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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Eradicating poverty beyond growth

Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Olivier De Schutter

Summary

The dominant approach to the fight against poverty relies on increasing the aggregate output of the economy (measured as the gross domestic product), combined with post-market redistribution through taxes and transfers. The Special Rapporteur argues, however, that the current focus on increasing the gross domestic product is misguided. An increase in gross domestic product is not a precondition for the realization of human rights or for combating poverty and inequalities. The ideology of “growthism” should not become a distraction from the urgent need both to provide more of the goods and services that enhance well-being and to reduce the production of what is unnecessary or even toxic. As long as the economy is driven mainly by profit maximization, it will respond to the demand expressed by the richest groups of society, leading to extractive forms of production that worsen social exclusion in the name of creating more wealth, and it will fail to fulfil the rights of those in poverty. Moving from an economy driven by the search for maximizing profits to a human rights economy is possible and, to remain within planetary boundaries, necessary. In the present report, the Special Rapporteur explains why this shift is needed and what it could look like.



I. Introduction

1. Defined as the increase in gross domestic product (GDP), economic growth has long been seen as desirable for its own sake. Economists have debated how it can be achieved and politicians how its benefits could be shared. Human rights bodies have seen growth as an indispensable condition for the realization of economic and social rights, based on the assumption that without growth, there would be no resources to mobilize for the progressive realization of such rights – for investments to be made in the provision of health care, social housing or education, or for the creation of jobs.¹ Governments still act as if infinite growth were possible. Ignoring the warnings of scientists,² they seem to believe that economic activity can expand endlessly, as if the Earth will forever provide limitless resources and absorb the waste resulting from our apparently endless quest for more.

2. In the present report, the Special Rapporteur questions these assumptions. First, he argues that growth is a distraction from what truly matters, namely: poverty eradication and well-being for all.³ Second, the economies of rich countries have grown far beyond what is necessary to allow people to flourish; they have become obese. In those countries, growth is failing to reduce poverty and inequalities and to create jobs. It is leading to the transgression of a number of planetary boundaries.⁴ Third, it has been fuelled by a plundering of the resources of the global South, in a post-colonial pattern of domination maintained by the stranglehold of foreign debt.⁵ In poor countries, where significant investments are still required – for the building of schools and hospitals, or for transport or electricity infrastructure – growth can still serve a useful role. In practice however, it has often been extractive, relying on the exploitation of a cheap workforce and the unsustainable mining of natural resources. If it is to contribute to the realization of human rights therefore, its direction must change. It should be reoriented towards satisfying needs and shared more widely, rather than simply making the rich richer and furthering the dominance of major economic actors.⁶

3. Despite its limitations, growth has become hegemonic.⁷ GDP remains the main indicator by which the performance of Governments is measured. Its increase is seen both as a substitute for large-scale redistribution and as a precondition for meeting certain challenges societies face. Unsurprisingly, it is in the name of growth that trade liberalization has been pursued: the Agreement establishing the World Trade Organization refers to the need to ensure “a large and steadily growing volume of real income and effective demand, and [to expand] the production of and trade in goods and services” (first preambular paragraph). Perhaps more troubling, economic growth is also referred to in the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, which includes a pledge to support an “open international economic system that would lead to economic growth and sustainable development in all

¹ Matthias Petel and Norman Vander Putten, “Economic, social and cultural rights and their dependence on the economic growth paradigm: evidence from the ICESCR system”, *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights*, vol. 39, No. 1 (2021), pp. 53–72.

² William J. Ripple and others, “World scientists’ warning of a climate emergency”, *BioScience*, vol. 70, No. 1 (2020), pp. 8–12.

³ Kate Raworth, *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist* (London, Random House Business, 2017); and Jason Hickel, *Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World* (London, Penguin Random House, 2020).

⁴ Johan Rockström and others, “Safe and just Earth system boundaries”, *Nature*, vol. 619, No. 7968 (2023), pp. 102–111.

⁵ Jason Hickel, “Is it possible to achieve a good life for all within planetary boundaries?”, *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 40, No. 1 (2019), pp. 18–35; and Jason Hickel, “What does degrowth mean? A few points of clarification”, *Globalizations*, vol. 18, No. 7 (2021), pp. 1105–1111.

⁶ Frances Stewart, “Macroeconomic policies for a sustainable world”, *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, vol. 24, No. 4 (2023), and Caroline Dommen, “Human rights economics: an inquiry” (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, July 2022).

⁷ Matthias Schmelzer, *The Hegemony of Growth: The OECD and the Making of the Economic Growth Paradigm* (Cambridge, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Cambridge University Press, 2016).

countries, to better address the problems of environmental degradation”.⁸ More recent multilateral environmental agreements replicate that language.⁹

4. The dominant approach to poverty eradication has largely remained within this hegemony of “growthism”: it has relied on fuelling economic growth first, followed by redistributing wealth through taxes and transfers. Instead of seeking to make the economy more inclusive, ensuring real equality of opportunities, Governments have focused on stimulating growth, which they have seen as a precondition for job creation and for the financing of public services and social policies. Policy choices such as trade liberalization, the flexibilization of work or the creation of a “business-friendly investment climate” (codewords for lowering taxes and regulatory burdens on the largest corporations) have been made in the name of increasing GDP, despite such measures causing social exclusion and testing the resilience of communities. Because it has acquired the status of a State imperative,¹⁰ the endless quest for growth restricts political imagination: more promising avenues for development, which could contribute better to human well-being and the realization of human rights, are insufficiently explored.

