

GREEN GROWTH – DEGROWTH – COLLAPSE

What do non-climate-expert intellectuals understand from the climate change issue?

New Year's card and photo-essay by Iván Tosics

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In early Autumn 2023 three Budapest intellectuals organized an informal weekend meeting for 30 people in a village, where all of them have thatched roof secondary farmhouses. The topic of the 'Vértesacsza conversation' was climate change: what is the challenge, what kind of policies prevail, what kind of local and individual actions are possible?

The organizers invited prominent Hungarian experts to speak. All the conditions for the 2 days' meeting were unusual: the setting (the shed of one of the farmhouses), the audience (limited in number but very interested in the topic), the financial conditions (all participants had to pay for their costs, speakers did not get any payment). The invitation letter from the three organizers emphasized the uniqueness of this occasion, allowing to speak openly to each other in an inspiring environment. No wonder: almost all invited persons came to the meeting.

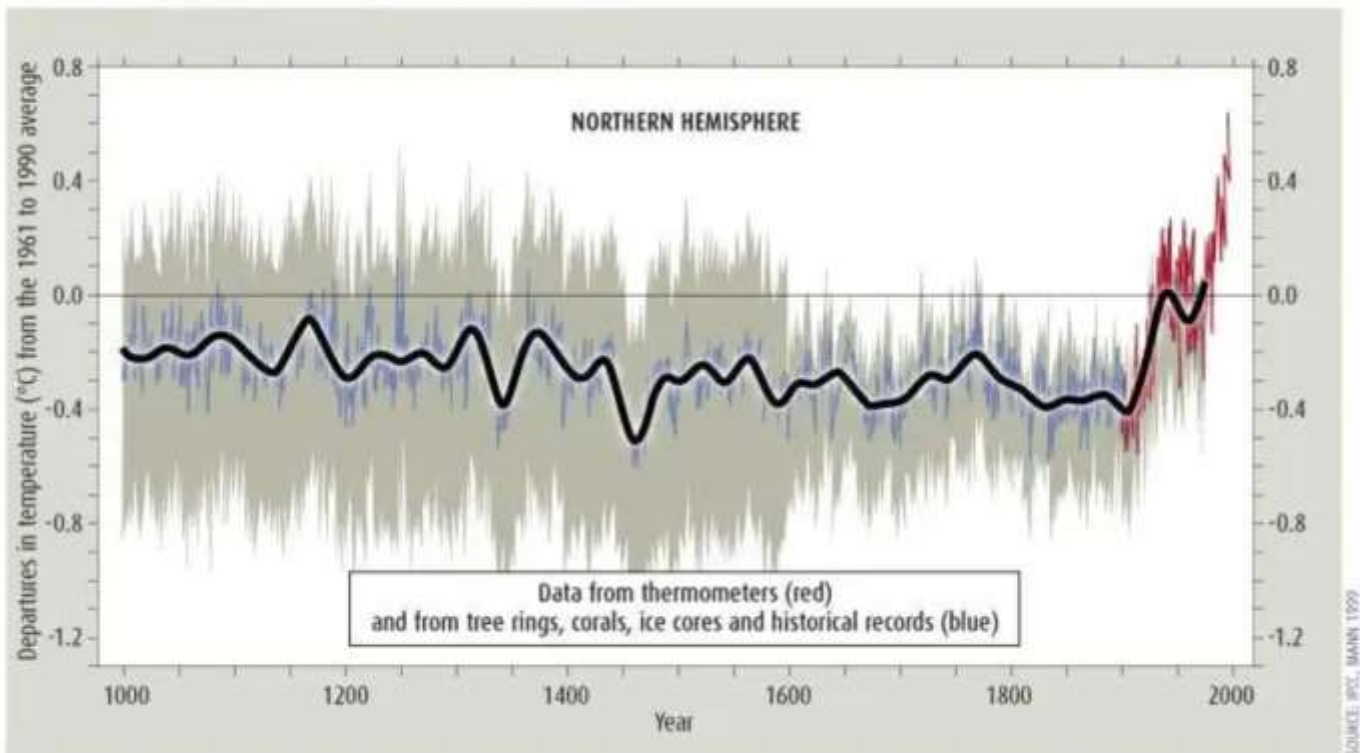


