

Fossil Fuels, Fossilized Growth

BY DAVE GUTKNECHT



Solar power projects at food co-ops are highlighted in this issue, and there will be more such reports ahead. These alternative-energy examples reduce the retailers' substantial

electricity costs, and the projects' visibility helps more of the public to think about energy issues.

I will assume that readers here recognize we face profound resource and energy challenges, globally and locally. Because of those converging threats—the combined crises of fossil fuel pollution and an overheated atmosphere, acidified oceans, fresh water depletion, and a global economic recession—we can anticipate further economic contraction. I want to question some common assumptions about energy, debt, and encroaching climate chaos.

Altering the complex sources of overheating the planet appears to offer two kinds of challenges: one is technical/financial and the other is cultural/political. Truth be told, maintaining our highly complex society is not assured with regard to either capacity. However, much thought is being directed to both.

A primary contribution cooperatives do make is in demonstrating the power of democratic participation and our methods for fairly sharing benefits and risks. The cultural/political shift needed for a constrained future is germinating in the daily work and in the ends envisioned by cooperatives and, more broadly, in the examples they provide.

As one limit to technical/financial capacity, significantly altering the energy infrastructure is enormously expensive. Alternative energy installations, preferably with storage capacity, do contribute toward a necessary energy transition and can buffer the risk of electricity brownouts and blackouts. "Renewables" require more debt and public subsidies—perhaps worthy investments, but with payback taking many years. The electricity provided is cleaner, but calculating the life-cycle net energy of the installation is dependent on multiple factors that vary by project.

When I read about the costs and limits of potential energy supply, an unavoidable conclusion is that we cannot maintain present (U.S.) consumption levels under any feasible scenario. That is actually a good thing! Culturally, a message of living with less stuff but more community connections is slowly spreading. In this vein,

food co-ops already promote eating well for less, conserving energy, working for a livable wage, and strengthening the local food economy.

There may be no soft landing ahead, but cooperatives—electric, food, credit, production, and other types—offer an adaptive method of fairly and democratically sharing services and resources. In situations of scarcity or social stress, cooperative sharing of risks and benefits attracts more people.

Cooperatives also offer an ownership structure that avoids the extreme concentration of wealth and power that is incompatible with democracy. But if cooperatives fail to ensure their expansion as a business model through the coming crises, cooperative ambitions will not be a global blueprint but rather a fading memory, and future readers and historical actors will again struggle to revive a fair and functional combination of productive enterprise and shared ownership.

Out of their concern for community, and in order to achieve their ends in support of economic democracy and a fair food system, co-ops will need to join in broader coalitions that address these and other critical social needs. See Art Sherwood's conclusions on strategic alliances, then shift to a larger context: how will civil society survive in an era of crisis and contraction? When the community and economy are disrupted, community survival will require new alliances, and cooperatives can offer foundational values and methods.

The transition needed is to prepare for a low-growth economy with lower consumption and a smaller population. As a society we are not ready for radical conservation—which will be forced upon us by encountering resource limits including the limits of renewables themselves. And a primary barrier to any fair arrangement is our extreme class divide—somehow the wealth concentration must be reversed.

Much of the public and visible leadership are in denial that there are resource limits and therefore limits to growth. Media talking heads also ignore cooperative and commons-based solutions and tell us that the only way to address inequality is through still more growth. I think of it as rushing toward a wall. Here's a well-grounded summary from Richard Heinberg, a leading voice on energy and environmental limits and building community resilience: <http://www.postcarbon.org/you-cant-handle-the-truth/>. □

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