5. That must and can be reversed. Within the Sustainable Development Goals themselves, while Goal 8 refers to “sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth” and includes a target of 7 per cent annual growth for least developed countries (target 8.1), target 17.19 calls for measurements of progress “that complement” GDP. World leaders gathered at the Sustainable Development Goals Summit in September 2023 agreed on the need to “go beyond” GDP.¹¹ Momentum is growing.¹² The search for post-growth forms of development has begun,¹³ in part because advanced economies have entered an era of secular stagnation.¹⁴ The negotiations of the next development goals, starting with the Summit of the Future in September 2024, provide a unique opportunity to accelerate that endeavour. Through the present report, submitted in accordance with Human Rights Council resolution 53/10, the Special Rapporteur seeks to contribute to that objective.

II. Limits to growth

6. The emphasis placed on economic growth is often justified by the need to increase State revenue, allowing it to provide public services and social protection. It is also seen as a way to create jobs, thus compensating for job losses that result from technological change, including artificial intelligence. On that latter front, it has disappointed: while economists have long relied on Okun’s law, positing that economic growth is needed to absorb the excess workforce made redundant by productivity gains,¹⁵ the correlation between GDP growth and the employment rate has been highly uneven in recent years, amounting to a meagre 0.34 since 2012 for Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

⁸ A/CONF.151/26/Rev.1 (Vol. I), resolution 1, annex I, principle 12.

⁹ See United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change art. 3 (5); and the Paris Agreement, art. 10 (5).

¹⁰ John Barry, “A genealogy of economic growth as ideology and Cold War core State imperative”, *New Political Economy*, vol. 25, No. 1 (2020), p. 18.

¹¹ General Assembly resolution 78/1, annex, para. 30.

¹² Joan Martínez-Alier and others, “Sustainable de-growth: mapping the context, criticisms and future prospects of an emergent paradigm”, *Ecological Economics*, vol. 69, No. 9 (2010), pp. 1741–1747; Giorgos Kallis, Christian Kerschner and Joan Martínez-Alier, “The economics of degrowth”, *Ecological Economics*, vol. 84 (December 2012), p. 172; and Wouter Vandenhole, “De-growth and sustainable development: rethinking human rights law and poverty alleviation”, *Law and Development Review*, vol. 11, No. 2 (2018).

¹³ Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Foundations for the Economy of Tomorrow*, 2nd ed. (London, Routledge, 2017).

¹⁴ Christine Corlet Walker, Angela Druckman and Tim Jackson, “Welfare systems without economic growth: a review of the challenges and next steps for the field”, *Ecological Economics*, vol. 186 (August 2021).

¹⁵ Arthur M. Okun, “Potential GNP: its measurement and significance”, Cowles Foundation Paper 190 (1962).

countries.¹⁶ Once the exception, jobless growth is becoming the norm.¹⁷ In rich countries at least, growth has passed its sell-by date. It has modernized poverty without eradicating it. And it has become uneconomical, undermining the foundations of the productive economy itself.

A. Modernizing poverty

7. Poverty is often defined as lacking the income required for an adequate standard of living, resulting from the lack of access to decent work or gaps in social protection. It is that definition that is used to monitor progress towards the eradication of poverty, which is target 1.1 of the Sustainable Development Goals. Today, 670 million people (8.4 per cent of the world's population) live below the international poverty line of \$2.15 a day at 2017 purchasing power parity, and it is estimated that this figure will fall to 575 million by 2030, which is far short of the target.¹⁸

8. That money-centric approach to poverty, adopted to monitor progress under target 1.1 of the Sustainable Development Goals, is hardly useful to capture the experience of persons in poverty. Multidimensional approaches to poverty, such as the one adopted in the Multidimensional Poverty Index developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Oxford University, seek to capture deprivations not only in the areas of consumption or income, but also of educational attainment, educational enrolment, drinking water, sanitation and electricity.

9. Such approaches reflect much better the impacts of multiple deprivations on individuals' ability to lead decent lives. They too, however, remain insufficient. They fail to capture the reality of social exclusion, which may result from the inability of certain households to meet social expectations, such as the need to organize decent funerals for their parents or decent weddings for their children, to pay for extracurricular activities for a child or to own a smartphone. Such social expectations change as overall affluence increases. As such, economic growth (defined by an increase in GDP), if accompanied by rising income inequality, may ultimately prove counterproductive: by raising the bar within a particular society, it may in fact worsen social exclusion – the sense of shame and worthlessness that people in poverty will experience. In addition, if the rise in overall affluence leads to the increased commodification of certain services in areas such as health, education or transport, under the pretext that most people will now be able to afford paying for such services, the impacts of income poverty will be worsened. In that sense, economic growth can go hand in hand with the modernization of poverty: even while extreme material deprivation is reduced, the number of socially excluded persons may increase.¹⁹

B. Undermining the foundations of the productive economy

10. The so-called productive economy, the activity of which is registered by the GDP indicator, depends on the ecosystems that provide the resources and absorb the waste and pollution on which economic activity relies. The productive economy also depends on the so-called reproductive economy, which takes place within households and communities, without remuneration, and to which women are the main contributors. It depends, finally, on the “commons”, on which many people in poverty still rely for the satisfaction of their basic needs. A process of economic growth that erodes those foundations instead of recognizing that triple embeddedness is bound to fail in alleviating poverty.

¹⁶ Eloi Laurent, “From welfare to farewell: the European social-ecological State beyond economic growth”, Working Paper 2021.04 (European Trade Union Institute, 2021), p. 13.

