, attack diversity, equality and inclusion initiatives, and suppress civil liberties under the guise of anti-'woke' rhetoric. Trump has also pushed a costly bill that, according to experts, will likely make the rich even richer and cut some $1 trillion from key safety net programs.

Meanwhile, Trump's disdain for science, education and information threatens to permanently damage the institutions required to understand and combat climate change. His administration targets educational institutions, attacks media outlets, and censors books and curricula that deal with topics such as systemic racism and other inequalities, civil rights and environmental justice. In a particularly tyrannical manner, he is attempting to demolish the influence of even the most respected universities in the USA. These efforts reflect not just cultural backlash, but a calculated attempt to reshape American society along authoritarian lines.

10 Cf. for instance: Hirschi and Spurk (2021); Resta E. et al. (2023).

Particularly alarming is Trump's approach to immigration.[11] His administration demonises immigrants and seeks to radically restrict immigration from non-white countries, ostensibly to preserve a disappearing white Christian majority (Gorski and Perry 2022; Martinez and Passel 2025). This xenophobic policy is out of touch with demographic realities and with America's long history of benefiting economically and culturally from immigration.[12] Currently, it is economically harmful: America's agriculture, healthcare, construction and service sectors are already experiencing labour shortages as a result. Moreover, recent efforts to 'whiten' the population – by encouraging white South African immigration while deporting masses of Latin American and African migrants – are ethically reprehensible.

Trump's broader foreign policy is similarly destructive. He has demanded rare minerals as 'payment' for peace negotiations in Ukraine, floated the idea of converting war zones into real estate ventures, and treated international crises as opportunities for personal profit or political spectacle. Multilateralism, historically a key mechanism for addressing global challenges, is being gutted under Trump's leadership. Once the backbone of post-World War Two peace and prosperity, the multilateral system now faces unprecedented hostility from one of its founding architects. Trump has withdrawn from international agreements, undermined alliances, and attempted to bully or buy influence across the globe while also dismissing foreign aid and dismantling critical humanitarian agencies such as USAID. His disdain for collective governance is evident in his threats to annex countries like Canada and Greenland, his obstruction of UN climate frameworks, and his general scorn for international norms.

All these outrages pale in comparison to the Trump administration's complete disregard for climate change. While the world and the USA face increasingly frequent and intense climate disasters – wildfires, hurricanes, floods – Trump acts as if they didn't exist. His administration prioritises fossil fuel production, economic growth at all costs, and the rollback of hard-won environmental protections. His recent big and beautiful bill directly attacks directly attacks

11 Trump's harsh and often racially charged stance on immigration and deportation stands in stark contrast to his own family background – his grandfather was German, his mother was Scottish, and two of his three wives were immigrants.

12 Cf. for instance: Abramitzky and Boustan (2022); Porter (2024).

initiatives of previous governments aimed at reducing climate warming, in deference to the oil industry's demands.

All this is occurring at a time when the United Nations is structurally incapable of implementing basic initiatives for human welfare. The three largest powers on the UN Security Council – the United States, Russia and China – now actively undermine efforts to address climate change and other critical humanitarian initiatives. Expansionist ambitions, ideological rigidity, and competitive nationalism have replaced cooperation and mutual accountability. In this context, environmental concerns are eclipsed by short-term priorities: energy security, military build-up and nationalistic posturing. Climate change barely features in strategic discussions about Ukraine, Middle Eastern conflicts, European rearmament or even the massive demonstrations against Trumpian authoritarianism.

Despite the growing visibility and severity of climate-related disasters, the Trump administration continues to treat environmental policy as expendable. He has once again pulled the United States out of the already modest Paris Agreement, eviscerated key environmental safeguards, and dismissed renewable energy in favour of an aggressive push for fossil fuel expansion. His infamous slogan 'drill, baby, drill' has been revived with even greater intensity, sending a chilling message about America's environmental priorities. Within just the first 100 days of Trump's renewed presidency, at least 70 actions were taken or proposed that directly threaten the environment, climate and public health (NRDC 2025). These actions include disembowelling policies related to clean air and water, defunding climate adaptation programs, rolling back protections for endangered species, and dismantling climate monitoring infrastructure. The defunding of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and suppression of climate research marks a systematic assault on the infrastructure of knowledge while reducing the country's capacity to forecast and respond to severe weather events, thereby putting thousands of lives at risk. The consequences of this environmental negationism are likely to be profound and irreversible.

In sum, Trump's pursuit of personal power, his right-wing politics and his rejection of environmental science are colliding in a way that profoundly undermines global efforts to address the climate crisis. He has rendered the United States an unreliable partner in international climate initiatives and created a dangerous

vacuum in global environmental leadership. Ironically, in his quest to 'Make America Great Again', Trump may succeed only in accelerating one form of growth: the country's emissions of greenhouse gases. If the world continues along this path of denial and delay, climate change will not just be the defining issue of our time – it will become the defining failure of our civilisation.

