

Why the village is the solution to the poly-crisis.

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Most of the big global problems are primarily due to over-population and over-consumption, that is to the fact that far too much producing and consuming is going on. This cannot be reduced to sustainable levels unless we achieve extreme “degrowth”. That cannot be done unless most people live frugally in small highly self-sufficient and cooperative villages. This article points to the benefits of this social form and explains how it defuses global problems, while improving the quality of life.

The Global Predicament.

Our industrial-affluent-consumer society is grossly unjust and unsustainable, We are far beyond levels of resource use, environmental impacts, consumption, “living standards”, and GDP that can be kept up for long let alone spread to all people. They will probably have to be reduced by more than 70%.

This trajectory cannot be remedied by reforms and technical fixes such as more recycling; it must involve scrapping the commitment to affluence and growth and shifting to lifestyles and systems that enable a high quality of life for all based on far lower resource demand. ([For the detailed case.](#)) The Simpler Way project argues that there is only one basic social form that can enable this quest.

The Village Alternative

Only if most people live in small, highly self-sufficient, cooperative, self-governing, needs-driven (not profit-driven) and frugal village communities is it possible to get the per capita resource and environmental impacts right down, while actually improving the quality of life. The purpose of this article is to outline the support for this claim. ([For the full version.](#))

High levels of self-sufficiency

This is the major factor. Converting towns, suburbs, neighbourhoods and households into thriving local economies producing many of the basic goods and services they need from local resources of land, labour, skill and capital, can greatly reduce many costs, such as for transport, roads and ports, packaging, and waste treatment.

Food

In a well designed village or small town economy almost all food can come from home gardens, community gardens, “edible landscapes” of public fruit trees etc. packed into commons and public space, and small farms within and just outside settlements. The smallness of scale and proximity of producers and consumers enables nutrients to be totally recycled in closed loops from gardens through

kitchens and animal pens to compost heaps and methane digesters and back to soils. Thus there would be no need for a fertilizer industry, sewer systems, supermarkets, food packaging, advertising or transport. Food would be fresh, not processed.

The capacity for localised small scale agriculture is generally underestimated. Yields can exceed those of agribusiness, while avoiding the huge costs in transport, chemicals, soil damage, packaging etc. (For the detailed case.) A [study of egg supply](#) found that eggs produced in back yards or local cooperatives involve energy and dollar costs around 2% of those created by the supermarket path.

Commons

Much space within an ideal settlement is given to commons, that is land and facilities owned and managed by the community, including vegetable gardens, parks, pastures, orchards, road side space, woodlots, ponds, sheds, clay pits, windmills, tool libraries, a few vehicles to borrow or hire, and the community centre containing a café, workshop, meeting space, craft rooms, library, art gallery, recycling racks, and tool library. The commons would mostly be created where many roads have been dug up, because in the new localised economies few cars would be needed to get to distant work places.

Village-level systems facilitate multiple and overlapping functions. Doing one thing also does many others. For instance woodlots provide fuel, shade, fruit, honey, timber, windbreaks, foraging and amenity. Manures become fertilizers. Ducks eliminate snails, fertilise ponds and produce ducklings and entertainment.

Small Farms

The third component of the village agricultural system is the small farm sector, located within the settlement and close by. Again the proximity enables return of nutrients to the soils, possibly transported by donkey carts on the return journey after taking produce to the town market place. (Donkeys find their own fuel, don't need grease and oil changes or spare parts, or assembly lines to produce, and provide leisure resources.)

There might need to be longer distance transport of some items from larger scale farms located in the best regions for their crops. Grains and dairy produce are among the few items that might best be produced outside the town.

Localised agriculture avoids most if not all of the problems associated with conventional agriculture. Above all are the energy implications. These alternative ways involve very low non-renewable energy inputs, many of them in the form of human exercise.

Products

Possibly the most important element in the simpler ay perspective is frugality; that is, the willingness to live with as little consumption as is compatible with a good quality

of life. This would dramatically reduce many factors, such as industry, resource consumption, international freight transport, finance, and waste disposal.

Frugality does not have to mean deprivation or hardship. It can be enjoyable to live simply, making things last and repairing things. [A study of a Sydney simpler way homestead](#) found dramatic reductions in materials and energy demand, with per capita household energy consumption around 2% of the national average.

Many products can be made by craft and small businesses within the town, as distinct from distant mass production factories. Many of the inputs can be from local sources including plants, fibres, leather, wool, clay, foundries and timber grown on community land. Small mass production factories in the region might provide basic clothing, shoes, appliances and materials such as glass. Dwellings and community buildings can be made extremely cheaply from earth.

