

The Club of Rome on “The Limits to Growth” (1972)

Abstract

Charting the impact of economic growth on the population, the food supply, energy usage, and the environment, a 1972 MIT study (sponsored by the Club of Rome and the Volkswagen Foundation) concluded that the world’s resources would be exhausted within a half century unless there were a radical turn to conservation.

Source

Nowadays, more than ever, man tends toward continual, often accelerated, growth—of population, land occupancy, production, consumption, waste etc.—blindly assuming that his environment will permit such expansion, that other groups will yield, or that science and technology will remove the obstacles. We wanted to explore the degree to which this attitude toward growth is compatible with the dimensions of our finite planet and with the fundamental needs of our emerging world society. [...]

A second objective was to help identify and study the dominant elements, and their interactions, that influence the long-term behavior of world systems. [...] Our goal was to provide warnings of potential world crisis if these trends are allowed to continue, and thus offer an opportunity to make changes in our political, economic, and social systems to ensure that these crises do not take place. [...]

1. We are convinced that realization of the quantitative restraints of the world environment and of the tragic consequences of an overshoot is essential to the initiation of new forms of thinking that will lead to a fundamental revision of human behavior and, by implication, of the entire fabric of present-day society. [...]

2. We are further convinced that demographic pressure in the world has already attained such a high level, and is moreover so unequally distributed, that this alone must compel mankind to seek a state of equilibrium on our planet. [...]

3. We recognize that world equilibrium can become a reality only if the lot of the so-called developing countries is substantially improved, both in absolute terms and relative to the economically developed nations, and we affirm that this improvement can be achieved only through a global strategy. [...]

4. We affirm that the global issue of development is, however, so closely interlinked with other global issues that an overall strategy must be evolved to attack all major problems, including in particular those of man’s relationship with his environment. [...]

7. [...] We believe in fact that the need will quickly become evident for social innovation to match technical change, for radical reform of institutions and political processes at all levels, including the highest, that of world polity. [...]

8. We have no doubt that if mankind is to embark on a new course, concerted international measures and joint long-term planning will be necessary on a scale and scope without precedent. [...]

But the major responsibility must rest with the more developed nations, not because they have more vision or humanity, but because, having propagated the growth syndrome, they are still at the fountainhead of the progress that sustains it. As greater insights into the condition and workings of the world system are developed, these nations will come to realize that, in a world that fundamentally needs

stability, their high plateaus of development can be justified or tolerated only if they serve not as springboards to reach even higher, but as staging areas from which to organize more equitable distribution of wealth and income worldwide. [...]

10. We affirm finally that any deliberate attempt to reach a rational and enduring state of equilibrium by planned measures, rather than by chance or catastrophe, must ultimately be founded on a basic change of values and goals at individual, national, and world levels.

Source: Statement by the Executive Committee of the Club of Rome in Donella H. Meadows et. al., *The Limits to Growth*, New York: Universe Books, 1972, pp. 18–96. The third edition of the book is available: D.H. Meadows, et. al., *The Limits to Growth – the 30-Year Update*, Chelsea Green Publishing Co., White River, VT, 2004.

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