¹⁷ See also Sangheon Lee and others, “Does economic growth deliver jobs? Revisiting Okun's law”, International Labour Organization Working Paper 17 (Geneva, International Labour Organization, 2020); and M. Sylvina Porras-Arena and Ángel L. Martín-Román, “The heterogeneity of Okun's law: a metaregression analysis”, *Economic Modelling*, vol. 128 (2023).

¹⁸ See https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal1#progress_and_info.

¹⁹ Olivier De Schutter, *The Poverty of Growth* (London, Pluto Press, 2024).

1. Crossing planetary boundaries

11. Economic growth demands escalating energy and material resource consumption to levels that can no longer be afforded. Unsustainable forms of consumption by certain groups of the population, primarily in rich countries, have pushed the Earth well outside a safe operating space. Six out of the nine planetary boundaries defining Earth stability and life support conducive to human welfare and societal development have already been transgressed.²⁰ While greenhouse gas emissions causing dangerous climate disruptions and extreme meteorological events are perhaps the most widely publicized, they are not the only environmental pressure imposed on ecosystems. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) recently warned that the extraction of resources had tripled since the mid-1970s, and it expected material extraction to rise by a further 60 per cent by 2060.²¹ In its 2019 global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services estimated that, as a result of human activity, 75 per cent of the Earth's land surface had been significantly altered, 66 per cent of the ocean area was experiencing increasing cumulative impacts, more than 85 per cent of wetlands had been lost, and approximately 1 million species would be facing extinction within decades, unless action was taken to reduce the intensity of drivers of biodiversity loss. Economic growth is a major driver of those trends: "Economic incentives generally have favoured expanding economic activity, and often environmental harm, over conservation or restoration."²²

12. Much hope has been placed on "green growth", or growth decoupled from environmental pressures thanks to cleaner technologies and more efficient means of production, with reduced use of resources and less waste and pollution. The limits of that approach are now becoming clear, however. In 2019, a systemic review concluded that "there is no empirical evidence supporting the existence of ... an absolute, global, permanent, and sufficiently fast and large decoupling of environmental pressures (both resources and impacts) from economic growth".²³

13. Absolute decoupling is not even occurring at the speed required in the limited area of greenhouse gas emissions (which is only one of the nine planetary boundaries considered). In a review of the performance of 36 OECD countries during the 2013–2019 period, its authors concluded that, while 11 countries managed to achieve absolute decoupling between GDP increases and greenhouse gas emissions during that period, the speed at which that was taking place would fall short of the rates required for those countries to remain within the global carbon budget resulting from the 2015 Paris Agreement, taking into account equity considerations. Based on their decoupling achievements during the period considered, those 11 countries would take 223 years on average to reduce their respective 2022 emissions by 95 per cent, by the end of which period they would have burned, on average, 27 times their respective remaining post-2022 national "fair shares" of the global carbon budget (if global heating is to remain below 1.5°C) in the process.²⁴

14. That confirms the conclusions of the Sixth Assessment Report presented in 2022 by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change noted that, while 23 countries (representing 20 per cent of a total sample of

²⁰ Katherine Richardson and others, "Earth beyond six of nine planetary boundaries", *Science Advances*, vol. 9, No. 37 (2023).

²¹ UNEP and International Resource Panel, *Global Resources Outlook 2024: Bend the Trend – Pathways to a Liveable Planet as Resource Use Spikes* (Nairobi, 2024).

²² Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, *Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services: Summary for Policymakers* (Bonn, 2019), para. B5.

²³ Timothée Parrique and others, *Decoupling Debunked: Evidence and Arguments against Green Growth as a Sole Strategy for Sustainability* (European Environmental Bureau, 2019), p. 31; and Helmut Haberl and others, "A systematic review of the evidence on decoupling of GDP, resource use and GHG emissions, part II: synthesizing the insights", *Environmental Research Letters*, vol. 15, No. 6 (2020).

²⁴ Jefim Vogel and Jason Hickel, "Is green growth happening? An empirical analysis of achieved versus Paris-compliant CO₂-GDP decoupling in high-income countries", *Lancet Planetary Health*, vol. 7, No. 9 (2023).

116 countries) had decoupled consumption-based emissions from GDP during the 2015–2018 period – through a combination of outsourcing carbon-intensive production and improvements in production efficiency and energy mix – such decoupling was often short-lived, and mostly occurred in countries (mainly from the European Union and North America) with high per capita GDP and high per capita carbon dioxide emissions. Another 67 countries (or 58 per cent), including China and India, had relatively decoupled GDP and consumption-based emissions between 2015 and 2018, reflecting a slower growth in emissions than GDP. A further 19 countries (or 16 per cent), including South Africa and Nepal, experienced no decoupling between GDP and consumption-based emissions from 2015 to 2018. In those countries, a further increase of GDP will likely lead to higher emissions, if they follow the historical trend without substantive improvement in efficiency of production and energy use. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warns: “although absolute decoupling has reduced annual emissions [in one fifth of the sample of 116 countries], the remaining emissions are still contributing to an increase in atmospheric carbon concentration. Absolute decoupling is not sufficient to avoid consuming the remaining CO₂ emission budget under the global warming limit of 1.5°C or 2°C and to avoid climate breakdown.”²⁵

15. Thus, while some decarbonization of the economy is occurring, it is mostly limited to high-income countries with high levels of greenhouse gas emissions per capita, and it is certainly not occurring at the speed required. Similar instances of absolute decoupling are not occurring with regard to other environmental pressures, such as biodiversity loss and resource use. Green growth is not happening. While the adoption of green technologies and circular economy models should be accelerated, they will not, on their own, provide solutions on the scale and at the speed required.