The following essay is an attempt to highlight important moments of the talks and debates. There were markedly different interpretations of the problems, of the potentials of institutional answers and of the possibilities of individual and local reactions. Even so, at the end of the two days' togetherness (which included a Saturday evening joint dinner with oven-cooked local specialities and drinks) participants agreed in the importance of such occasions: taking out two days from our fastly running and changing life, allowing to focus on one important issue through expert talks and debates with fellow intellectuals.

1. What are the climate related challenges today?

An illustration of the climate challenge got famous under the label 'hockey stick graph'.

The 2001 IPCC version: "Variations of the Earth's surface temperature over the past 1000 years"
The error bars (in grey) show the 95 per cent confidence range



Source: New Scientist, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn11646-climate-myths-the-hockey-stick-graph-has-been-proven-wrong/>

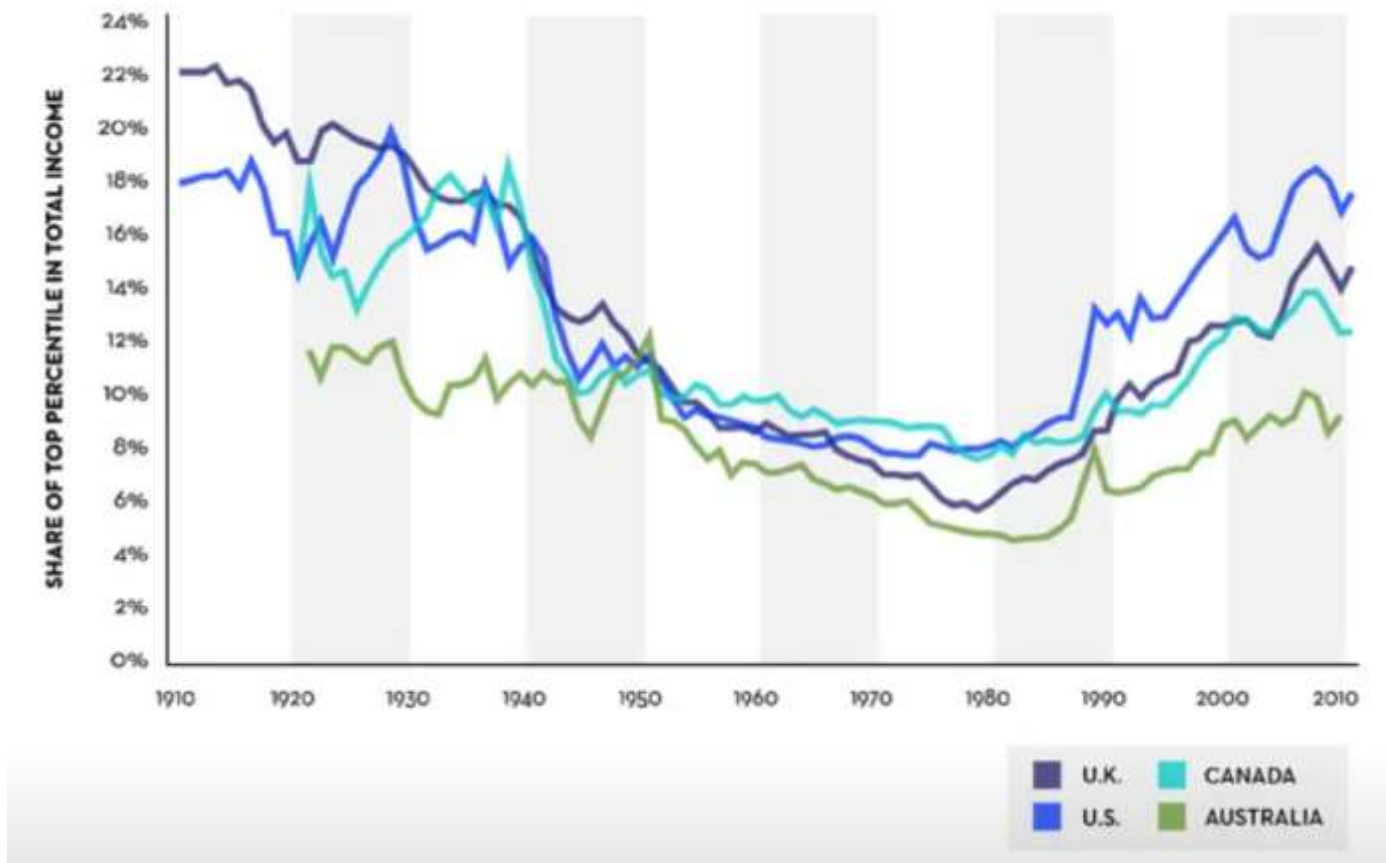
Although there are still debates around the hockey stick graph, several new calculations show that the original hockey stick of Mann, Bradley and Hughes (1999) shows correctly the danger of global warming.

