

SEARCH Foundation Webinar, 4 December 2025

The Role of State Capture in the looming Climate Catastrophe

Dr Mark Diesendorf

Honorary Associate Professor
in Environment & Society

UNSW Sydney

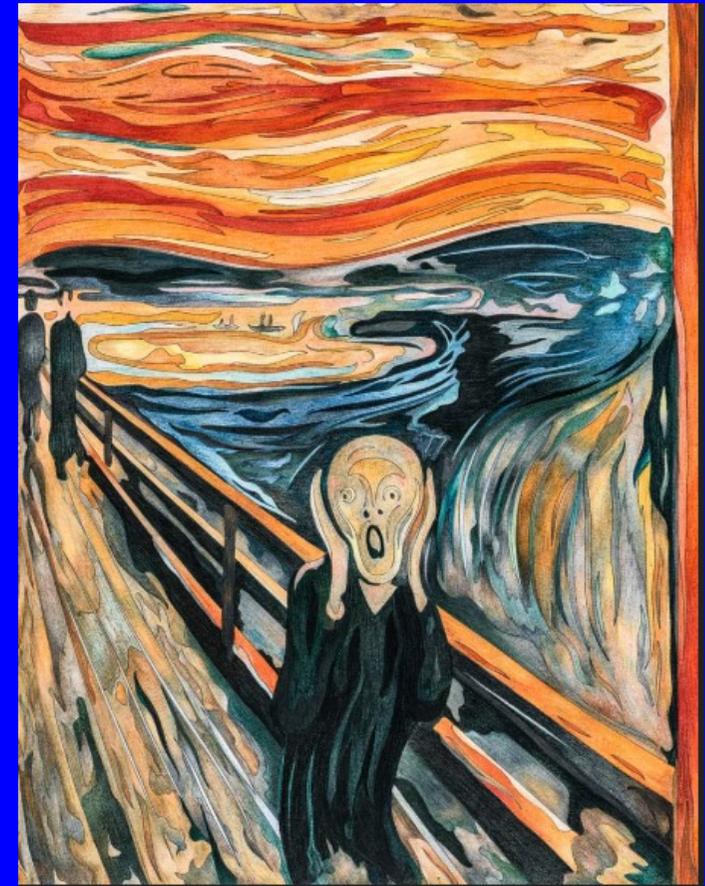
<https://www.markdiesendorf.com>



Image by Rod Taylor

Growing Threats to Environment, Social Justice, Human Rights, Peace & Democracy

- ★ Climate change; loss of forests, soils & freshwater; pollution of air, water, soil; etc
- ★ Wages stagnating while prices rise
- ★ Increasing gap between rich & poor, housing unaffordable; decline in basic public services
- ★ High probability of nuclear war
- ★ Democracy undermined by influence of big business & rich individuals
- ★ The right to peaceful protest undermined



'The Scream' by Edvard Munch

We are facing a Polycrisis!



Existential Threat to Civilisation: Climate Change

Global heating has already exceeded 1.5°C above pre-industrial
Time is running out to avoid crossing tipping points



Recommended Energy Transition Strategy



- ✦ Renewable electricity
- ✦ Electrification of transport & heating
- ✦ Energy efficiency
- ✦ Social justice

These actions will cut over 80% of Australia's GHG emissions.

- ✦ Still to do: Develop industry to produce renewable fuels, e.g. 'green' hydrogen & ammonia, for air & sea transport and non-energy industrial use

Some Resistance comes from a few Fossil Fools



Most resistance to Climate Action is from Fossil Fuel Industry

Also from property, nuclear, and ICE motor vehicle industries; capitalists; and some neoclassical economists



State Capture is responsible for most threats to environment, social justice, human & worker rights, and peace — the polycrisis

- ★ Capture of the nation-state – government, opposition, public service, media, other institutions – by powerful vested interests
- ★ Captors include fossil fuel, armaments, finance, property, gambling, weapons and pharmaceutical industries
- ★ Captors also include foreign governments & institutions: e.g., US military-industrial complex; World Bank & International Monetary Fund



Image by Rod Taylor

Capture of the Australian Nation-State on Climate/Energy by Fossil Fuel Interests



- ✦ Retiring Ministers for Energy/Resources of both major political parties appointed to highly-paid jobs in fossil fuel industry
- ✦ Both the Chief of Staff and a senior political adviser to previous Prime Minister appointed from Minerals Council of Australia
- ✦ Huge donations to both major parties from fossil fuel industry
- ✦ Campaigns by News Corp against climate science and renewable energy
- ✦ Manipulation of science has failed, except for some people in USA

State Capture by Global Military-Industrial Complex



Another
Existential Threat.
Huge climate
impacts



- ★ Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) is funded by US & Australian governments and weapons industry
- ★ Former Defence Minister appointed president of a major contractor to Defence
- ★ Before Australian government joined AUKUS and announced it would buy nuclear submarines, 5 'retired' US admirals were paid consultants to Defence
- ★ Expansion of US bases under Force Posture Agreement – land, sea and air – including access for nuclear weapons-capable B-52s based in Australia

State Capture by Property Development Industry threatens Social Justice & Energy Efficiency

Property Council of Australia

- ✦ Board made up of Australia's largest residential and commercial developers
- ✦ Campaigns for negative gearing & discounted capital gains tax
- ✦ In 2015 PCA's advocacy budget was \$6.4M + \$1M for communications, and \$7.2M for 'networking' (Phibbs & Gurrán 2016)

Results

- ✦ Property prices & rents increase
- ✦ Home ownership declines
- ✦ State planning in effect by developers
- ✦ Ugly, environmental damaging projects with insufficient social housing

From PCA's webpage



Advocacy

Our powerful advocacy initiatives influence policy outcomes nationally and across jurisdictions. As respected thought leaders in the business community, governments, stakeholders and our members rely on us to lead conversations, undertake research, and solve problems to create a better future.

