

## A3 | FROM UNETHICAL GROWTH TO ETHICAL DEGROWTH: CAN CAPITALISM BE TRANSFORMED?

### Introduction

A post-pandemic recovery must be anchored in economic growth and productivity while including newer policy thinking around inclusivity. (Speer, Fagan, and Glozic 2020)

So wrote a group of Canadian global policy wonks, emphasizing that ramped up economic growth is a “crucial precondition for addressing many of the challenges facing our society” from “funding for education, health, care and social services” to improving “employment, wages, and, ultimately, living conditions” (Speer, Fagan, and Glozic 2020). The former governor of the Bank of Canada was similarly blunt about normalizing post-COVID-19: “The main thing is for us to focus on growth ... to do some things that will boost growth forever” (Armstrong 2021). These arguments are the *lingua franca* of many economists. They echo those made in the recessionary aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. They also bump up against the one (literally burning) challenge usually missing from their list of economic priorities: climate change.

Climate change is only one of the pressing ecological crises we face (Chapter A1). We, but most notably the wealthier global quintile of us, are cannibalizing the environmental bases of our survival. The rich country members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) presently consume annually 1.7 times the ecological resources the earth can regenerate and provide. If everyone in the world consumed at the level of OECD countries, we would need 4.75 earths to meet our consumable wants. Yet the (still) poverty and disease burdened majority of the world needs to consume more to achieve an ethical life expectancy at birth, pegged at around 74 years. The only way this discordance can be resolved is for our over-consuming global minority to go on a strict diet in which their present levels of material consumption shrink dramatically so that consumption can increase, within planetary limits, for others. Such a resolution is anathema to capitalism and something for which our present economic systems are ill-equipped.

Previous editions of *Global Health Watch* have taken a critical stance on the neoliberal model of global capitalism, including some aspects of its growth imperative. Questioning the necessity of endless economic growth is not new. Since 1972’s publication of the Club of Rome’s *Limits to Growth*, a study based on computer simulation models (Meadows et al. 1972), researchers have repeatedly

argued that it is impossible for populations, food production, industrialization, natural resource exploitation, and pollution to continue growing without the closed planetary system eventually collapsing. A half century later with daily reality eclipsing computer modeling, what alternatives might we invoke?

### Localization/deglobalization: taming capitalism

The early years of the new millennium saw two differently coined but overlapping roadmaps for a break for our consumptogenic societies. In 2007, *Localization: A Global Manifesto* was published, arguing the need to reject economic globalization in favor of localized production and consumption (Hines 2007). The pandemic has embraced this to an extent as the collapse of global supply chains for medical equipment led some countries to begin enhancing their national manufacturing capacities and to look inwards with respect to economic stimulus. But the localization manifesto went much further, urging a return to import protections to safeguard national and regional economies, localized money flows to rebuild community economies, national (not global) competition policies to ensure high-quality and affordable products, progressive and resource taxation measures to finance an equitable transition to an ecologically sustainable level of production, and trade and aid to assist rebuilding local economies rather than to increase international competitiveness. Food, the Manifesto insisted, should be regionally sourced, one of the axioms of an agroecological food system (Chapter C5) and of a resilient human livelihood (Cristiano 2021).



**Image A3.1** Capitalism, the high price of healthy foods, and the hidden environmental cost.

Source: Sketch by Kriti Shukla for *Global Health Watch 6* (dining cartoon).

These localizing strategies are all reasonable, but they are also ones that work better for larger, already well-endowed nation states. They are more challenging for smaller countries lacking certain key resources for food, energy, and industrial inputs that would allow for such localized self-sufficiencies. Trade might be environmentally and equitably better if practiced on a more local or regional basis (Chapter D2), but some degree of global trade would still be needed. Almost 20 years ago, Walden Bello, a Philippines-based economist and founder of the NGO Focus on the Global South, laid out a platform for what he called “deglobalization” through which national economies are strengthened even as pluralist global governance is improved (Bello 2002). Deglobalization is not a withdrawal from global trade and the international economy so much as a reorientation of national economies away from production for export to production for local needs (think crops for local food markets rather than tobacco leaf for global export). Many of the redistributive “taming” policy reforms mentioned in Chapter A1 are needed, but alongside these is the replacement of “growth” with “equity” as the main metric of economic decision-making. Economies should be localized as much as possible, while redefining and strengthening the cooperative (worker-owned and run) models that have fallen prey to liberalized global capitalism.

