

Nordic Energy Efficiency Conference Oslo 2025

Food for thought: A new narrative
for “Energy efficiency first”

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Summary and key takeaways

A new narrative for “Energy efficiency first”

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Vetlesen opened his talk by noting that this was the first time ever he was invited to speak from a stage on energy issues. He opposed the narrative of a never-ending increasing demand for energy, stating that this might be easy to swallow but is not sustainable in the long term within a capitalist and market-orientated system.

The philosophical approach by Vetlesen did not attack the individual morality of consumers, as he noted that it is a human condition to want more of a good thing. However, he claimed that today’s market economy has a systemic bias towards more spending and less product quality.

The efficiency principle, Vetlesen noted, is historically about doing more for less but is often used to reinforce endless growth and is not necessarily used for sustainability. To underline this point, he noted that gains in efficiency are often counteracted by increased consumption. He believed this to be because of the current market structures. Further, he commented that non-sustainability and irreversibility are key components of the current market system and are driven by privatisation and globalisation. He pointed out that it has become easier to export threats to nature and climate and that the price is paid by those who can’t afford to move away from the affected areas.

Another key point of his speech was to attack the notion of decoupling, the idea that growth can continue without hurting the limitation of planetary natural resources with the promise of novel technologies. To underscore his point, he cited Tim Jackson’s argument. Jackson argues that no credible scenario allows for infinite growth while respecting environmental limits.

Vetlesen, however, left with an optimistic note. He insisted on the historical virtues of gratitude, collaboration, and modesty and commented that these are typical for the Nordic countries. As such, they can hopefully form the basis of a more sustainable future and a collective mindset that enough is enough.

Key Takeaways:

- Efficiency alone doesn’t address structural drivers of overconsumption; a culture of sufficiency is needed.
- Capitalism and the current market economy are designed to prioritise growth over sustainability. This can also offset efficiency gains through increased consumption.
- The Nordic region’s tradition of modesty, gratitude, and collaboration could form the basis of a more sustainable narrative and consumption culture.



The limit of the planet is threatened by the limitlessness of the market.

Arne Johan Vetlesen

Written speech by Arne Johan Vetlesen

A new narrative for "Energy efficiency first"

Even though we live in uncertain times, we are constantly being told that one thing is certain: namely, that in the future there will be an ever-growing increase in the demand for energy, the Nordic countries being no exception. The widely shared assumption is that enhanced efficiency—in terms of technologies, in particular—will help us meet the stipulated demand for energy. I, for one, find this questionable.

Let me start by asking what efficiency is: what kind of thinking, principles, and values is it based upon? Efficiency is related to the human tendency to want more of a good thing. The efficiency principle, following Thomas Princen, is expressed in the idea of getting more benefit for a given effort or of investing less to get the same outcome.

However, in today's situation of environmental crisis, enhanced efficiency and better cooperation are not enough to arrest declines in ecosystem functioning. Popular as these principles are, both suffer from what Princen calls "normative neutrality.". One can find efficiencies in harvesting a forest so as to save trees just as well as one can find efficiencies to get every last bit of fibre off an acre of timberland. One can cooperate to protect a forest just as well as one can cooperate to clear-cut it. When incentives line up on the side of return on investment and growth, cooperation and efficiency lean toward clear-cutting and fibre extraction, toward ever more economic activity, spurring material and energy throughput in the economy. The pursuit of these principles may actually thwart ecological restoration and sustainable use by helping key actors disguise, displace, and postpone true costs. Squeezing out yet another production efficiency, even in the spirit of cooperation, is of little benefit if throughput still increases.

Efficiency and cooperation are thus no more suited to reversing the trends and promoting sustainable practice than they are at stimulating those trends and thwarting sustainable practice. The two principles do not distinguish between environmental improvement and sustainability. They do not address two defining characteristics of contemporary environmental trends:

The increasing criticality of environmental threats, problems characterised by irreversibility and non-substitutability, threshold and synergistic effects (Surprise"), long time lags between cause and effect, and, therefore, limited predictability and limited control. Climate change, biodiversity loss, soil erosion, persistent toxics, and declining freshwater availability are examples of such threats.