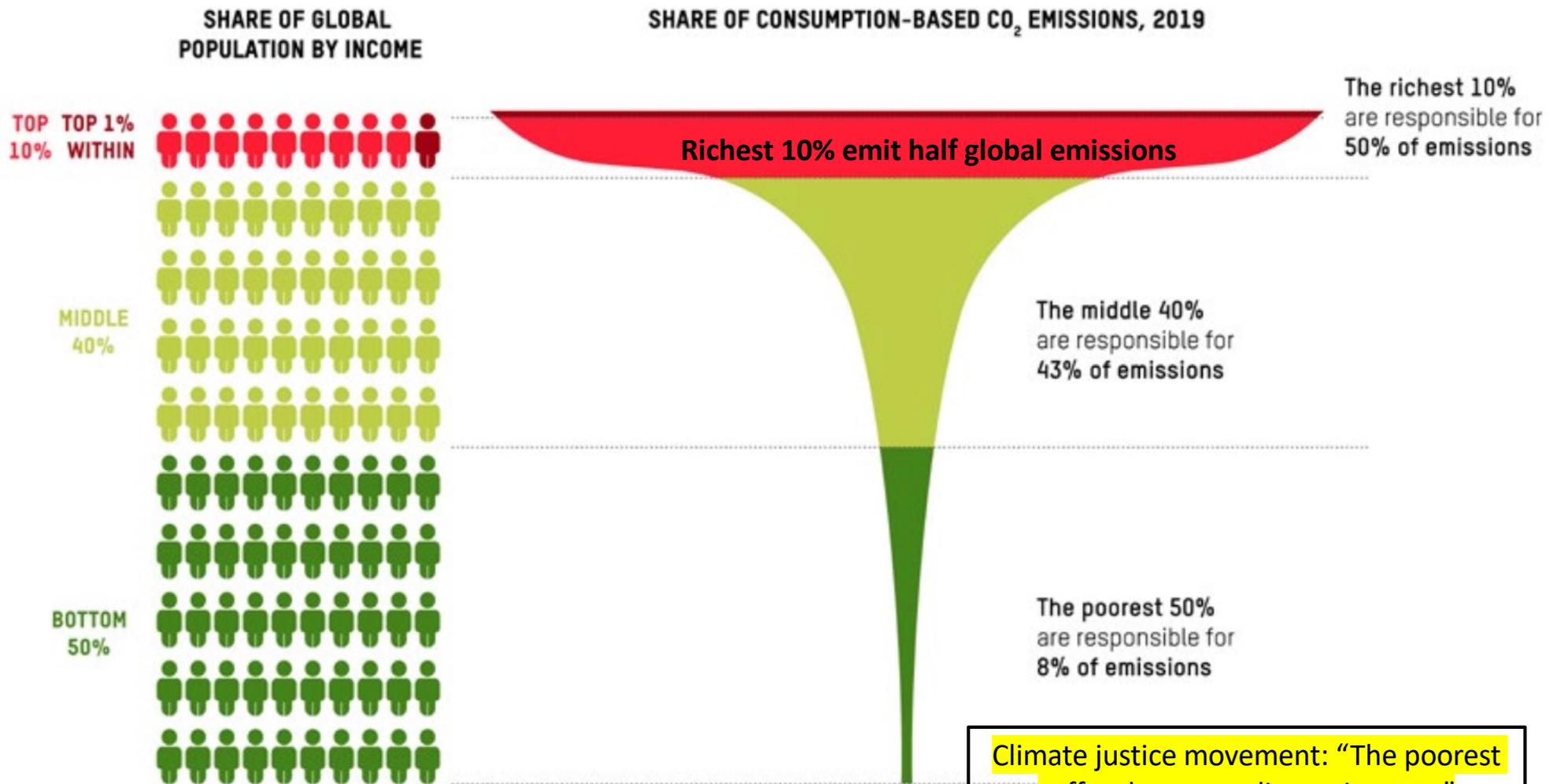
Methods of State Capture are essentially the same for all Issues

- ★ Political donations & election expenditure
- ★ Revolving door jobs
- ★ Concentrated media ownership & social media campaigns
- ★ Think tanks (e.g. IPA; ASPI)
- ★ Covert lobbying
- ★ Opaque consulting
- ★ Manipulating scientific research
- ★ Capitalism, especially its extreme form, neoliberalism