2. Undervaluing socially useful work

16. The focus on increasing GDP obscures the importance of domestic and care work and the need to value it better. Approximately, 16.4 billion hours are spent each day on direct personal care of young children or older relatives and indirect care activities, such as cooking, cleaning or collecting water or fuelwood. That represents 2 billion people working eight hours a day without remuneration. If that contribution were to be remunerated on the basis of the minimum hourly wage, it would represent 9 per cent of global GDP. More than three quarters of that work (76.4 per cent) is provided by women, who dedicate 3.2 times more time than men to unpaid care work.²⁶

17. Care work is vital to the economy: productive work would be impossible without it. Yet, because care work is not valued in monetary terms, it has generally neither been accounted for nor supported through social investment. That is gradually changing. Since 2013, labour force surveys more systematically include unpaid domestic and care work in statistics, under the heading “own-use provision of services”; the Sustainable Development Goals include a target (5.4 under Goal 5 on gender equality) to recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work.

18. Recognizing unpaid domestic and care work is a first step, ensuring that it is factored into economic analysis and taken into account in public policies; that the upbringing and education of children or caring for a dependent relative is considered valuable work experience by prospective employers; that paid parental and other carers’ leaves are granted; and that “care credits” are included in pension calculations, as required under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.²⁷ In addition, Governments should reduce the scope and weight of domestic and care work, which means ensuring the

²⁵ Shobhakar Dhakal, Jan Christoph Minx and Ferenc L. Toth, “Emissions trends and drivers”, in *Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change*, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2022), para. 2.3.3.

²⁶ Jacques Charmes, *The Unpaid Care Work and the Labour Market. An Analysis of Time Use Data based on the Latest World Compilation of Time-use Surveys* (Geneva, International Labour Organization, 2019), p. 47.

²⁷ See Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *Trujillo Calero v. Ecuador* (E/C.12/63/D/10/2015).

provision of universal access to safe water, sanitation and domestic energy systems, of affordable and high-quality care services, as well as policies that support mothers and fathers in their parenting roles and other caregivers. Lastly, care and domestic responsibilities should be redistributed to make progress towards gender equality and improve the work-life balance for all. None of those objectives will be met, however, unless representation is also improved: care workers and women's rights organizations, in particular, should be involved in decision-making forums in the workplace, the community and in the policy arena to guarantee that "paid and unpaid caregivers have a voice in establishing quality care and decent conditions of work".²⁸

19. Beyond domestic and care work, "growthism" leads to undervaluing work that makes positive contributions to society, while work that "adds value" is overvalued: as emphasized, for instance, by scholars of the "foundational economy",²⁹ it is the most profitable jobs, but not the most useful, that are better rewarded through higher wages and better working conditions, including job security.³⁰

3. Eroding the commons

20. In many communities, the commons – collectively managed resources and institutions – have been relied upon for access to water, grazing land or food, or to services, such as health care or education. Human rights standards are gradually evolving to take better into account the need to protect the commons, both from market forces and privatization, and from capture by the State. Recent instruments have explicitly referred to common property regimes based on customary forms of tenure, with a view to ensuring that such regimes should be protected from encroachment. The Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security, endorsed in 2012 by the Committee on World Food Security of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, provide that States should ensure that governance of tenure should "recognize and respect ... legitimate tenure rights including legitimate customary tenure rights that are not currently protected by law" (guideline 5.3), and that where there are "publicly-owned land, fisheries and forests that are collectively used and managed (in some national contexts referred to as commons), States should ... recognize and protect such publicly-owned land, fisheries and forests and their related systems of collective use and management, including in processes of allocation by the State" (guideline 8.3).

21. Similar language is found in the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication, adopted in 2014 by the Committee on Fisheries of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations following a three-year long participatory process, as well as in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas, adopted on 17 December 2018 by the General Assembly.³¹

22. In addition to prohibiting States from depriving people from access to the resources on which they depend, human rights law imposes a duty not to disturb the production and allocation of resources based on the practice of commoning (the collective management of shared resources) as part of a broader duty to abstain from interfering with the enjoyment of rights. In situations in which the goods and services corresponding to such rights are delivered by the community itself, or such enjoyment depends on existing access to certain resources, such as land and water, that duty is to respect commons-based institutional arrangements. While that duty has been primarily affirmed as regards land or natural resources, it is not limited to them. In its general comment No. 4 (1991) on the right to adequate housing, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights identifies sustainable access to natural and common resources as an element of what constitutes adequate housing (para. 8 (b)). Community-led housing cooperatives, such as the Baan

²⁸ High-Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment, "Leave no one behind: taking action for transformational change on women's economic empowerment" (2017).

²⁹ See <https://foundationaleconomy.com>.

³⁰ A/78/175, paras. 49–54.

³¹ See in particular arts. 5 (1) and 28.

Mankong programme launched in Thailand in 2016³² or the MOBA Housing SCE (European Cooperative Society) in Central and South-Eastern Europe,³³ illustrate the potential contribution of community-based initiatives in ensuring access to housing.³⁴ In its general comment No. 19 (2007) on the right to social security, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights includes, as part of the State's duty to respect the right to social security, an obligation not to "arbitrarily or unreasonably interfer[e] with self-help or customary or traditional arrangements for social security" or "with institutions that have been established by individuals or corporate bodies to provide social security" (para. 44).