The increasing ease of exporting the risks of critical threats and escaping responsibility for their creation. Globalisation, privatisation, and diminishing state capacity conspire with technological innovation and market manipulation to skew the benefits and costs of economic activity, creating the illusion of environmental progress.



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A new narrative for "Energy efficiency first" (Continued)

I suggest that, rather than promoting a narrative about efficiency first, we need to look for an alternative narrative, call it an older one rather than a new one, based on sufficiency, highlighting restraint, frugality, and respect for limits, and advancing the values and attitudes of modesty and gratitude. Whereas efficiency by its nature will facilitate more growth—this being its promise, as it were—the problem with the mentality of which efficiency is part is that enough is never enough. What is needed in our present situation of crisis is a reduction of energy consumption, not its continued increase.

Let me turn to a Nordic philosopher who was keenly involved in this issue, namely the Finnish philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright, a pupil of Ludwig Wittgenstein and his successor at the University of Cambridge. Von Wright is pessimistic about the prospects of developing sufficiently deep solutions to the ecological crisis (see Høyer 2012). He considers the concept of "sustainable development" launched by the Brundtland Commission in 1987 to be highly problematic. In particular, he finds questionable the assumption that the growth in industrial countries can carry on, that the material standards of living in these countries shall not be reduced, and that people shall not be forced to refrain from the thousands of new toy products that the advanced technological industry spews out in ever-increasing quantities to geographically expanding markets.

Without using the concept, we can say that von Wright anticipated, by way of warning, the present-day popular idea of so-called "de-materialisation," namely that thanks to production and consumption becoming less resource-intensive per unit of output, a world economy that enjoys constant growth is a distinct possibility, one to be welcomed also by environmentally concerned people.

To be sure, the notion of "decoupling," based on de-materialisation, is intriguing: as economic output becomes progressively less dependent on material throughput, the economy can continue to grow without breaching ecological limits (tipping points) or running out of resources. Indeed, the constellation "more economic activity, less environmental damage" suggests a win-win situation. No wonder this idea is so popular with politicians.

However, the notion does not hold up to closer scrutiny. Commenting on the promise of decoupling, the British economist Tim Jackson, in his book *Prosperity without Growth*, points out that there is as yet no credible, socially just, ecologically sustainable scenario of continually growing incomes for a world of eight or nine or ten billion people. It is entirely fanciful to suppose that "deep" emission and resource cuts can be achieved without confronting the structure of market economies. Nowhere, Jackson continues, is there any evidence that efficiency can outrun scale in the way it must do if growth is to be compatible with sustainability. Far from acting to reduce the throughput of goods, technological progress serves to increase productive output by reducing factor costs. The phenomenon of "rebound" attests to this: money saved through energy efficiency gets spent on other goods and services (see Jackson 2010: 86, 88, 95).



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A new narrative for "Energy efficiency first" *(Continued)*

In my view, what prevents "enough is enough" from happening is not lack of knowledge or concern or moral character in the individual consumer. It is the structural reliance of the market system itself on continued growth: on investments continuing to bring profit, on profits continuing to grow. The twin objectives of growth and profit—whereby profit is both growth-dependent and growth-driving—are the system-immanent key characteristics of a capitalist economy; and they happen to be exactly the traits resulting in capitalism's incompatibility with the planetary key characteristics of limits and finiteness.

As capitalism goes global, all human needs are directed towards the market, and all cultures are forced to strive for the very instrument—the market—that continuously robs humans of their ability to survive by their own efforts and skills and to live lives that do not lead to an overload of global carrying capacity—the limit which is threatened by the limitlessness of the market and the insatiability of commercialised needs.

The cycles of creative destruction attest to this: product lifetimes plummet as durability is designed out of consumer goods and obsolescence is designed in. Quality is sacrificed relentlessly to volume throughput. As Jackson observes, the throw-away society is not so much a consequence of consumer greed as a structural prerequisite for survival—survival of the capitalist system, that is. To an ever greater—not smaller—extent, "the institutions of consumer society are designed to favour a particularly materialistic individualism and to encourage the relentless pursuit of consumer novelty because it is exactly what is needed to keep the economy going" (Jackson 2010: 163).

Bibliography

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