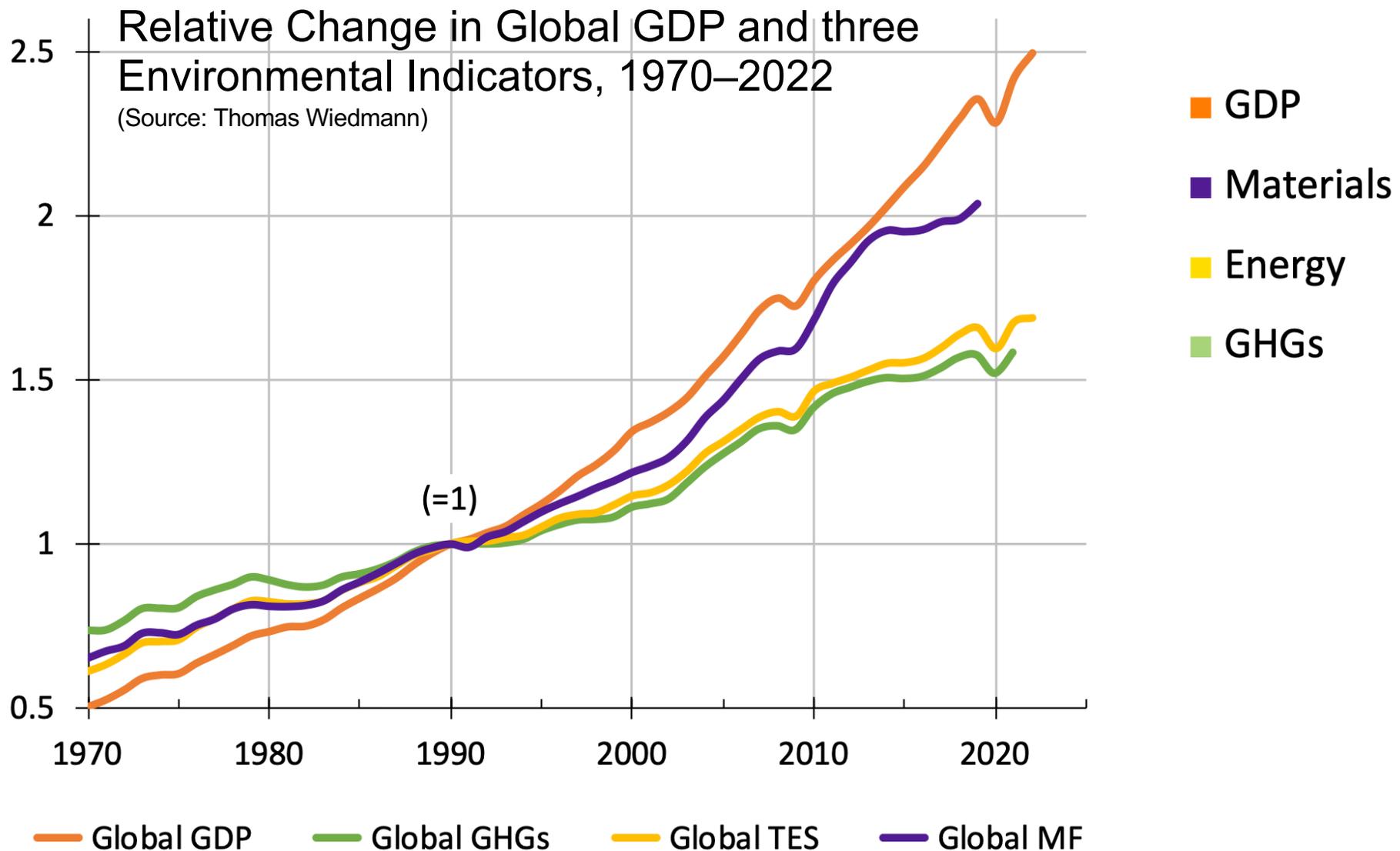
Climate Change and Social Justice are Linked

Share of Consumption-Based Global CO₂ Emissions by Income



Source: Oxfam (2023)

Environment and Capitalism linked via latter's notion of endless growth on finite planet