Enlarging the role of worker, producer, and consumer cooperatives is one of the feasible means to erode capitalism’s dominance of political economy. Cooperatives undermine capitalism’s defining ethos of private accumulation. Such social enterprises still enjoy a strong foothold in the European Union (EU), where they account for 6.3% of the continent’s GDP (OECD 2020) and have been a source of resilience during the pandemic. In the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, cooperatives in some localities enjoyed a populist uptick, as activists negotiated social pacts with local organizations, businesses, and governments based on principles of reciprocal solidarity. By 2015, 10% of Barcelona’s economy took this form (Neyra 2019). These are revitalizing harbingers of what is more simply referred to as a social economy, defined by its “... focus on economic practices that are sustainable and inclusive ... by addressing societal (i.e., social and/or environmental) needs [and] by organizing economic activities building on local roots ... using participatory and democratic governance ...” (Schwab 2019; OECD 2020).

### **Transforming capitalism: from circular economies to degrowth**

Strengthening social economies in the face of current inequalities in wealth and power will be important. Doing so will require strong government support via financing and regulation along the lines argued in Chapter A1, some of which we return to in this chapter. But social economies will still need to tackle the inequitable excess consumption of some at the ecological peril of many. As a policy study for a post-pandemic economy noted:

Over the last four decades, global material use has not only increased, it accelerated ... largely driven by expanding populations and changing

consumption trends ... driving a 71% rise in per capita resource use. And in today's industrial systems, more than 90% of this material is used only once, then thrown away – a design that has been characterized as a 'take-make-waste' linear economy. (Cairns and Cyrus Patel 2020, 9)

Governments in their post-pandemic rebuilds are now urged to prioritize the "circular economy," an idea that shares much in common with localization/deglobalization policy ideas. Environmental activists for years have argued the need for "cradle-to-grave" regulatory protection from the ecologically damaging externalities of industrial production. The idea of a circular economy takes this one step further: government policies through carrots (incentives) and sticks (regulations) should promote an economic model in which there is "a continuous recirculation of post-consumer materials" such that "there is no such thing as waste" (*ibid.*, 6–7). There is certainly no reason why governments could not immediately place conditions on public purchases from private suppliers, including performance requirements for equity-enhancing labor conditions and environmental protective measures. Since government procurement accounts for 12% of global GDP (Bosio and Djankov 2020), implementing this practice could have widespread positive impacts.

The circular economy model focuses principally on achieving a net zero carbon energy system, critical with respect to climate change and a target many of the world's governments have pledged to achieve by 2050. While the model, by institutionalizing the "reuse" and "recycle" mantras of 1980s environmentalism, should also "reduce" our exploitation of natural resources, it does not explicitly address our economy's fatal addiction to endless consumption. A perfectly circular model is not feasible, since new resources are required at every rotation and increased efficiency is likely to boost accelerated demand for consumption (Cristiano et al. 2020). Over the past decade a more radical discourse has been gaining ground that pushes the circular economy in a more revolutionary direction: an ecological transition based on a rejection of the standard economic growth model. Increasingly bundled up under the rubric of "degrowth," at its simplest it argues for a planned reduction in all energy and resource use so that it fits within ecosystem limits (Hickel 2020). Its demands rest heaviest on over-consuming high-income countries (HICs) even as it acknowledges the need for greater fiscal and ecosystem space for under-consuming low-income countries (LICs) to achieve a basic livelihood and an ethical life expectancy (see Chapter A1). A growing number of economists, environmental scientists, and civil society activists see degrowth as key to resolving the climate crisis and other key environmental overshoots. Degrowth is not a technical agenda and does not promote recession or austerity; rather, it aims to create flourishing societies outside of the growth mantra, respectful of fundamental and systemic caring about environmental justice, social equity, and shared well-being (D'Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis 2014a). Unlike the circular economy, which upholds the idea of continued economic growth so long as it is decoupled from resource

throughput, degrowth argues that historic evidence puts a lie to this possibility (Parrique et al. 2019). Rather, growth itself is seen as the problem.