The neighbourhood centre

Most petrol stations could be converted into neighbourhood centres containing a workshop, recycling racks, surplus food sharing, tools to borrow, a library, an art gallery, craft rooms, a café, recycling racks, a stage for performances and a large space for community assemblies.

Commons, committees, and working bees

The town would own and maintain many commons, such as the parks, some of the farms and cooperatives, workshops, quarries, wood lots, ponds and energy systems. These would be maintained by committees and working bees, reducing the amount for councils to do, meaning far lower rates. They would provide many “free” goods, such as fruit from the roadside trees. There would be committees for agriculture, looking after elderly people, youth affairs, education and especially leisure. Contributing to community working bees would be a way of paying some of your tax.

Because there will be little need for the car when most workplaces and leisure resources are localised, many roads could be dug up, possibly converting one quarter of urban land area to agriculture and other community uses.

Transport

Few people would need a car as most could get to nearby work on foot or bicycle. A few community cars might be available for hire. Many basic goods would be produced in small factories within the town or close by, cutting delivery and supply logistics. Few trucks would be needed to bring goods into the town. There would be little need to build or maintain road infrastructures including freeways, toll roads, tunnels and bridges. Far less international trade would be needed, thus reducing the need for aircraft, shipping and associated infrastructures.

Work

Because we would be living simply and many things would be free from the commons we would not need to buy much. Most people might only need to work for

money two days a week. Much producing would be by hobby and craft activity, and much would be done on enjoyable working bees. Unpleasant tasks could be shared or performed by working bees. The work distribution committee would make sure everyone had a livelihood.

Child Care

With few people away at work and communities with many people around all the time there would be no need for a child minding industry. There would be few if any isolated nuclear families struggling on their own with child raising problems.

Adolescents would have far more interesting things to do than watch screens, and would be integrated into social functioning, with contributions to make, such as running the poultry co-op. In the village children from early ages would accompany adults on working bees and help in home production.

An easily overlooked benefit would be that all adults would in effect be parents of all children. They would be close to and concerned about the welfare and development of local kids. This would to some extent reduce the incentive to have children of one's own, given the predominance of isolated nuclear families in a world that is grossly overpopulated. At present it is generally not possible to have close and involved relations with children unless one produces some.

Aged care

Most old and infirm people would be able to remain in their homes, looked after by the relevant committee, working bees and rosters. They would continue as valued, experienced members of the community, serving on committees etc. Sudden retirement could be avoided as older people phase down their work contributions and continue to feed their experience into discussions. Hospitals and hostels would be in the centre of town amid gardens and animals, enabling continued involvement in public affairs, and making it convenient for people to drop in for a chat. Working bees and rosters would get much of the caring work done.

Education

Education could be radically transformed. The main goal would be to help young people to become good caring, cooperative and skilled citizens of the town, aware of how the town depends on prioritising the welfare of all, of the need to care for local systems, conscientious, and with the multi-skills needed to maintain things. Young people would learn these skills and values by participating in working bees and committees. We would introduce them to a wide range of hobbies, leisure pursuits, crafts, ideas, literature, philosophies etc, and especially to limits to growth themes showing that affluent lifestyles and resource intensive ways must be avoided. Children would have useful functions and responsibilities. We might have teenagers running the poultry coops. They could go on to professional training as at present, but we would need far fewer technocrats, lawyers, engineers etc.

Leisure

These settlements would be leisure-rich. The neighbourhood would contain many familiar and skilled people, interesting things to do, common projects, animals, gardens, forests, wind mills, lakes, little firms and community workshops. People Will not need to work much for money, so will have much time for leisure activities. The leisure committee would organise visits, local holiday sites, talks, festivals, weekly concerts, and celebrations. There would be many hobby and craft groups, with people eager to teach their skills.

Because the town would be leisure-rich people would be less inclined to go away at weekends or for holidays, let alone to travel overseas, thereby reducing national energy consumption.

Patriarchy

A village of the kind being advocated enables (but does not guarantee) non-hierarchical relations, especially between men and women. All share in important activities and roles, within a community that realises that it has to organise cooperatively to function well. Women and men would chair committees, contribute to working bees, run small businesses etc. Men would not be away at the office all day but would be partners helping to run productive households. The village ethos would involve a determination to avoid domination and to enable equality. (This is crucial in their participatory form of government; see below.)