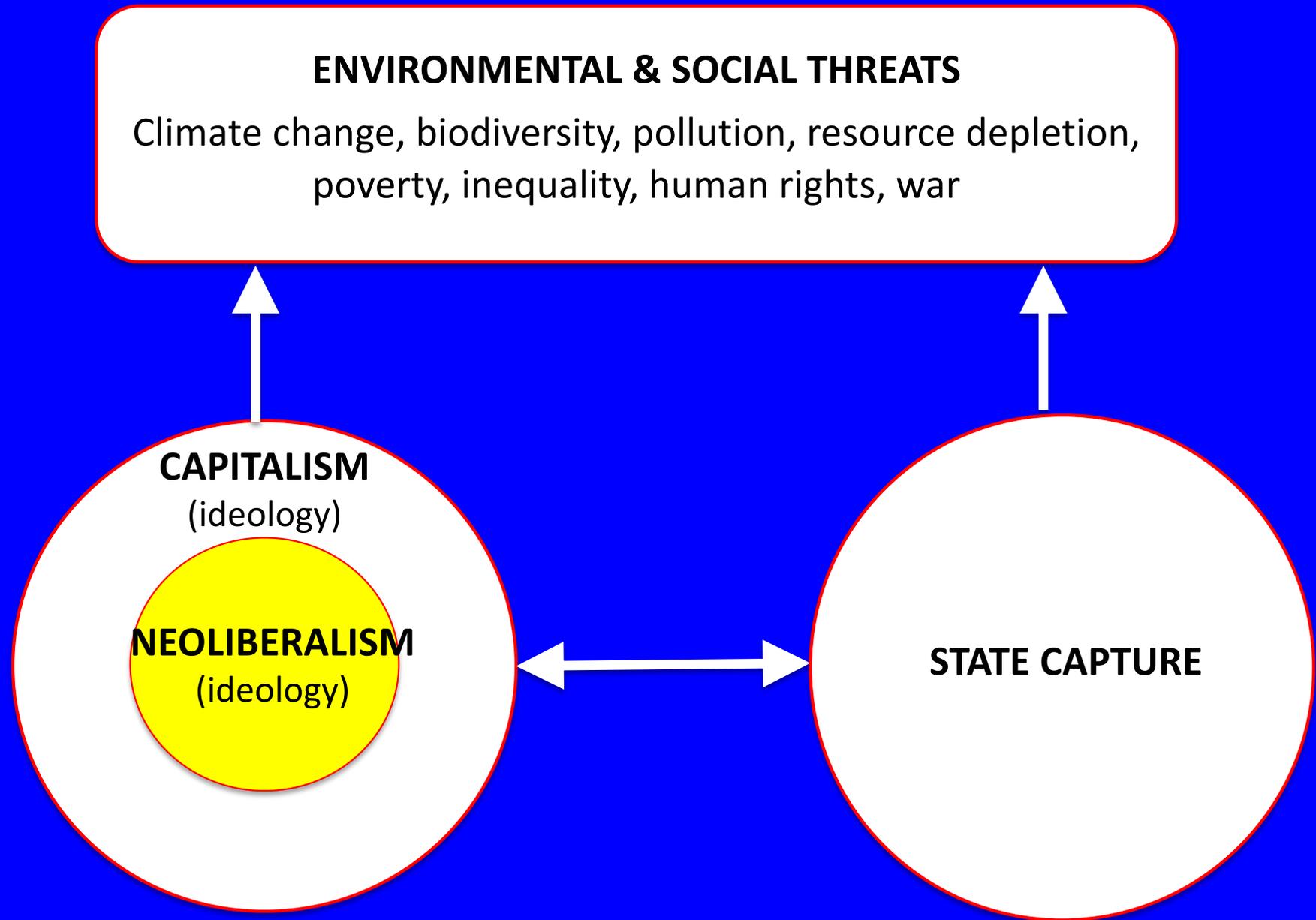
Summary: Threats to Environment, Social Justice, Peace and Democracy are Linked

- ★ Rich people and rich countries have the biggest environmental impacts
- ★ Environmental impacts are worse for the poor (e.g. droughts; floods)
- ★ A common driving force is capitalism, which is based on the exploitation of the planet and its people for private profit
- ★ The global economy is undemocratic, ruled by rich people, large corporations & rich countries
- ★ War has huge environmental, social justice and political impacts
- ★ War and subversion are tools of colonialism & neocolonialism
- ★ Better democracy → less social inequality and injustice and fewer wars

Links → Opportunity

What strategy could address all threats simultaneously?

Strategy: Weaken Driving Forces of Threats



Summary of Threats from Capitalism



- ★ Capitalism in general, and neoliberalism in particular, are based on exploiting the environment and most people to benefit a small minority.
- ★ The beneficiaries of this system achieve political power as well as economic —→ state capture

How to weaken state capture & capitalism

Build a Stronger Social Change Movement!

- ★ Form alliances of environmental, public health, social justice, human rights, trade union and peace NGOs to **challenge the driving forces of common to all these issues**



Diagram by
Rod Taylor

- ★ Driving forces are state capture by vested interests and capitalism, especially its extreme version, neoliberalism
- ★ State capture's **methods** are vulnerable to community: political donations; revolving door jobs; neoliberalism; etc

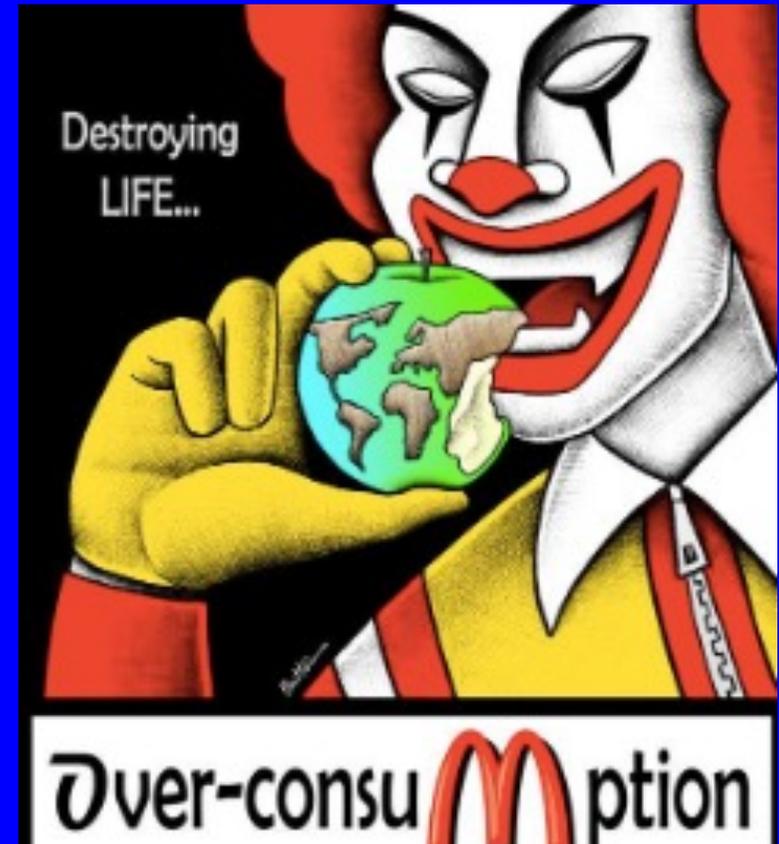
Capitalism is a Major Driver of the Polycrisis