Global warming and the resulting climate change is just one of the big challenges for mankind, among which the growing consumption of energy, loss of biodiversity, war, COVID, economic crises can be listed – leading to the polycrisis of our time.

Many people share the view that, as a consequence of the polycrisis, the functioning of civilization in its present form will end within a few decades, due to the effects of climate change, the shortage of food and raw materials and the resulting sharpening societal conflicts.

There were no differences among the invited experts in this diagnosis. They also agreed in the statement that economic growth can not solve the problem. Not only because the conditions for endless growth are not given in our finite world, but also because GDP growth is not leading to the proportional improvement of the situation of the whole of the society in the long term. This has been proved by Piketty, showing that economic growth leads to the increase of inequalities, as the top few percentage of population are skimming all the profit.

INCOME INEQUALITY IN ANGLO-SAXON COUNTRIES, 1910-2010



Source: Piketty's Inequality Story in Six Charts, by John Cassidy, The New Yorker, 2014
<https://www.newyorker.com/news/john-cassidy/piketys-inequality-story-in-six-charts>

Almost similar was the agreement among the speakers that green growth can not solve the problems, either. The electric car, the solar and wind power plant, bioethanol might be useful in some aspects, but are far not enough to stop the unfavourable trends. Moreover, the promised technological innovations are too far in the future to handle the speeding changes. Some people even called the green growth vision as a dead end.

If not economic growth and not even green growth can save the world, only degrowth remains. If thinking in terms of systems, such as materials, energy, emissions, only the reduction of economic growth can be the pledge for survival.

If this is the case, many serious questions emerge. How can people be convinced to decrease their consumption, accepting a different lifestyle? How can capitalist companies convinced and/or regulated to change towards no growth, which would mean less or no profit? Or more generally: how can capitalism fundamentally be changed, taking out the profit and growth motives from the principles of this economic system?

The extensive literature of degrowth, of course, shows that the real problem is more complex. Decreasing consumption of the rich is fundamental, but many people (the have-nots) could increase their consumption regarding basic needs. Although generally degrowth is needed, it is possible that some sectors could grow (e.g. energy-efficient renovation of buildings...)

But the main questions are very difficult even in their most simplistic form. In our discussion most time was spent to address the first question: how can people be convinced to decrease their consumption?

2. How to decrease consumption and emissions of people?

There are several ways how people try to address the climate change issue, aiming to change their behaviour in different ways. It is not at all sure, however, that such good-willing actions lead to the result aimed for. There is little information available for the broad public about the environmental effects of different types of human activities. One of the scientific publications came to the following result regarding the emission-saving potentials of different actions.