Consider, first, that growth in economic terms continues to be measured almost exclusively by GDP (gross domestic product). GDP measures the total market value of all finished goods and services within a country and is regarded as “a comprehensive scorecard of a given country’s economic health” (Fernando 2021). It is so embedded in our political discourse and public imagination that its rise or fall is always big news. It defines whether we are in a recession or a depression, and often becomes an election issue by which governments rise or fall. The political centrality of GDP persists, even though its blindness to environmental sustainability or distributive justice has long been criticized. As far back as 1968, Robert Kennedy in a famous speech described GDP as something that “measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile” (Jackson 2018). Much of what we do not want and that imperils a worthwhile life, and certainly what our planet can no longer afford, adds to our economic growth. From environmental pollution that requires government clean-up costs to wars and “natural” catastrophes that lead to what Naomi Klein calls “disaster capitalism” (Klein 2017), the GDP ticks relentlessly upwards, paying no ethical heed to what societies, people, and the planet need. As a measure of human or ecological well-being, it fails. Several alternative measures now attempt to capture more of what matters (see Box A3.1). These have informed policy and legislative processes in several countries (Stiglitz, Fitoussi, and Durand 2018), although none have yet to displace or even routinely accompany GDP as an axiomatic measure of societal well-being. Neither do these alternatives prescribe what needs to be done, a challenge picked up by the degrowth movement.

### **Box A3.1: Gross domestic product or gross national happiness?**

One of the best-known alternatives to GDP is the Kingdom of Bhutan’s Buddhist-inspired Gross National Happiness (GNH). Who doesn’t want to be happy? In 2008 the Kingdom began to use an in-depth survey to examine living standards, health, governance, ecological diversity, resilience, time use, psychological well-being, cultural diversity, and community vitality (“Gross National Happiness” 2021) to inform its policies. Responding to the Bhutanese initiative, a global partnership of academic centers has been producing annual World Happiness Reports<sup>1</sup> since 2012, drawing on multiple data sources, primarily the Gallup World Poll, and combining indicators of GDP, social support, life expectancy, freedoms of choice, generosity, and corruption. The Nordic countries always perform best, and the measures that appear to matter most are social support, generosity, freedom of choice, and absence of corruption (Helliwell et al. 2020).

The GNH inspired similar initiatives elsewhere, the most significant and recent one being the 2019 New Zealand decision to base its government budget on how well it progresses on several “well-being” goals: reducing child poverty, supporting Indigenous peoples, moving to a low-carbon-emission economy, and flourishing in a digital age. A new set of measures will be used to track loneliness, trust in government, water quality, and everything in between (Samuel 2019).

Like the GNH, Canada’s Index of Wellbeing (CIW) started first with extensive community consultations on what mattered for people’s life quality, and then organized the responses into eight domains (healthy populations, democratic engagement, community vitality, environment, leisure and cultures, time use, education, and living standards). Each domain is comprised of eight indicators drawn from routinely collected government data (“About the Canadian Index of Wellbeing” 2012). The CIW’s main use to date has been to highlight the “massive gap between how well the economy is doing and Canadians’ wellbeing,” a gap which grew after the 2008 recession (“Our Index” 2012).