It is based on myths favouring vested interests

Myth 1: “Endless growth in consumption on a finite planet is feasible and desirable”

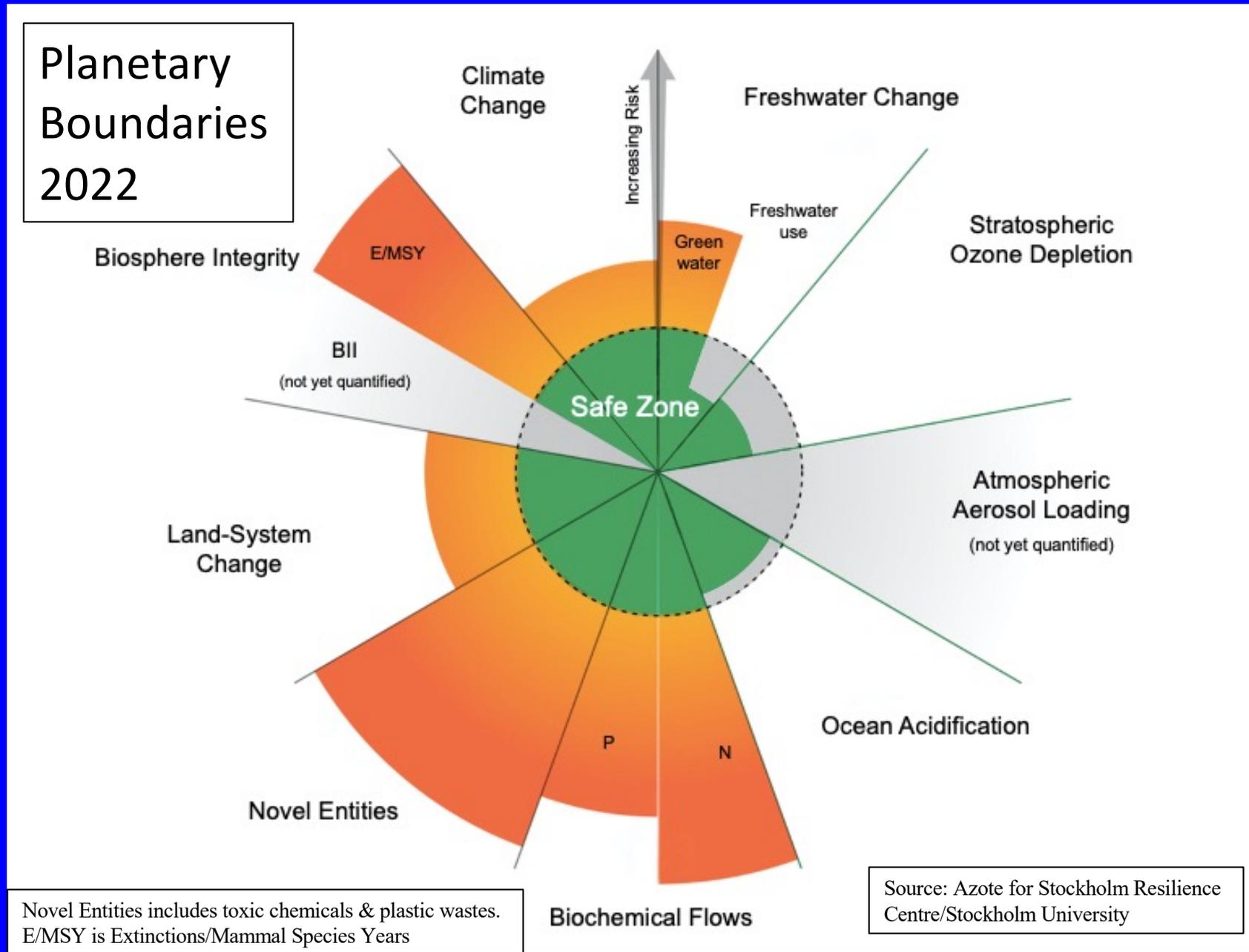


Refutation: Increasing economic activity → exceeding planetary boundaries; close correlation between GDP & consumption of materials & energy; no decoupling



