



# Resolutions To Action

LCWR Global Concerns Committee

Volume 19, Number 1

February 2010

## 'ILLth': Uneconomic Growth

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### EXPERIENCE

Many have compared today's economic crisis to the Great Depression. Indeed, with official unemployment surpassing 10 percent and debts forcing a growing number of families to leave their homes, it is easy to see similarities. Both financial crises were rooted in a prior period when the financial sector of our economy became too large and influential, putting the rest of the economy at great risk.

But there are significant differences between our current situation and the 1930s. At that time, Earth's resources appeared to be endless. Today, however, we find ourselves running up against an increasing number of physical limits to our growth. Look at [this chart](#) of the usage of almost any natural resource during the last few hundred years and you will see an exponential growth line that looks like a hockey stick lying down. Name the resource – water, oil, forests, carbon emissions, minerals, fisheries – and you can see that we are on the vertical side of a line that shoots off into infinity, while our planet is very, very finite.

It is clear that this cannot go on. A linear system focused exclusively on growth cannot continue forever within a finite planet. Will we continue at the current pace and use up the last of our grandchildren's resources in a final splurge of consumption? Or will we radically renew our lives and our economy to live within the boundaries of Earth in time to leave our progeny some limited resources?

### SOCIAL ANALYSIS

We need to change our mentality from that of a cowboy with an ever extending frontier of resources to exploit, to that of an astronaut on a spaceship with very limited resources. In 1965, Kenneth Boulding wrote, "Earth has become a space ship, not only in our imagination but also in the hard realities of the social, biological, and physical system in which man is enmeshed... In a space ship there are no sewers." We need to change the rate we consume resources to below the rate which Earth can replenish them and reduce our waste to levels which Earth can absorb.

When we have surpassed the natural capacity for regeneration, economic growth

becomes "uneconomic" growth. Instead of producing wealth, we produce "illth," a term originally coined by John Ruskin, a 19th century philosopher, to mean the opposite of well being.

The pattern of growth in the US and Europe over the past 40 years could well be called uneconomic growth – it creates more "illth" than goods. Ecological economist Herman Daly and others made a case for this by creating the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW) which measures 19 items including, but not limited to, income inequality; public spending on health and education; costs associated with pollution, commuting, etc.; the depletion of natural resources; and the loss

*Resolutions to Action* is an occasional publication of the Global Concerns Committee of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). Members of the committee are: Kathleen Bryant, RSC; Jacquelyn Doepker, OSF; Judith Justinger, SSJ; Janet Lehmann, SC; Miriam Mitchell, SHSp; Kathleen Storms, SSND; and Marie Lucey, OSF, staff. Please address correspondence to:

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of farmland and natural habitats. When they made graphs comparing the US ISEW to US GDP, they found that the graphs ran together from 1929 through the 1960s; but from the mid-1970s, US ISEW remained stagnant while US GDP continued to grow. From the mid-1970s until the financial crisis US GDP has grown, while US ISEW, our physical and ecological well being, has declined. Economic growth in the US has caused tremendous ecological destruction, but it has not brought us happiness.

The challenge facing global citizens in this financial crisis is not simply how to bring back the ever-growing economy, but to develop a steady state economy that respects Earth's limits and needs while distributing the limited resources equitably so that all are guaranteed their basic needs: an economy in which well-being flourishes in communities of less industrialized nations that have experienced "underdevelopment" – and "de-growth," or downsizing occurs in communities in industrialized nations that use a disproportionate share of Earth's resources.

## REFLECTION

God created the world and put Adam and Eve "in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." (Gen 2:15) But can humans beings say that we have truly taken care of Earth? Is God pleased with how the stewards have preserved the amazing gift that is Earth? Or has the sight of massive pollution, extinction of thousands of species of plants and animals, and overuse of most of its resources brought sadness to God's heart?

When God led the Israelites out of Egypt, God established a new economy, a Sabbath economy through the gift of manna (Exodus 16). God provided manna to meet people's needs on two

conditions: that they gather up no more than what they needed; and that they distribute it to all in the community. In places like the US more emphasis must be placed on a sufficiency-based economy where all people, regardless of gender, race or other characteristics, equitably share access to Earth's gifts that

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nourish and sustain them: nutritious food, clean water, suitable shelter.

Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff underscores four essential ethical principles that should undergird all our actions:

**Respect:** Every being has intrinsic value and can serve the good of humanity if guided not by purely utilitarian ethics, such as those which predominate in the current socioeconomic system, but rather by a feeling of mutual belonging, responsibility and conservation of existence.

**Care:** A loving, non-aggressive attitude which repairs past harm, and avoids future harm must extend into all areas of individual and social human activity.

**Collective responsibility:** Our actions can be beneficial or harmful for life and for the common good of the Earth and humanity. The current financial and ecological crises are the result of a lack of responsibility in our collective projects and practices lead-

ing to both market and Earth system imbalance.

**Cooperation:** If we do not all cooperate, we are not going to emerge stronger from the current crises.

## ACTION

Nothing less than a paradigm shift is required to move human consciousness and action toward responsible and sustainable use of limited natural resources – beyond exploitation toward a relationship of respect and synergy with the natural world. A new coalition has formed called [Faith-Economy-Ecology](#) that has identified four key areas to work for change: 1) help create this paradigm shift; 2) reorient the global economy away from growth and toward sustainable human development; 3) create community-centered economies that provide equitable and sustainable development; and 4) return private corporations to their proper

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place in society. Consider signing the FEE coalition's base statement and participating in their monthly working meetings.

We are called to be a prophetic people - prophetic in denouncing our current broken economic system and prophetic in announcing the new; showing a fresh way of organizing ourselves in a more sustainable and equitable way.