23. Under certain conditions, local communities manage common resources in ways that are more sustainable and more effective than if such management were left either to individual owners following a process of privatization or to the State.³⁵ Local communities are ideally positioned to design the governance system that is best suited to local conditions. The rules they set are perceived as highly legitimate by the members of the community and, since community members contribute to shaping the governance regime, they have a strong incentive to contribute to their enforcement. Lastly, as the rules are set with a view to improving the situation of the community as a whole rather than that of individual members, they may be designed in order to minimize negative externalities and to preserve the long-term viability of the resource, thus improving sustainability.³⁶ The delivery of services through commoning thus presents a number of benefits, including empowerment of local communities inventing their own solutions, inclusive access and improved accountability. Yet, the quest for growth has often encouraged privatization processes that have eroded the commons for the sake of creating new markets and maximizing profits from the exploitation of resources.³⁷

III. Development without growth

24. Steering economies towards post-growth scenarios does not mean imposing austerity; nor should it be confused with recession, although recessions are characterized by negative growth rates. Rather, directing the economy towards a post-growth future means democratically planning a transition towards an economy that will reduce its addiction to growth, in a way that contributes to the realization of economic, social and cultural rights and to the reduction of inequalities. Attempts to steer societies away from the search for growth will be met with resistance as long as people equate economic growth with progress and improved well-being.³⁸ The strengthening of democracy is therefore necessary if a post-growth approach to development is to succeed: participatory forms of democracy in particular can allow the questioning of certain widespread assumptions about the correlation between growth and well-being, or happiness.³⁹

25. Ensuring well-being as grounded in the fulfilment of human rights cannot be confused with the satisfaction of limitless desires for more, manufactured by companies' marketing

³² See <https://en.codi.or.th/baan-mankong-rural>.

³³ See <https://moba.coop>.

³⁴ Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, "The commons and public services: a new way forward or an alternative to human rights?" (2024).

³⁵ Stéphanie Leyronas, Benjamin Coriat and Kako Nubukpo, eds., *The Commons: Drivers of Change and Opportunities for Africa* (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2023).

³⁶ Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1990); Arun Agrawal, "Common property institutions and sustainable governance of resources", *World Development*, vol. 29, No. 10 (2001), pp. 1649–1672; and Michael Cox, Gwen Arnold and Sergio Villamayor Tomás, "A review of design principles for community-based natural resource management", *Ecology and Society*, vol. 15, No. 4 (2010).

³⁷ On the impacts of the privatization of public assets, see [A/73/396](#).

³⁸ Milena Büchs and Max Koch, "Challenges to the degrowth transition: the debate about wellbeing", *Futures*, vol. 105 (2019), pp. 155–165.

³⁹ Jonas Lage and others, "Citizens call for sufficiency and regulation – a comparison of European citizen assemblies and national energy and climate plans", *Energy Research & Social Science*, vol. 104 (2023).

strategies and fuelled by status competition and the search for “positional goods”.⁴⁰ Instead, a human rights-based norm of sufficiency should replace unrealistic expectations grounded in consumer sovereignty.⁴¹ The full realization of human rights requires not an endless effort to satisfy infinite wants, but the guarantee of a set of entitlements allowing individuals to flourish in a world of finite resources. The Committee on the Rights of the Child underlines that the rights to adequate housing, food, water and sanitation should be realized sustainably, including with respect to material consumption, resource and energy use and the appropriation of space and nature.⁴²

26. Democratic deliberation should ensure that the resources available are dedicated primarily to ensuring adequate levels of provision of public services (in areas such as health, education, public transport, energy provision and housing) and social protection, rather than catering to the demand expressed by the groups with the highest purchasing power.⁴³ In that sense, a post-growth future is one that focuses on the full realization of human rights: it is the very opposite of sacrificing rights to the professed need to reduce public spending.

A. Valuing what counts

27. Significant progress has been achieved in recent years in designing, and using, indicators of social progress as an alternative to GDP.⁴⁴ While a number of countries have introduced well-being indexes under various forms, some have gone further, using such indicators to guide policy. In 2008, Bhutan introduced the gross national happiness index, which seeks to measure progress through nine domains and 33 indicators that encompass psychological, health, cultural and environmental well-being; the Constitution of Bhutan requires the Government to consider gross national happiness in its policymaking.⁴⁵ The Constitutions of Ecuador and the Plurinational State of Bolivia refer to *buen vivir* as a guiding framework for development.⁴⁶ Within the government of Scotland, the National Performance Unit assesses progress towards national outcomes (established under the National Performance Framework launched in 2007), based on household surveys. In Wales, implementation of the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 is assessed by the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales. In 2019, New Zealand became one of the first countries to implement a well-being budget, which places well-being and the environment at the heart of the Government’s budget-making process, rather than a narrow focus on GDP; a living standards framework dashboard helps look beyond just the fiscal and economic implications of policy choices.

28. In 2020, the OECD Secretary-General’s Advisory Group on a New Growth Narrative recommended that policymakers consider four core objectives in new frameworks of economic theory, analysis and policy: environmental sustainability, rising well-being, falling inequality and system resilience.⁴⁷ While acknowledging that “income is important, particularly for those whose incomes are low”, the Advisory Group emphasized that the

⁴⁰ Fred Hirsch, *Social Limits to Growth* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977); and Robert H. Frank, “Positional externalities cause large and preventable welfare losses”, *American Economic Review*, vol. 95, No. 2 (2005), pp. 137–141.

⁴¹ Doris Fuchs and others, *Consumption Corridors: Living a Good Life within Sustainable Limits* (London, Routledge, 2021), p. 69.

⁴² General comment No. 26 (2023). See also Andreas Buser, “From doughnut economics to doughnut jurisprudence: a human rights perspective”, *Human Rights Law Review*, vol. 24, No. 2 (forthcoming).