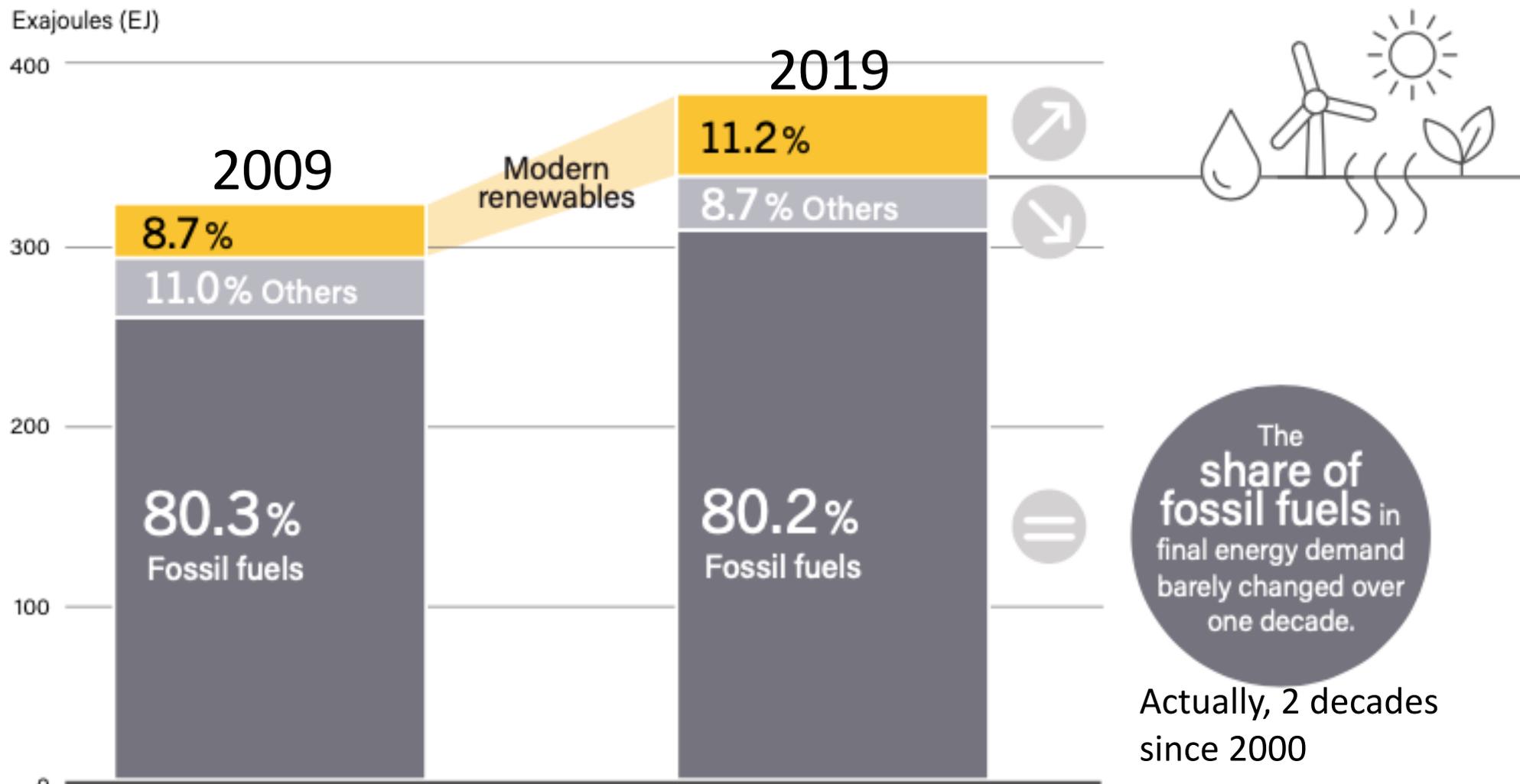
Existential Threats to Civilisation: Environmental