The indicator created by The New Economics Foundation’s Happy Planet Index combines four measures: well-being (people’s self-rated life satisfaction derived from the World Gallup Poll), life expectancy (using data from UN agencies), inequality of outcomes (which adjusts for distributional differences), and ecological footprint (developed by the Global Footprint Network)<sup>2</sup> which measures consumption of earth resources, measured in global hectares per capita (“About the HPI” n.d.). Its ecological emphasis is apparent. A key finding is that most wealthy HICs score poorly. Small Costa Rica scores in the first place, the USA in the 108th place (Andester 2019).

In contrast to other alternatives, the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) adopts the GDP default to a dollar sign (“Genuine Progress Indicator” n.d.). Rather than just tabulating the income gains of what economies generate (the GDP), it also calculates the monetary costs of the negative externalities economies create (e.g., inequalities, underemployment, pollution, loss of environmental resources, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, crime, and loss of leisure) (“Genuine Progress Indicator” 2021). Its bottom line is still a number, estimating how much a person or an economy can consume in each period without decreasing that consumption in the next period. The Canadian government and several Canadian provinces have applied the GPI in their legislative decisions, and some US states have adopted its use. As with other alternative measures, there is little relationship between the GPI and the GDP.

The OECD has also been studying alternatives to the GDP for some years. In the wake of the global financial crisis, the French government

convened a commission of leading economists to examine how better to measure economic and social progress. Building on this work, the OECD in 2012 created a Better Life Index to measure the well-being of its member countries across 11 dimensions: income/wealth, work, housing, health, knowledge/skills, subjective well-being, safety, work-life balance, social connections, civic engagement, and the four “capitals” (natural, economic, human, and social) (“OECD Better Life Index” n.d.). Several OECD member nations and other countries have developed their own well-being metrics for use in policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation (Stiglitz, Fitoussi, and Durand 2018). Subsequent OECD work called for a suite of measures rather than any one index, while emphasizing that a critique of GDP limitations did not imply “anti-growth.” Growth, instead, needed to be equitable and sustainable. But, as its 2018 *Beyond GDP* report acknowledged, “economic growth” at least as present “is not environmentally sustainable” (Stiglitz, Fitoussi, and Durand 2018, 26). The growth/sustainability contradiction is left unresolved.

All of the above attempts to distill “what matters” into a single metric have limitations. But so does GDP. The alternatives, especially those that incorporate measures of distributional equity and ecological sustainability, are not panaceas, but they offer activists new arguments and evidence to counter the uncritical acceptance of the growth, growth, growth mantra.

### Explaining degrowth

The term “degrowth” has been subject to considerable debate in activist circles, especially from the Global South (Rodríguez-Labajos et al. 2019). Originally coined in French (*décroissance*) in the 1970s (Georgescu-Roegen 1979), its English version only recently began to diffuse following an international conference on the concept in 2008. It is specifically intended to be a “missile word” for a radical re-politicization of environmentalism, both as an idea and as a challenge. The narrative of degrowth developed as “a response to the urgency of the present physical, ecological, social, and economic limits of complex societies” (Sekulova et al. 2013). It challenges the hegemony of growth and calls for a democratically led redistributive downscaling of production and consumption and an equitable reallocation of wealth “within and across the Global North and South, as well as between present and future generations” (Demaria et al. 2013).

To many activist movements in the Global South, however, degrowth is seen as an idea arising from HICs. This is perhaps apt since that is where the consumptogenic diet must start. But there are many ecojustice movements in the Global South that pre-date the degrowth movement and the concern that their pluralistic/multicultural concepts could be subsumed by what is still largely

seen as a “Eurocentric” idea. There is also much in the idea of “growth” (apart from its economic materialism) that is to be valued (people grow, crops grow, understanding grows), and so the negative phrasing is problematic for some grassroots activist groups. Although degrowth shares with ecojustice movements an overarching concern with ecological sustainability, many activists focus as much on the profit-seeking and exploitative actions of transnational capitalists (and the governments that support them) as on a critique of economic growth itself, or of its GDP mismeasurement. Finally, if consumption levels in many LICs need to rise for people to approach their ethical life expectancy, this implies some form of economic growth provided it is (or rapidly becomes) non-fossil fuel-based with a declining rate of material throughput.