⁴³ Timothée Parrique, “The political economy of degrowth”, PhD dissertation, Université Clermont Auvergne and Stockholm University, 2019.

⁴⁴ Rutger Hoekstra, *Replacing GDP by 2030. Towards a Common Language for the Well-Being and Sustainability Community* (Cambridge, United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2019).

⁴⁵ Milan Thomas and Yangchen C. Rinzin, “What is Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness Index?”, *Asian Development Blog*, 20 March 2023, available at <https://blogs.adb.org/blog/your-questions-answered-what-bhutan-s-gross-national-happiness-index>.

⁴⁶ Alberto Acosta, “El buen (con)vivir, una utopía por (re)construir: alcances de la Constitución de Montecristi”, *Obets Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, vol. 6, No. 1 (2011), pp. 35–67 (in Spanish); and Martin Calisto Friant and John Langmore, “The *buen vivir*: a policy to survive the Anthropocene?”, *Global Policy*, vol. 6, No. 1 (2015), pp. 64–71.

⁴⁷ OECD, *Beyond Growth: Towards a New Economic Approach* (Paris, 2020).

“wide variety of other factors” that allowed for a “fulfilled and flourishing life” would not automatically result from higher GDP. Indeed, it stated that, whatever progress is expected from higher GDP “can often be harmed by the ways it is generated – particularly for those on lower incomes and in more precarious work, and where private consumption is prioritised over public goods”.⁴⁸

29. The United Nations has also played its part. UNDP has been developing a human development index since 1990, as a summary measure of achievements of different countries in three dimensions of human development: living a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable and having a decent standard of living.⁴⁹ Within the Sustainable Development Goals, target 17.19 was preceded by the adoption, on 19 July 2011, of General Assembly resolution 65/309, in which the General Assembly recognized that the GDP indicator by nature was not designed to and did not adequately reflect the happiness and well-being of people in a country, that unsustainable patterns of production and consumption could impede sustainable development and that there was a need for a more inclusive, equitable and balanced approach to economic growth that promoted sustainable development, poverty eradication, happiness and well-being of all peoples. Furthermore, it invited Member States to pursue the elaboration of additional measures that better captured the importance of the pursuit of happiness and well-being in development with a view to guiding their public policies. Indeed, the Sustainable Development Goals themselves provide an alternative to GDP as a compass to guide public action.

30. Building on Our Common Agenda report, in his Policy Brief 4, the Secretary-General recognized that GDP did not account for human well-being and outlined different ways of moving beyond gross domestic product to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.⁵⁰ Noting that well-being, equality and environmental sustainability were complex multidimensional phenomena that could not be addressed by a single summary indicator, such as GDP,⁵¹ the Secretary-General questioned the usefulness of a single composite indicator of everything, considering that it might summarize too much and reveal too little to be able to adequately inform policy.⁵² Rather, the Secretary-General supports the creation of a conceptual framework to value what counts, focused around the achievement of three outcomes (well-being and agency, respect for life and the planet, and reduced inequalities and greater solidarity) and three elements (participatory governance and stronger institutions, innovative and ethical economies, and from vulnerability to resilience).⁵³ In the policy brief, the Secretary-General proposed the establishment of an independent, high-level expert group to develop a dashboard of potential indicators.

31. In general, those attempts to identify indicators of well-being present three insufficiencies. First, they are perceived as arbitrary rather than consensual and objective: both the list of the components of well-being and the weight to be given to each can be contested. Second, they do not include an element of accountability: with rare exceptions, Governments can routinely ignore the warning signs that well-being indicators provide. For both those reasons, grounding well-being indicators in human rights and allowing human rights mechanisms to monitor compliance would be highly advisable. Third, while those indicators are a tool to allow societies to understand which direction they are taking, they are ill-equipped to identify solutions. They may alert communities to the need to change course; but they stop short of indicating how. In what follows, the Special Rapporteur explores some avenues for action.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 17.

⁴⁹ See <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI>.

⁵⁰ Secretary-General, “Valuing what counts: framework to progress beyond gross domestic product”, Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 4 (May 2023), pp. 3 and 8.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 10.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 9.

B. Fighting inequalities

32. The fight against income and wealth inequalities – “vertical inequalities”, as opposed to the “horizontal inequalities” between groups that human rights law has traditionally been more concerned with – should be at the heart of the search for post-growth approaches to poverty eradication.

33. First, inequalities (both within countries and among countries) allow the most affluent to command resources that, as a result, are not available to meet the basic needs of persons in poverty. The more the production system is guided by demand, and the more income differentials are allowed to persist, the more resources will be diverted to satisfying the desires of the rich, rather than the needs of the poor. The economy is thus less efficient in meeting those needs if it tolerates high levels of inequality.

34. Second, the accumulation of wealth within a narrow elite has significant impacts, in particular on greenhouse gas emissions, due to the investment choices of the wealthiest groups. The most wealthy 1 per cent of the world’s population has been responsible for 23 per cent of the total increase in emissions since 1990 (while the poorest 50 per cent has been responsible for only 16 per cent of all emissions growth); the bulk of the emissions from the richest result from their investments rather than from their consumption.⁵⁴