The Economy

These alternative ways cannot be implemented unless the present economic system is more or less totally replaced. It causes most of the global problems, firstly because it allows market forces and profit to determine development, meaning that the most urgently needed things are not developed and output goes mainly to richer people because they can pay more for things. Above all, this economy must have growth, meaning that it inevitably generates increasing resource and environmental problems. A sustainable economy must have undergone a great deal of "degrowth". The goal must be highly self-sufficient and self-governing stable town or regional economy producing as little as is necessary. These features mean that it cannot be a capitalist economy

The basic economic priorities must be worked out according to what is socially desirable, democratically decided mostly at the local level, not dictated by distant state bureaucracies. However, much of the economy could remain as a (carefully monitored and regulated) form of "free/private enterprise" carried on by small firms, households and cooperatives, and little family firms, so long as their goals were not profit maximisation and growth. Small businesses would be regarded as tools enabling a steady income by contributing to meeting town needs.

There would be no unemployment and no poverty. These could easily be eliminated as communities set up the co-ops and small firms to make sure everyone who wants a job can have a livelihood enabling valued contributions to meeting local needs.

Although The Simpler Way looks for the simplest ways of doing things, it is not opposed to modern technology. When we reallocate presently wasted resources to

socially useful purposes we could still have (small) cities, technically sophisticated procedures and research in those fields where it is important, such as medicine.

Because most economic activity would be taking place at the local level there would be a greatly diminished national economy beyond the towns and their regions. There would be far less transport, importing, heavy industry, infrastructure, big corporations and banks, and a negligible financial industry. There would be much less for the (remnant and much revised) “state” to do in regulating, setting standards, coordinating, informing, maintaining communications, legal and transport systems, and running any ventures that are not best left to local cooperatives and small firms. (But the “state” would have little or no legislative power; see below.)

Money, Banking, Interest, Finance, Capital

None of these would be very important. We would be able to live in very low cost housing, without needing to earn much or own a car. Town banks would hold most savings and lend only to ventures likely to benefit the town and its inhabitants.

There could be no interest paid on loans. For interest to be paid the economy must grow. Because they will have been large scale degrowth there will be little need for investment, which will be confined to dealing with depreciation or adjusting productive capacity.

Government

In a nation made up mostly of largely self-governing villages government would have been radically transformed. Firstly, the national economy would be geared mainly to providing the towns with small quantities of light machinery and materials etc. which they cannot produce for themselves.

There would be far less for national governments to do given the devolution of so many functions to the local level. Most and ideally all of the decisions would be taken at the village assemblies. Issues involving regions beyond the village, such as a valley’s water supply, would be dealt with by federations and other arrangements focused on the region, to which town delegates would be sent, but designed to take recommendations back down to the village assemblies for acceptance.

Governing would no longer be primarily about zero-sum conflicts between self-interested groups. There would probably be no need for political parties, elections, campaign donations or politicians.

The Quality of Life

Above all, the village would be a community of caring, familiar, co-operative people, bound by mutual concern, driven mainly by the realisation that these values and predispositions are crucial for its spiritual health and survival. All would be acutely aware that unless the town runs well their own individual welfare will suffer. But in addition living securely in an atmosphere of care and mutual aid would be intrinsically rewarding. The situation would require good values and strong citizenship ...and it would reward these.

Studies have found that the quality of life in ecovillages is higher than in mainstream society.

Geopolitical Implications

The simpler way would [prevent](#) most of the big global problems and conflicts. Because it dramatically reduces levels of production and consumption, thereby eliminating most resource demand and environmental impact, it would not generate conflict over access to resources, land, markets and spheres of influence.

So should we set up lots of new eco-villages?

The implication of the foregoing argument is not that this should be a primary goal. Although the more ecovillages established on greenfield sites the better, that should not be the focus of the degrowth movement. The need is to transform existing settlements towards the kinds of structures and practises ecovillages exhibit.

It is costly and difficult to set up a new village, requiring a small dedicated group of unusual, energetic and well-resourced people. But about half the world's people are already living in existing villages, and most of the rest live in urban suburbs and neighbourhoods where many of the above practices could easily be established, if that was the intention. This is happening in many cities, under the label of the Transition Towns movement. Existing suburbs and neighbourhoods have many of the structures and procedures that are needed in the new settlements, avoiding the many and difficult tasks confronting those wishing to establish new eco-villages. The goal should be to help more people to see the wisdom of joining the Transition Towns movement to “villagize” their existing settlements.

The deteriorating global predicament will force people towards this localisation vision. There is [a strong case](#) that a major collapse of environmental, resource, political, social, and especially financial systems is rapidly approaching. This will force people to turn towards the small scale, localised, cooperative, self-sufficient alternative arrangements outlined above. (See Simpler Way [transition theory](#).)

For detailed accounts of the ways being argued for see [The Alternative, Sustainable Society](#), or the 48 minute video [A visit to Pigface Point](#).