Jason Hickel, an economic anthropologist, in responding to some of these concerns, argues that if degrowth is used to refer only to “ecologically destructive and socially less necessary production” it is, in fact, a positive term (Hickel 2020). It is also consistent with many goals and concepts promoted by ecojustice movements worldwide, such as the South American concept of *Buen Vivir* (Gudynas 2014) (see Chapter C4) and initially was drawn from African-sourced critics to development (Latouche 2004). Degrowth is explicitly critical of capitalism’s voracious appetite for over-accumulation and its “mis-sile word” intent is largely meant to undermine capitalism’s core hegemonic idea: the absolute need for continuous economic growth (D’Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis 2014b). In that sense degrowth is intrinsically anti-capitalist. Stated differently, as a fully realized political economy, degrowth cannot be achieved within capitalism, at least as currently conceived.

These degrowth characteristics distinguish it from green growth (Green New Deal) approaches described in Chapter A1, which are more ambivalent on the role that capitalist markets might play in a post-COVID world provided they are regulated to “decouple” growth from its material throughputs, notably by decarbonizing energy requirements. Green growth also places a heavy responsibility on development and deployment of new technologies, such as carbon capture and green energy, but – at least in its superficial narrative – shares with degrowth advocates the need for a shift in our consumption (Stratford 2020). The green growth agenda, like that of localization, deglobalization, and circular economies, is vitally important, but only if it does not simply mask business as usual. It is also insufficient. Global economic growth at 2% per annum (green or otherwise) still means a doubling in the scale of consumption every 35 years (Stratford 2020). This is a pace that technological innovation is unlikely to keep up with if the current growth/consumption “coupling” relationship remains as present. Even the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) a few years ago argued the necessity of a “low energy demand” scenario aimed at reducing global energy consumption by 40% by 2050 (Hickel 2019, 56). This would make it easier for a transition to 100% clean energy but would also mean a decline in industrial production and consumption of 42% in HICs and 12% in LICs (ibid.).





**Image A3.2** Too much for some, too little for others; homeless person seeks shelter in front of overstocked store with a sale on its goods.

Source: Photo by Dan Burton on Unsplash. <https://unsplash.com/photos/w3TwyZMlfPg>

The Canadian environmental emeritus, William Rees, co-founder of the “global footprint” methodology to measure per capita ecosystem consumption, is more forthright in challenging the technological optimism of some of the green growth movement. In an essay where he asks “Am I wrong?” he points out that the world is steadily urbanizing, that urbanization demands energy, that global energy demand outpaces growth in renewables, and that renewables to scale would consume huge amounts of rare mined metals, steel, aluminum, and non-renewable plastics (Rees 2019b), to say nothing of the human and environmental exploitations that such mining and production often entails (McKie 2021). In sympathy with the degrowth idea, Rees reaches a simple conclusion: we must consume less of everything, accompanied by a radical redistribution in who consumes (less for the rich, more for the poor) and what is consumed (less in footprint-heavy material goods, more in footprint-light caring services).

### **From degrowth laboratories to a degrowth political agenda**

It’s been said that degrowth unfolds “not in discourse, but in practices of reciprocity that promote community self-sufficiency” (Neyra 2019). This ethos is an ancient one, and variations of it have been pursued throughout the capitalist era with differing emphases on cooperatives, non-monetary barter systems, eco-communities, direct action (civil disobedience), and communal systems of food production. Today’s digital technologies create new possibilities such as localized community currencies; think online exchange platforms but with a local

form of public banking thrown in. In common with most ecojustice movements globally, such degrowth innovations seek the decommodification of basic needs, modeling alternative (non-capitalist) forms of barter, exchange, and mutualism.