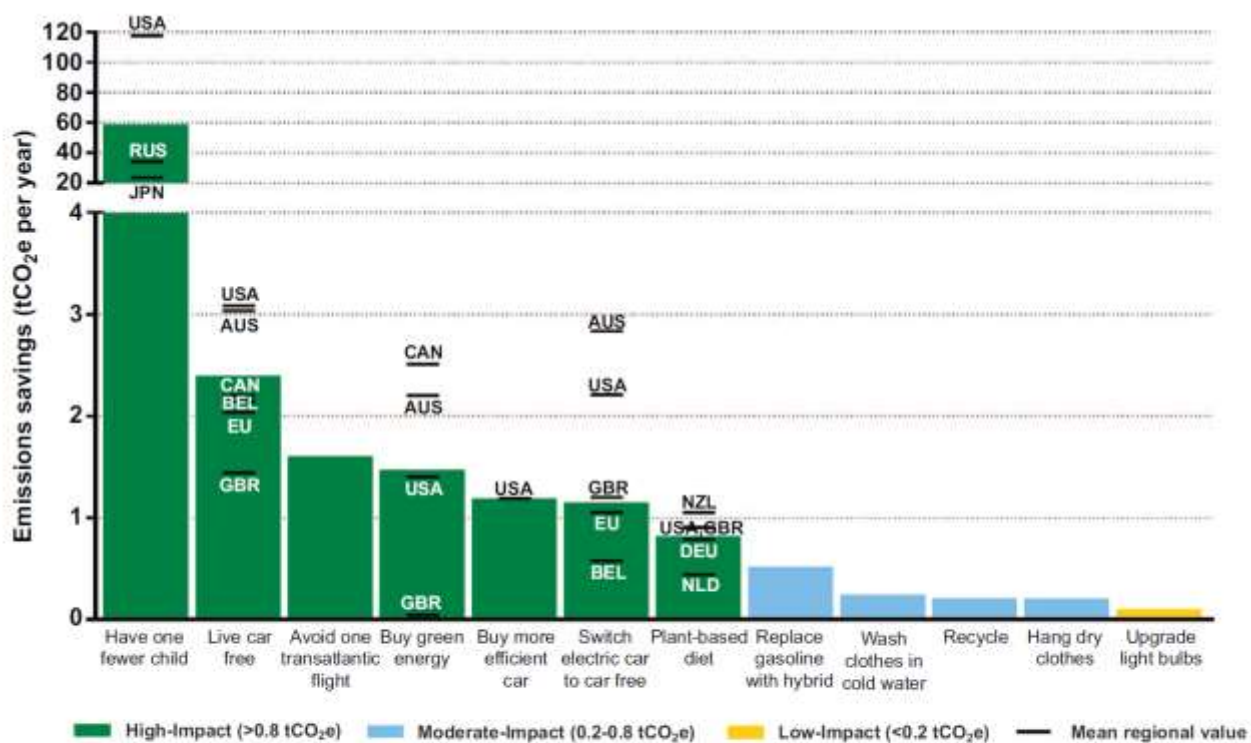


Figure 1. A comparison of the emissions reductions from various individual actions. The height of the bar represents the mean of all studies identified in developed nations, while black lines indicate mean values for selected countries or regions (identified by ISO codes) where data were available from specific studies. We have classified actions as high (green), moderate (blue), and low (yellow) impact in terms of greenhouse gas emissions reductions. Note the break in the y-axis. See supplementary materials 5 for details.