Climate change is linked to several other existential environmental threats



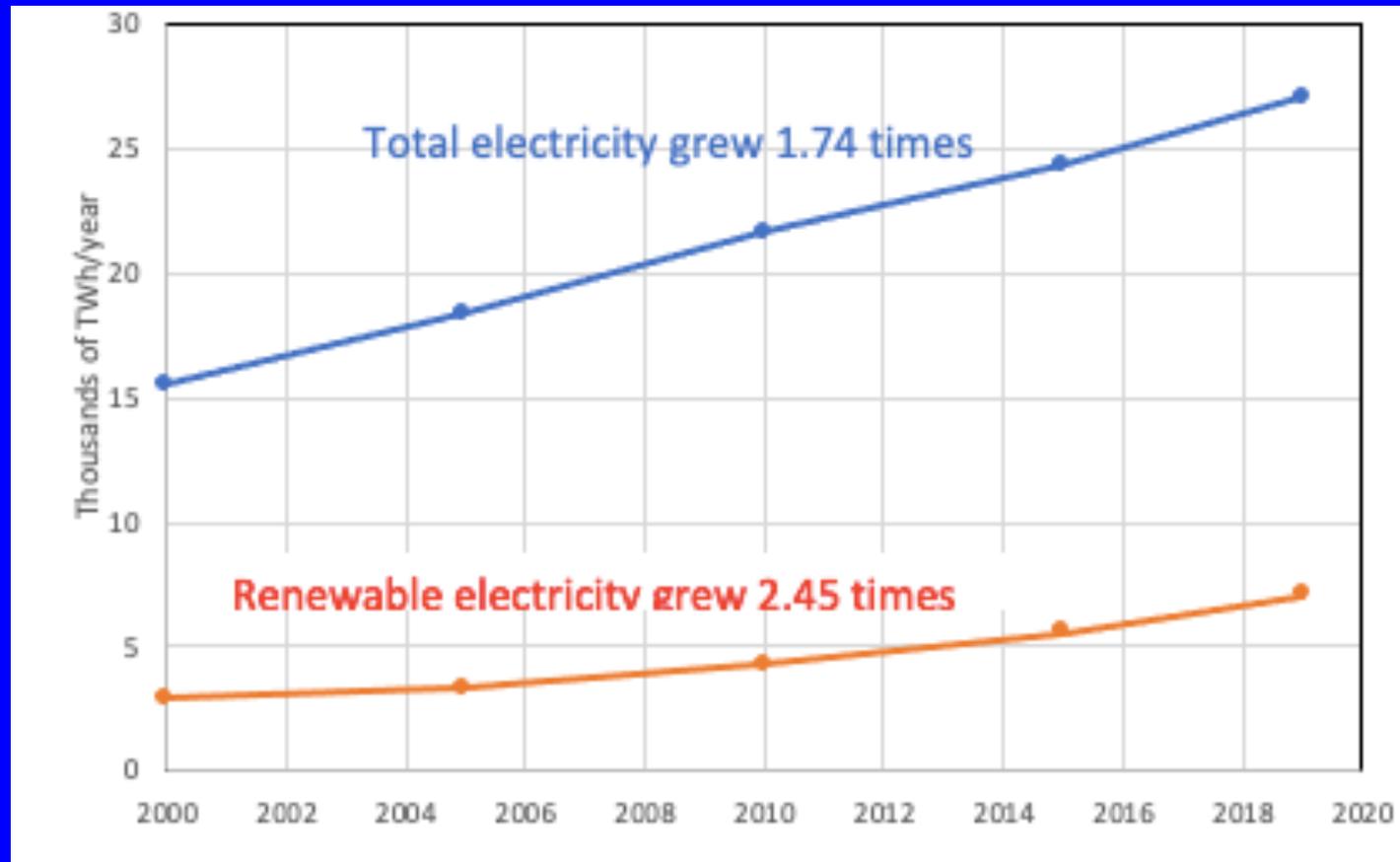
Growth in Global Total Final Energy Consumption, Electricity + Transport + Heating, 2009 to 2019

Source: IEA data



Growth in consumption → renewable energy is chasing a retreating target

Even renewable electricity was falling behind total global electricity generation, 2000–2019



Renewable electricity generation is growing at a faster rate, but still falling behind total generation in TWh, because it has started from a small base and it's chasing growing consumption, much of which is fossil fuelled.

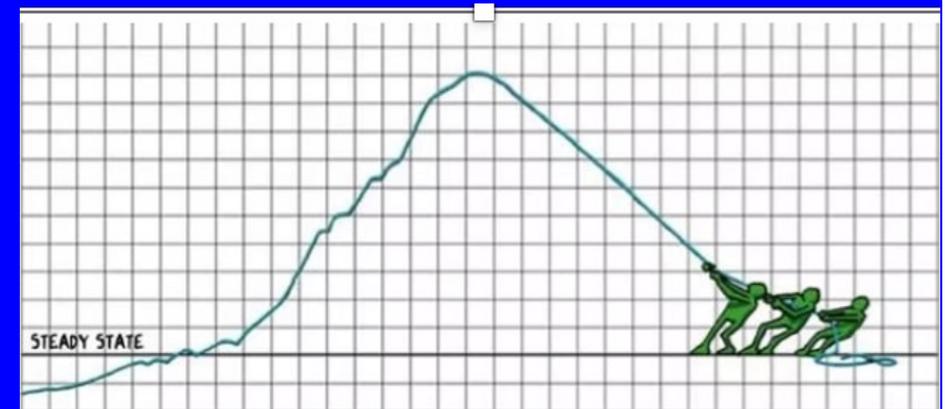
Economics for People and Planet

The First Steps to put Limits on Capitalism

- ★ Recognise that **GDP is NOT** a measure of national wellbeing
- ★ **Wellbeing measures:** environmental, socioeconomic and political system
- ★ Socioeconomic wellbeing measures & policies include **Universal Basic/Public Services:** public health, education, transport, housing & parks; low-cost childcare & aged care
- ★ **Political wellbeing** policies include controlling state capture by vested interests and so restoring democratic decision-making
- ★ Introduce a **Job Guarantee**, with jobs provided by local government and registered community organisations; funded by federal government

Economics for People & Planet: Phase 1 ctd

- ★ Transition to a (leaky) circular economy
- ★ Transition to a steady-state economy with reduced consumption of energy, materials & land, and no population growth



Policies to Reduce Consumption include:

- ★ Transition to circular economy
- ★ Wealth & inheritance taxes; progressive income tax; capital gains tax
- ★ Remove subsidies to destructive industries, tax them, phase them out