Kate Raworth's Doughnut Economics model encountered in Chapter A1 represents another theory that is often discussed in degrowth conferences, articles, and policy proposals, and one that is starting to infiltrate post-COVID economic thinking (Raworth 2017). The model doesn't define a precise set of policies but, instead, offers a framework for policy agenda setting. The goal is no longer "growth" but getting the metrics of its various environmental overshoots and social undershoots within the safe "doughnut" space, where there are minimum social thresholds to be guaranteed and upper ecological thresholds not to be trespassed. In 2020, Raworth launched a Doughnut Economics Action Lab to bring together individuals and groups keen to put the framework into action (Raworth 2017). At present, the online community and its members' practices focus primarily on a few European cities. This does not make the ideas inherent in the framework Eurocentric or fit for the rich world only. Like the degrowth concept, however, its diffusion into low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and across the socioeconomic gradients in HICs requires skilled communication, respectful listening, and critical contextualization. This is especially important since many of the people in the lower rungs of our socioeconomic, gendered, and racialized hierarchies are already living within the doughnut's per capita ecological safe space, but fall well outside it in experiencing critical social shortfalls. Although some argue that this makes such groups "too poor to be green" (Martinez-Alier 1995), the roots of ecological unsustainability and social inequality are often the same.

Degrowth, it's been argued, "is not a political platform, but rather an 'umbrella concept'" (Mastini, Kallis, and Hickel 2021, 3); others prefer to describe it as an "interpretative frame for a new (and old) social movement where numerous streams of critical ideas and political actions converge" (Demaria et al. 2013). The same can be said of doughnut economics. But these concepts or interpretative frames need to become political platforms or, at the very least, agendas, and to do so quickly if they are to supplant or at least modify the insufficient incrementalism of most post-COVID reboot, reset, and reform packages. But how?

### **Box A3.2: The degrowth movement in Italy**

As a social movement, degrowth attracts academic professionals, practitioners, activists from other movements, some of which who are fiercely militant. Like other movements, it subsumes a range of political visions from oppositional activism to green reformism, from eco-Marxism to anarchism, and

including marked eco-feminist claims. The degrowth movement embraces both science and the creative arts. It “grows” its ideational values, practices, and proposals through international meetings, an informal global network and working groups, and local events (“What Is Degrowth?” n.d.). Italy provides two examples of more localized degrowth activism.

The Movimento per la Decrescita Felice (MDF) (The Movement for Happy Degrowth) was founded in 2007 and its structure is composed of more than 20 local groups with 400 members across Italy. Its distinguishing trait is a pragmatic approach to the concept of degrowth. MDF serves as a reference point to disseminate degrowth ideas, provide its supporters with the opportunity to discuss and further elaborate the concept, and – above all – to put it into practice, here and now. Its members promote a new cultural model by acting simultaneously on three pillars: politics, technology, and lifestyles. The movement promotes both individual and collective experimentation with new, more sustainable lifestyles; it advocates for local and national policies towards greater equity and sustainability, and it promotes and researches technologies that make it possible to reduce the consumption of resources and energy. MDF also promotes values and cultural practices that are radically alternative to those proposed by the dominant growth model such as sharing of resources and power, mutualism, conviviality, self-production and autonomy, attention to social marginality, feminism, respect for cultural diversity, nonviolent political action, care of the ecosystem, and attention to the spiritual and meaningful dimension of daily life. It is particularly active in challenging the idea of “decoupling” as a green growth strategy.<sup>3</sup>

The Associazione per la Decrescita (Italian for Association for Degrowth) was founded in 2004 and defines itself as a cultural-political collective, a post-bureaucratic meeting and sharing platform. It is committed to cultural promotion, public thinking and debate, and social and political action inspired by ecological sustainability and social equity. It is active in highlighting, revealing, and denouncing all forms of violence and dominion, particularly those linked to and justified by the ideology of progress, growth, and development. The association is organized in multiple forms according to local and regional peculiarities. At a wider level, it was among the first and main promoters of the third International Conference on Degrowth, Ecological Sustainability, and Social Equity, held in Venice in 2012. The association takes part in local, regional, national, and international networks related to sustainability and public health. It does not seek power, but rather promotes values of caring for oneself, other human beings, and the entire world.<sup>4</sup>