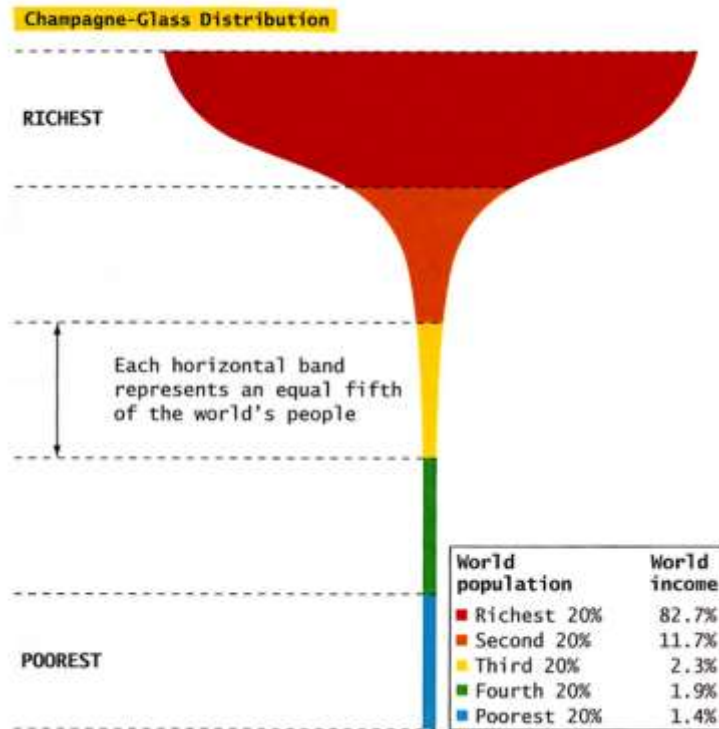
Source: Seth Wynes and Kimberly A Nicholas 2017 The climate mitigation gap: education and government recommendations miss the most effective individual actions *Environ. Res. Lett.* 12 074024
<https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/aa7541/pdf>

The chart suggests that having smaller number of children would bring far the highest environmental impact, following by car free living, skipping overseas flights, using green energy, riding more efficient car or electric car, introducing plant-based diet, ... On the other hand, upgrading light bulbs or recycling have far less, or even negligible impact on the emissions.

It is obvious that most people are unwilling to give up by themselves the comfort of travelling by airplane or by large and strong cars, for example. The dilemmas of decreasing consumption are even more serious as it is linked to inequalities. This can easily be illustrated with the champagne glass example. The wealth of people is very unequal: the highest, most affluent quintile of people are responsible for the large majority (over four quintiles) of all the wealth. These people are at the same time also the most influential in political and economic terms and are very unwilling to give up any element of their wealth and privileged lifestyle.

Champagne Glass Distribution of Wealth

Laura Norén
on May 27, 2009



Champagne Glass Distribution from Conley (2008) You May Ask Yourself

Source: <https://thesocietypages.org/graphicsociology/2009/05/27/champagne-glass-distribution-of-wealth/>

The problem with changing consumption and emissions is similar, as these are also very unequally distributed among population groups. The task would be to change the champagne glass into a vertical sided beer mug. This is clearly a question of redistribution from the first to the other quintiles – while also the total amount of champagne has to shrink.

The redistribution of wealth and consumption is unimaginable for most rich people. An interesting illustration for that is the Abdulla family, posing with all of their possessions for a portrait in front of their home in Kuwait City. Like many Kuwaitis the Abdullas enjoy a high standard of living, subsidized by the oil rich country. Even if having already four cars, they complain not to have a fishing boat and enough money and time to travel. In general: wealthy people dream about further increasing their wealth.