Final considerations

Recognition of the character and nature of threats to environmental sustainability has evolved over time. Earlier and much-debated concerns with population growth and size continue to be relevant, but their policy implications – within the short-term window of opportunity that the current slide to unsustainability presents – are increasingly limited. Meanwhile, other demographic processes such as international and national migrations, population aging, and urbanisation, demand renewed interest in global and national policies, but they do not have the same significance, nor have they been subjected to the same level of scrutiny as growth, in relation to their environmental consequences and policy implications.

Throughput growth has long been identified as the centrepiece of major environmental threats, insofar as it is predicated on the increased appropriation and spoilage of natural resources for purposes of feeding economic growth spurred by enhanced consumerism. In the process, it has generated a civilisation wherein individual happiness and societal success is routinely measured in terms of access to material goods of dubious need. Globalisation of this model has spurred both increasing worldwide consumption and a consequent level of damages to environmental sustainability.

In discussing future perspectives and policies, it is essential to place these issues within the scope of a broader perspective, since both development and environmental concerns are inherently global. Climate change, like other threatening environmental issues, is at the mercy of cultural transformations embedded in the hegemonic development paradigm that rules the world. Until it is explicitly recognised that consumer culture drives demand and that increased production in the current format to meet this demand generates several ecological problems – which could lead to an abrupt destabilisation of the global environment – there will be no sustainability. Consumer culture and its most extreme form, consumerism, encourage and sustain the current development

trajectory, but they also trigger and accelerate the dangerous environmental changes taking place on the planet. This is the greatest ethical, ideological and existential dilemma facing humanity in the twenty-first century.

Revision of this unsustainable model and efforts to move in new directions are constantly derailed by negationist propaganda rooted in the powerful lobbies of the economic sectors that cause the greatest damage to sustainability (Aronoff 2025). Global power politics, especially the initiatives currently undertaken by the United States of America – the world's most powerful country – actually preview a drastic increase in environmental chaos. The recent election of a negationist strongman to the presidency of that country has provided lobbyists and other negationists with a powerful instrument for the disruption and dismissal of environmental concerns and policies at all levels. The consequences of ongoing assaults by this autocratic government on multilateralism and on environmental safeguards is bound to have lasting repercussions on short- and long-term sustainability for the world.

A radical increase in environmental awareness leading to effective policies is the essential starting point for the avoidance of planetary chaos. Enhanced support from environmental movements leading to political action, as well as the commitment of world leaders and multilateral agencies, is essential to this purpose. Solving this conundrum will require redefining not only 'development' but also the primarily material content of modern-day 'happiness'. However, there is little indication that such a transformation will occur in good time since consensus for critical initiatives is lacking. Multilateralism is drowning in the egotistical pursuit of additional supremacy by major powers. Global political, economic and cultural turbulences inhibit objective reflection on needed policies while obstructing the consideration and implementation of acutely-needed steps to counter a predictable global environmental chaos.

In brief, the pursuit of 'development' through the expansion of throughput growth stimulated by consumerism drives an unsustainable global system. The recognition of grave environmental threats and the willingness to engage in collaborative action to address them is essential for sustainability. It also requires significant cultural changes and dramatic reductions in consumption within a radical transformation of the development paradigm. This could only be achieved through a new global governance focused on common issues of sustainability,

justice and the pursuit of human welfare, and not simply on a patchwork of disparate and unequal national 'development' objectives.

Unfortunately, as clearly demonstrated in current global Conferences and global actions, the pursuit of throughput growth has become so ingrained in the DNA of politics, at all levels, that it inhibits effective action. The current policies and actions of the world's most powerful government particularly deviates attention from the threat of environmental chaos and further hampers vital initiatives at the global level. Eventually, persisting on consumer-based development, under a chaotic system of global governance, may very well consolidate an increasingly dystopian civilisation.

Countering the current trajectory towards unsustainability will require bold and transformative action, rooted in a more empathetic vision of 'development' – one that acknowledges the fundamental interdependence between different sectors of humanity as well as their collective relations with the natural world. It will demand the widespread adoption of technologies that: enhance the accessibility and efficiency of renewable energy while phasing out fossil fuel dependency; safeguard vital natural assets and protect fragile ecosystems; prioritise collective well-being and the pursuit of equality over individual wealth accumulation; and, strengthen the social, economic, ideological and political foundations of sustainability. The alternative is to face escalating environmental threats and to risk unravelling the very fabric of our civilisation.

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