To start, there is much in the incremental green growth playbook that is urgent and compatible with a degrowth future. Green New Deals propose an overhaul of the energy system away from fossil fuels. This is essential. The transition, as many environmental economists have pointed out, is also likely to increase rather than decrease employment, especially if energy utilities are brought back under public ownership. Many of the skills workers employ in fossil fuel extraction are needed in green energy development, the safe decommissioning of abandoned oil and gas wells, and the improvement of energy efficiencies through new housing designs and existing retrofits. However, “greening” the energy sources without reducing its material demands must still be addressed.

There is a worsening undersupply of care workers globally, notably in the health sector (see Chapters A2 and B1) but also in education and social protection. The patriarchal legacy of much of society’s care work being relegated to an unpaid, informalized, and predominantly female workforce needs undoing. Social and labor reforms, including job guarantees, universal basic incomes, and massively expanded support for welfare (well/fair) programs, are key elements in most green growth platforms, as well as within degrowth movements. More skilled workers are needed to clean and restore despoiled environments. Restoring our ecological commons and caring for others are low-resource intensive activities. Whether counted within GDP ledgers or via alternative metrics (Box A3.1), these activities comprise a form of green economic “growth” that is centered on equitable well-being and a livable planet rather than simply on economic expansion.

Reforming labor markets is fundamental; a degrowth political agenda that does not pay close attention to employment concerns will fail right out of the gate. For well over a century there have been multiple forecasts of an imminent era where our economic needs would be fulfilled with just a few days of work per week. The remaining time could be devoted to leisure, sociability, and culture. This idyllic era has yet to manifest itself. In HICs we see, instead, overwork for some and underwork for others, alongside the rise of the part-time gig economy. In LMICs much of the labor force remains informal, unbenefited, and insecure. The pandemic has only worsened these conditions (see Chapter C2). Redistributing work from industrial activities (producing things we don’t need and can’t afford without going into debt) to socially productive activities (a caring and environmentally restorative economy) will help. But work weeks also need to be shorter and “living wages” must be established.

Multiple immediate government policies (akin to changing procurement rules) can nudge our economies into a degrowth trajectory. Taxation policies are critical, as Chapter A1 argued. Governments can place high taxes on resource-consuming things that are not needed and/or are socially/ecologically damaging (luxuries from big cars and houses to fast fashion excesses) while eliminating taxes on things that are essential (healthy foods). Utility taxes (for electricity, heating)

can be tiered so that beyond a minimum level required for health and comfort consumption costs skyrocket.

At present, many of these degrowth starter policies are ones that HICs might find it easier to advance. But all governments can pursue these policy goals through increased taxation rates on carbon, wealth, land value, resource extraction, profits, marginal incomes, capital gains, and excess consumption, especially if there are systems for redistributing tax revenues globally. The world is awash with an abundance of wealth with the potential for its progressive capture for public good purposes. A fairer distribution of existing income and wealth can improve human health and welfare globally without the necessity of resource-consuming growth.

Stated more systemically, a degrowth economy will rely upon an expansion of public goods and services and an end to centuries-old practices of enclosures and rentier classes in which wealth for some is accumulated by dispossessing the resources of others. It will require a move away from the state as a backstop to markets (the regulator of last resort) to the state as a democratic tool that will allow citizens, collectively and autonomously, to determine priority essential public goods and services and where the fulsome use of public money finances their provision, with the slow erosion of reliance on private capital and debt as the basis of market-delivered growth.