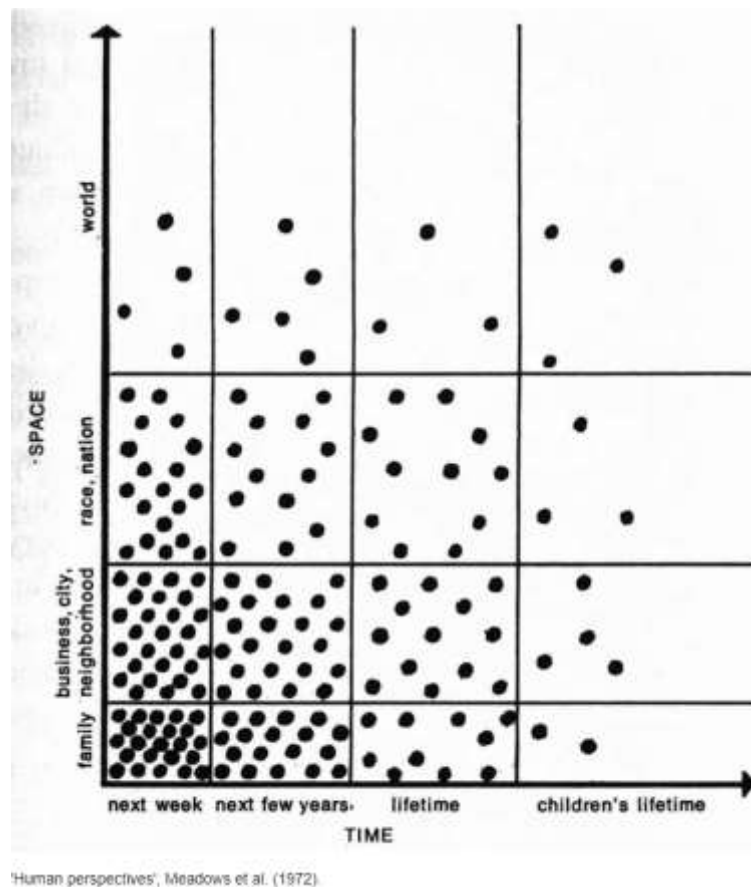


From Peter Menzel's Material World Project that showed 30 statistically average families in 30 countries with all their possessions. <https://www.menzelphoto.com/portfolio/G000GPaxwfsZQ0Q>

Taken the strong financial and political power of the rich, it is no wonder that politicians are unwilling to touch such people and areas. One of the rare exceptions is the case of Gothenburg, where the city recognized that the efforts towards sustainable mobility are most hindered by the high emissions coming from the most affluent areas of the city where the rich families have many cars. The city launched a project to discuss the issue with the residents. Through the work of facilitators in 12 meetings some results have been achieved to change the mobility behaviour of the rich residents. (Source: presentation of Mats Alfredson, City of Gothenburg, at the European Week of Cities and regions, Brussels, 10 October 2023.)

3. What can the state and green movements do to decrease emissions and change the growth paradigm?

The Club of Rome report from 1972 illustrates vividly the difficulties to react on the climate problem with long-term and over-arching, world-wide policies: the political considerations for re-election, the market interest in profit maximising and the individual constraints (lack of knowledge and interest) all point towards short-term and local reactions.



Any state interventions to introduce climate mitigation measures are confronted with huge resistance from the side of the affected families – for example Dutch farmers were blocking highways objecting nitrogen-related restrictions; the French eco-tax initiative sparked the yellow vest movement in France. The resistance capacity of the rich is even stronger, therefore governments rarely address the rich directly. It is telling that Macron gave up some of his tax increasing ideas but refused to reinstate a wealth tax which he scrapped upon entering into office.

Not only national governments but also international organizations have difficulties to achieve real changes in climate policy issues. The issue of taxonomy for sustainable activities, related to green conditions for lending (if a company does not reach a certain percentage of 'green behaviour', it cannot receive a loan) sparked huge debates in the EU. In the discussion on which economic activities are environmentally sustainable, Germany insisted to natural gas while France to nuclear power. Another difficulty is that the Global South is blocking the direction that renewable technologies should be supported instead of more polluting, outdated technologies.

In this difficult situation some green movements consider state efforts insufficient and radicalize. A relatively 'mild version' of such groups is the [tyre extinguishers](#). It is a general view, however, that eco-terrorism, especially if directed on almost randomly selected, basically innocent people, scares the majority of society, rarely achieving the aimed behaviour change. As the Hungarian philosopher, [András Lányi said](#): „No one has ever been motivated to ride a bike because their car's tire was punctured. This only made him want to hate the Greens and cast his vote for the least green, right-wing populist party in the next election.”

4. So, what...?

So far it became clear that drastic reductions in emissions and pollution are needed, however neither individual actions, nor state or international efforts are able to achieve the necessary changes in human behaviour and in the functioning of economic enterprises, or regarding capitalism in general. If accepting this conclusion, we would arrive to the verdict that collapse of our world is unavoidable. However, in the Vértesacsza meeting two ideas emerged for the way out from this seemingly deadlock situation.