35. Third, reducing inequalities would put a brake on the most unsustainable lifestyles, which only the richest segments of the population, located mostly in rich countries, can afford. Globally, the wealthiest 10 per cent of the world’s population (two thirds of whom live in high-income regions) contribute about 36–45 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions, while the lifestyle consumption emissions of the middle-income and poorest citizens in emerging economies are between 5 and 50 times below their counterparts in high-income countries.⁵⁵ It is not just the wealth of the elite that is the problem, due to the kind of consumption patterns it allows, but inequality itself, since inequality encourages status competition through material consumption. Indeed, beyond a certain level of individual affluence, we want material things not because of the comfort they provide, but for the message we send to those around us: unequal societies fuel a permanent race for status through consumption.⁵⁶ By contrast, in more equal societies, or in societies in which social positioning can be signalled by means other than consumption, the growth needed to feed the work-spend-consume cycle becomes less necessary.⁵⁷

36. Fourth, income and wealth inequalities have political consequences. Economic dominance is easily converted into political influence, allowing the richest groups of the population and the most powerful economic actors to veto any change that might challenge the status quo they benefit from.⁵⁸ In more unequal societies, moreover, civic engagement is generally lower, and differentials in access to information and power discourage persons in poverty from mobilizing – although they are the ones most affected by the lack of action on issues such as air and water pollution, against which they cannot protect themselves.⁵⁹

37. Thus, inequalities lead to a vicious cycle. They lead to a financialization of the economy that is a major source of increased greenhouse gas emissions and they stimulate the adoption of consumption patterns by the rich – larger houses, more powerful cars, exotic trips

⁵⁴ Lucas Chancel, “Global carbon inequality over 1990–2019”, *Nature Sustainability*, vol. 5, No. 11 (2022), pp. 931–938.

⁵⁵ Dhakal, Minx and Toth, “Emissions trends and drivers”, paras. 2.6.1 and 2.6.2.

⁵⁶ Olivier De Schutter, Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson, “Equality as an ingredient for a post-growth world”, in *Transformative Ideas - Ensuring a Just Share of Progress for All*, Kalina Arabadjieva and others, eds. (Brussels, European Trade Union Institute, 2023), pp. 81–92.

⁵⁷ Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level. Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger* (London, Allen Lane, 2009), p. 226.

⁵⁸ Martin Gilens, *Affluence and Influence. Economic Inequality and Political Power in America* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2012); and Alessandro Roncaglia, *Power and Inequality: A Reformist Perspective* (Cambridge, United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2024).

⁵⁹ James K. Boyce, “The environmental cost of inequality”, *Scientific American*, vol. 319, No. 5 (2018), p. 72; and James K. Boyce, *Economics for People and the Planet: Inequality in the Era of Climate Change* (Anthem Press, 2019).

– which compete against marginalized communities and low-income households for the use of scarce resources. Those communities and households are priced out from that auctioning process, and they may ultimately be unable to satisfy their needs, even in situations in which resources would otherwise be sufficient to ensure decent standards of living for all. The lifestyles of the rich, driven by status competition and conspicuous consumption, fuel the consumption-driven model of our current global economic system, which relies on the ever-increasing production and purchase of consumer goods to sustain economic growth. Such lifestyles are entirely incompatible with the need to reduce environmental pressures. Yet, their control of assets allows powerful economic actors, who thrive on the status quo, to veto any significant reform that might threaten their dominant position.

C. Moving from the profit-driven economy to the human rights economy

38. Reforms of the economy that reduce its dependency on the market can allow societies to move away from the treadmill in which overproduction, dictated by the need to increase profits, can only be sustained by stimulating overconsumption, thus locking people into an employment-consumption cycle that is an obstacle to flourishing lives. At the consumption end, access to goods and services necessary for the full enjoyment of human rights should be made less conditional on the ability to pay and thus on access to remunerative jobs. At the production end, the productive machinery should focus more on responding to basic needs, and less on satisfying wants manufactured by the marketing strategies of companies and stimulated by status anxiety. Five priorities emerge.

1. Stimulating the social and solidarity economy

39. The social and solidarity economy includes enterprises that place “people and social purpose over capital in the distribution and use of surpluses and/or profits as well as assets”.⁶⁰ They produce goods and deliver services in order to fulfil their social mission, as determined by their members.⁶¹ Their purpose is thus not to reward investors, but to address community needs.⁶²

40. Enterprises from the social and solidarity economy either cannot redistribute dividends to shareholders or are strictly restricted in their ability to reward investors. Theirs is a “patient capital”, which discourages short-term gain, and does not allow the accumulation of wealth or financial speculation.⁶³ Any surplus generated will be either reinvested in the company or implicitly reallocated, for instance through its purchasing policy or sales policy. Moreover, the governance of social economy enterprises is democratic: rather than voting rights being linked to the amount of invested capital, each stakeholder typically has one vote, and most stakeholders will have a twofold role: investor-worker, investor-consumer or even investor-supplier.⁶⁴ Such democratic decision-making ensures that the strategic decisions of the enterprise will serve not to maximize profit, but to promote the interests of its members and/or the general interest.⁶⁵

41. In contrast to for-profit enterprises, for which growth is imperative in order to attract investors, and the profits of which depend on extractive business practices (since they must take out more than they return), enterprises from the social and solidarity economy can thus delink economic viability from the growth imperative.

⁶⁰ International Labour Organization resolution concerning decent work and the social and solidarity economy, document ILC.110/Resolution II, 10 June 2022, para. 5.

⁶¹ Sybille Mertens, *La gestion des entreprises sociales* (Liège, Edipro, 2010).

⁶² Walter W. Powell and Richard Steinberg, *The Nonprofit Sector: A Research Handbook*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2006).

⁶³ Matthew Thompson, “Social economy and social enterprise”, in *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, Audrey Kobayashi, ed., 2nd ed., vol. 12 (Elsevier, 2020), pp. 239–247.