### **Is a post-capitalist, post-pandemic degrowth possible?**

One of the pandemic's silver linings may well be the extent to which it has revealed the dependence of contemporary capitalist economies on people spending money they haven't got on things they don't need. A year of pandemic stay-home requirements and a closed, partially open, closed again economic arrhythmia may see more of us embracing an era where we have more appetite for simpler lives than ones predicated on a treadmill of borrow, buy, consume, toss away, worry, borrow more, repeat. But we must also acknowledge that a realized degrowth political agenda will lead to a dramatic reduction in material standards in HICs or for the wealthy, regardless of their geographic locale. But material standards are not the same as, or even related to, living standards or quality of life. That association is the product of a century of deliberate brainwashing, better known as advertising. Material standards (including income growth) need to improve for much of the world's population that has yet to access the basic resources essential for their enjoyment of a healthy and achievable ethical life expectancy. But they will decline for many of us, as environmentally, proportionally, and ethically they should.

The pandemic has further highlighted existing tensions between expanding and predatory economies on the one hand, and health and healthcare access on the other. Ecological thresholds continue to be exceeded and minimum social goals remain widely unreachd. At the same time, the pandemic has placed

governments once again in the economic driver's seat – at least for now. If contemporary human societies are to move into an ecologically sustainable and socially just safe “doughnut space,” there are a few necessary degrowth elements that might guide such a transformation:

- Recognize that no economy that grows or maintains itself by depleting essential capital is sustainable; instead, stop pursuing material growth as a goal and focus on ensuring basic needs and universal human rights.
- Embrace the need to construct a new foundation for economics that is consistent with bio-physical reality.
- Set hard targets for less production and consumption while lowering net levels and reallocating globally by basic need and not by manufactured want.
- Set hard targets for reduced demand for all energy and material throughput and not be content with substituting fossil fuel with green alternatives.
- Ration the remaining carbon budget to low-intensity food production, mass transit, and redistribution to make reparation for HICs' historic hoarding.
- Use radically progressive fiscal (tax and spend) measures to redistribute income and wealth at local, national, and global scales and to provide public assistance for sustainable lifestyles.
- Ensure that the human population does not continue growing to an ecologically unsustainable size (Rees 2019c).<sup>5</sup>

Canadian “global footprint” ecologist William Rees acknowledges that these actions “will seem outrageously radical” (Rees 2019a, 145) and will be challenged and dismissed as utopian or unrealistic, as would be any threat to elite power. But, as he continues, “we really have no choice but to act upon what our best science has been telling us for decades” (Rees 2019a, 145–146).

And so, a starting point for health activists wherever they might be: support a collective and, when required, transiently state-centered platform of genuinely Green New Deal economic programs and reforms where some substantial forward movement seems achievable, but with critical oversight and efforts to ensure responsiveness to local needs and cultures. Do not directly or indirectly support or abet ecologically hazardous and socially unjust products, practices, and/or structures. Reframe as needed the language and practical consequences of degrowth to accommodate different cultures, contexts, or populations but retain its core arguments and evidence which could be regarded as universal. Use these arguments and evidence and apply them to the socioecological doughnut economics framework, identifying which essential and livable policy goals are best suited to initiate a contextualized degrowth transformation that could herald a new form of post-capitalist society, even if not yet fully imagined.

In this activist work, it will be necessary to develop synergies across the different social, ecological, and health movements, and to promote simultaneously bottom-up approaches which, from grassroots and local practices, could create

new social imaginaries to confront the still hegemonic, growth-based neoliberal capitalism.

## Notes

1 See <https://worldhappiness.report/archive/> for the archive of past publications of *World Happiness Report*.

2 For more information on the Global Footprint Network, please consult <https://www.footprintnetwork.org/>.

3 For more information on the Movimento per la Decrescita Felice, please visit <https://www.decrescitafelice.it/>.

4 For more information on the Associazione per la Decrescita, please visit <https://www.decrescita.it/associazione/>

5 Rees argues that the human population should decrease over time to reach an ecologically sustainable level and calls for equitable and ethical policies to achieve this. What is an optimal population size that planetary resources can sustain, assuming they are consumed responsibly and fairly, remains a contested topic, especially given a colonial and neocolonial legacy of racist population control policies. There is less disagreement over the main point of keeping population growth within the limits of ecosystem boundaries.

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