On the one hand, Zoltán Pogátsa raised the idea of [Modern Monetary Theory](#). The theory argues that countries that issue their own currencies can never “run out of money” the way people or businesses can. In her new book [Stephanie Kelton](#) demonstrates that concerns about public debt overhang are ill-founded as government spending properly targeted and government debt need not be problematic.

Based on this – by many economists criticized – idea, it is the government who can change the champagne glass towards a beer mug, by investing heavily in the lower quintiles. To add to the lower segments seems to be politically much easier than taking directly away from the highest one. In practice this could mean big government investments into sustainable sectors of economy, eg low emission cars, building retrofitting, education. If the less polluting products become affordable for the poorer segments, both environmental and inequality issues are tackled.

The other idea, mentioned by Péter Kajner and Márió Nobilis, is based on the notion of democratically developed resilience. The aim would be to move towards human values, a less material and energy intensive direction, in such a way that the quality of life of people does not depend on material assets. Education and conscious mobilization of people are needed to develop resilience, based on local democratic foundations. Constant, long-term trust building would be necessary. Besides new bottom-up ways for the development of collective knowledge, also top-down, government supported tools could help, such as creating a conditional basic income system, in which the work done for the local sustainable community is the condition for the basic income.

In that way more and more communities could be created in which people like the alternative offered by the greens, evaluating it as good and attractive, despite its much lower level of material and energy use (and less emissions).

Neither of these two ideas is easy to implement. Especially the second needs long time – much longer than the climate crisis allows. COVID, as a shock-type crisis, helped a lot to distribute both of these ideas, but this was a relatively short crisis. Seemingly larger crises are needed and longer periods of catharsis, to achieve fundamental changes.

The two-day long meeting in Vértesacsza ended with mixed feelings. On the one hand the threatening diagnosis of the climate challenge and the existing, and so far not effective political and institutional efforts (tax increases to punish polluting materials and activities, COP discussions and world-wide organizations to fight climate change) do not allow to have any optimistic look into the future. The lastly mentioned new ideas are in their infancy with many uncertainties.

Although it is clear that individual actions are not enough to stop climate change, we recognized that all of us have responsibilities to fight against the barriers which limit to achieve our own sustainability expectations. Bottom-up identification of the barriers, if added together efficiently, might force national and international players to consider real changes in politics and regulation.

Despite all the difficulties a positive spirit developed during the meeting due to the rare opportunity to confront the views of very different disciplines, represented by very different people. Such exchanges, held in friendly and inspiring atmosphere, might help us to better understand where we are and what options for the future can be expected.



Acknowledgement

The main organizers of the 2023 'Vértesacsza conversation' were **Lajos Koszorú, Péter Szaló and Iván Tosics**

The speakers of the event were as follows:

Péter Kajner, Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Human Ecology

Sándor Kerekes, economics Professor Emeritus, Budapest Corvinus University

Márió Nobilis, Catholic priest, Assistant Professor at Sapientia, Monastic College of Religious Sciences

Zoltán Pogátsa, economist, sociologist, Associate Professor at the University of Sopron

Barbara Botos, Ambassador at Large for Climate, Ministry of Energy, Hungary

László Z Karvalics, university Associate Professor, Institute of Advanced Studies Kőszeg

András Lányi, director of the Human Ecology Master's Program at Eötvös Loránd University

Orsolya Barsi, head of the climate strategy department in Budapest Municipality

Julianna Szabó, Budapest University of Technology and Economics, Urban Planning Department

Gábor Tokai, landscape architect, urbanist

Anna Móricz, landscape architect

Péter Szaló jr, employee of Budapest Municipality

Balázs Kulcsár, local organic farmer in Vértesacsza

Zsuzsa Mészáros, community developer

Réka Nagy, community developer

Oláh Roland community developer

Rihay Zsuzsa Szatyor Association

Kristóf Asbót, TV director and cameraman, stage designer and interior architect, video communication, artistic consultant, at FUGA Budapest Architectural Center