

## Let's have a big debate on the energy emergency

### Paradigm Change:

*Without the active support of the citizenry, it will be impossible to provide meaning to the change we must necessarily face*

Fernando Prats

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**W**e live in turbulent times in which it is essential to chart a course for navigation to confront what is shaping up to be a genuine crisis of civilisation. To this end, it is crucial to know how to interpret each event in itself, but also concerning a systemic and epochal change.

Regarding the latest energy measures approved by the government to deal with the energy shock caused by the invasion of Ukraine, beyond the details, it should be noted that they have urgently implemented a series of actions—basically price limits, demand reduction and support for the most affected sectors—to temporarily mitigate the effects. However, their scope will be limited concerning the following underlying trends.



Una mujer en bicicleta por un parque de Milán.

FRITZ BIELMEIER

What is missing from the recent governmental actions is that their parliamentary approval is not accompanied by a much more ambitious deployment of information and social debate on the dimension of the energy (and general) changes to come; a campaign that would reach all corners of the country to try to avoid confusion and to build a congruent and shared narrative from which to confront, beyond laws, what is seen as a cultural change, of ways of life and the historical cycle.

*It is unfortunate that the parliamentary approval of energy saving measures is not accompanied by a much more ambitious deployment of information and social debate.*

To justify the requirement mentioned above, the following is a general consideration followed by four plausible hypotheses related to the long-standing tensions between economy, energy and global ecological overshoot.

Concerning the general consideration, we can only underline that, beyond the energy-climate issue, we are facing a critical overshoot of other fundamental biophysical limits for preserving life on the planet today. To give a widely recognised reference, the work led by J. Rockström (Stockholm University) more than a decade ago, Planetary Boundaries, identifies up to nine vital biophysical limits (seven identified), most of which have already been or are tending to be transgressed by current socio-economic logics.

The headlines of their essential contents are noted on the four plausible hypotheses that highlight the need for an open debate on the energy (and general) future.

- ➔ The tensions between socio-economic growth, low-cost energy availability and ecological overshoot are already structural in nature and are growing. They existed before Ukraine, have been exacerbated by the war, and, if there are no significant changes in substance, will manifest themselves again, sooner or later, after the end of the conflict.
- ➔ The availability (in a timely manner) of affordable energy from a combination of renewables and eco-efficiency is not comparable to, if not significantly less than, that provided by fossil fuels which are themselves in a critical or declining phase.
- ➔ The increasing contradictions between the logic of unlimited material growth and the reduction of ecological overshoot lead to two possible scenarios: 1) a global collapse due to the strangulation of energy supply and the critical overshoot of biophysical limits; and 2) socio-economic and energy decline to levels compatible with a sustainable combination of renewable systems and eco-efficiency.
- ➔ The post-growth option would favour the transition towards simpler, more territorial societies based on renewable systems, with priorities focused on guaranteeing a dignified/just life for all people on a habitable planet. It would entail the modification of living and consumption patterns typical of the wealthiest countries.

To summarise what these four hypotheses suggest, it is worth mentioning some of the content of the report produced by the European Environment Agency in 2015 (the year of the Paris Summit), The Environment in Europe: "An overall analysis shows that neither environmental policies nor efficiency improvements through technology alone are sufficient to achieve the 2050 targets. Living well within ecological limits requires fundamental transformations in production and consumption systems, ultimately responsible for environmental and climate

pressures. These transitions will require far-reaching changes in institutions, practices, technologies, policies, lifestyles and mainstream thinking.

In this context, the question arises as to what would be the energy per capita that would meet the needs of a decent life for all people on a habitable planet. A group of universities - Leeds (UK), Lausanne (Switzerland), Yale (USA) and the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis in Austria - published a report in 2020 in the scientific journal *Global Environmental Change* with the title "Providing Decent Living With Minimum Energy: A Global Scenario",<sup>1</sup> which contains interesting considerations.

The study analyses 119 countries and, after taking a realistic view of technological implementation, concludes that the energy needed to sustain a decent life for all the Earth's inhabitants could be around 500 watts per person per year (a far cry from the 9,000 watts in the USA and Canada, less than half the 1,500 watts estimated as a minimum ratio by the International Energy Agency and in line with the consumption of many Iberian American, African and Asian countries), which would make it extraordinarily easy to cover the corresponding supply by renewable systems in record time.

More specifically, the study estimates that, from an energy point of view, the concept of "decent living" would allow for "highly efficient services for cooking, food maintenance and laundry; 50 litres of hot water for bathing; a home temperature of 20°C all year round; access to computers connected to information technologies; a transport network that would provide between 5,000 and 15,000 km per person per year; and a universal health service and free education for all between the ages of 5 and 19".

In any case, beyond the discussion on the quantitative estimates of reference consumption and its benefits, a very

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complex issue in such a diverse world, this type of approach has the value of confronting governments and citizens with the enormous dimension of the change in life patterns that, in a most unique way, would have to be assumed in the wealthiest countries on the planet.

We should even ask ourselves whether the current restrictions should be used to turn the emergency into a strategic opportunity and initiate a path of changes in paradigms and socio-economic logic with progressive reductions in energy consumption (coal, oil, gas and nuclear) and other strategic materials to adapt the carbon and ecological footprint to neutral scenarios in twenty years. Let us not deceive ourselves. Beyond the European struggle with Russia, either efficiency strategies and a conscious reduction in energy demand are tackled, accompanied by comprehensive redistributive programmes, or it will not be possible to balance the ecological footprint produced by society and the biocapacity of territories and the planet.

To return to what was said in the first lines, it is clear that we need a broad debate in the country on energy and the future. This was called for by the Transitions Forum in "Mr. President, let's open a great debate" in May 2020 and, as noted there, only in this way will society be able to participate consciously in the transformations to come, which will have to go far beyond those recently approved and which will pose broad socio-economic and political

<sup>1</sup> ↪ Joel Millward-Hopkins, Julia K. Steinberger, Narasimha D. Rao, Yannick Oswald: [Providing Decent Living With Minimum Energy: A Global Scenario](#) — The Just Semper Global Alliance, April 2022.

problems. The active support of the citizenry is essential to give meaning to change because, without shared and fair visions, social resistance is likely to grow, the changes will be unfeasible, and opportunism, populist positions and social disintegration will grow stronger.

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### Related links:

- The Jus Semper Global Alliance
- Alejandro Pedregal and Juan Bordera: [Toward an Ecosocialist Degrowth](#)
- Jason Hickel: [Degrowth is About Global Justice](#)
- Joel Millward-Hopkins et al: [Providing Decent Living With Minimum Energy: A Global Scenario](#)
- Álvaro J. de Regil: [The Deceptive Delusions of Green Capitalism](#)
- Álvaro J. de Regil: [Transitioning to Geocratia the People and Planet and Not the Market Paradigm — First Steps](#)
- Paul Burkett: [An Eco-Revolutionary Tipping Point?](#)

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