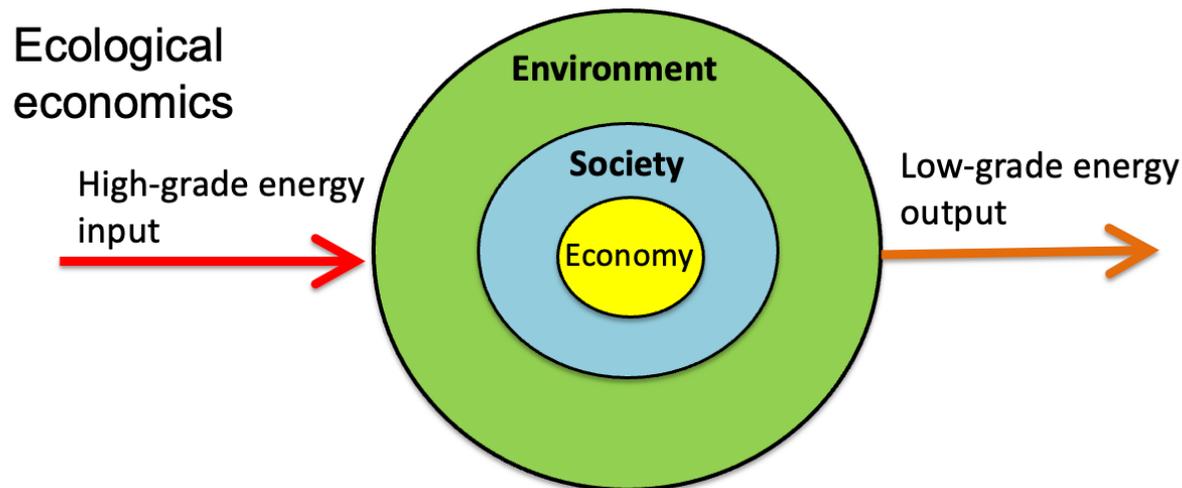


- ★ Facilitate creation of 'green' industries & businesses

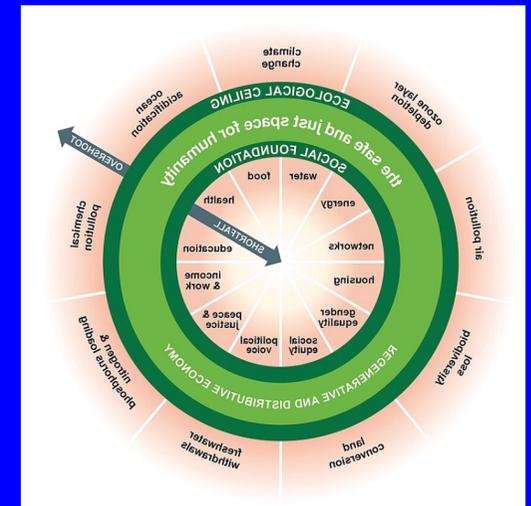


Create a Strong Social Change Movement to Challenge the Methods of State Capture

- ★ Form alliances of environmental, public health, social justice, trade union and peace organizations for Resistance and Vision
- ★ This could become a social movement
- ★ A potential theoretical economic system is Social Ecological Economics, with goals ecological sustainability & social justice



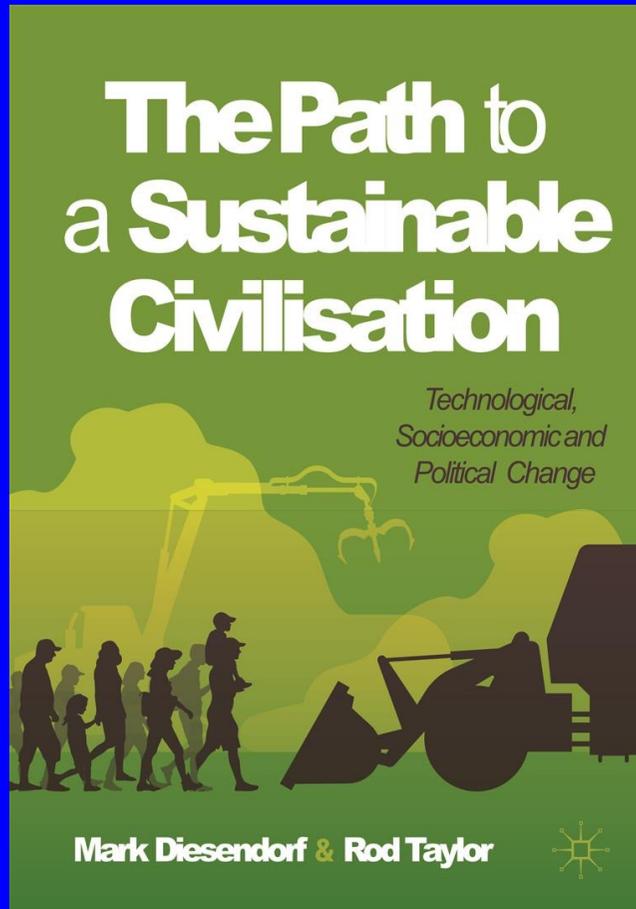
or



Successful Social Movements



Further Information



Research papers, popular articles,
podcasts & videos:
www.markdiesendorf.com

Success stories: Right Livelihood Award
(alternative Nobel Prize)

Book can be ordered from Springer
See markdiesendorf.com/books