⁶⁴ OECD, “What is the social and solidarity economy? A review of concepts”, OECD Local Economic and Employment Development Papers, No. 2023/13 (2023).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

2. Democratizing work

42. While democratic governance is one characteristic of the social and solidarity economy, workplace democracy can and should be encouraged in all companies, including in the for-profit sector.⁶⁶ While it is commonly assumed that unions will oppose a transition to more environmentally sustainable production methods and business models, especially in highly polluting or resource-intensive industries, there is evidence that this is changing.⁶⁷ The interest of workers in healthy and safe working conditions often converges with the search for production methods that are less damaging to the environment. Workers, far more commonly than shareholders, are part of the communities affected by the waste and pollution caused by certain production processes. Lastly, granting workers a more important role in shaping the strategic decisions of companies, including in global supply chains, will reduce the incentive companies face to outsource the most highly polluting segments of production chains to jurisdictions in which environmental regulations are non-existent or underenforced.

43. The democratization of work can be strengthened by ensuring workers can access the necessities of life by means other than work. The introduction of a job guarantee⁶⁸ or the provision of universal basic services would weaken the ability of corporations to resort to “job blackmailing” and would thus also support workers’ attempts to ensure that increasing profits is not prioritized above the health of workers or of communities.⁶⁹

3. Sharing employment

44. Shortening working hours holds significant potential for reducing the pressure of economic activity on ecosystems.⁷⁰ In a study comparing 29 high-income OECD countries over the years 1970–2007, it was shown that reducing working hours reduced the ecological footprint (measured as the surface area of bioproductive land required to meet demand in relation to food, housing, transportation, consumer goods and services, by providing resources and absorbing waste), the carbon footprint (carbon emissions generated by the consumption of a country’s residents, including emissions embedded in imports), and territorial carbon emissions (produced within the borders of the area under consideration).⁷¹ Similarly, in a study on the time use and consumption patterns of Swedish households, it was seen that a decrease in working time by 1 per cent may reduce energy use and greenhouse gas emissions by approximately 0.7 and 0.8 per cent, respectively.⁷² In the United States of America, a significant relationship was found to exist between long working hours and carbon emissions: this relationship is attributable both to the contribution of long working hours to GDP and to the more carbon-intensive lifestyles of workers facing time-poverty because of long working hours.⁷³

⁶⁶ See the argument made by more than 6,000 scientists from around the globe, at www.DemocratizingWork.org.

⁶⁷ Paul Guillaibert, *Exploiter les vivants: une écologie politique du travail* (Paris, Amsterdam Editions, 2023) (in French).

⁶⁸ [A/HRC/53/33](#).

⁶⁹ J. Mijin Cha and others, *Workers and Communities in Transition: Report of the Just Transition Listening Project* (Labor Network for Sustainability, 2021); and Alyssa Battistoni, “Sustaining life on this planet”, in *Democratize Work: The Case for Reorganizing the Economy*, Isabelle Ferreras, Julie Battilana and Dominique Méda, eds. (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2022), pp. 103–110.

⁷⁰ It may also have significant impacts on gender equality, and it is thus also a means to better value unpaid domestic and care work: see De Schutter, *The Poverty of Growth*, pp. 89 and 90.

⁷¹ Specifically, the study concluded that a 10 per cent reduction in work hours would result in the decline of the ecological footprint, carbon footprint and carbon dioxide emissions by 12.1, 14.6 and 4.2 per cent, respectively. See Kyle W. Knight, Eugene A. Rosa and Juliet B. Schor, “Reducing growth to achieve environmental sustainability: the role of work hours”, in *Capitalism on Trial: Explorations in the Tradition of Thomas E. Weisskopf*, Jeannette Wicks-Lim and Robert Pollin, eds. (Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 2013), pp. 187–204.

⁷² Jonas Nässén and Jörgen Larsson, “Would shorter working time reduce greenhouse gas emissions? An analysis of time use and consumption in Swedish households”, *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, vol. 33, No. 4 (2015), pp. 726–745.

⁷³ Jared B. Fitzgerald, Juliet B. Schor and Andrew K. Jorgenson, “Working hours and carbon dioxide emissions in the United States, 2007–2013”, *Social Forces*, vol. 96, No. 4 (2018), pp. 1851–1874.

45. Two mechanisms are at work. First, reduced working time generally results in lower incomes, thus forcing households to consume less. Second, the reduction in working time may create space for less energy-intensive but more time-consuming consumption patterns (such as cooking meals rather than buying pre-cooked meals), and for own-production activities, reducing the dependency on the market. The first mechanism will be particularly important in situations in which the shortening of working hours goes hand in hand with a reduction in wages, a development that should only be encouraged if the right to a living wage and to fair remuneration is fully guaranteed,⁷⁴ and if public investments are increased for the provision of universal basic services.

4. Combating consumerism

46. The fight against inequalities overlaps with the fight against consumerism: the stimulation of consumption by marketing and permanent innovation. Since the end of the Second World War, marketing strategies aim not at responding to demand by identifying unsatisfied needs, but rather at blurring the distinction between needs and desires and creating new objects of desire.⁷⁵ That, together with the growing pace of innovation, resulting in the rapid obsolescence of private consumption items, favours the unchecked growth of business. It also worsens the exclusion of people living on low incomes, who are unable to keep up with the resulting changing social expectations.⁷⁶ Banning advertising, prohibiting the planned obsolescence of goods and introducing a right to repair can contribute to the search for a post-growth strategy.

5. Providing universal basic services

47. In addition to raising incomes by guaranteeing the right to living wages and to fair remuneration⁷⁷ and by strengthening social protection, Governments should invest in the delivery of universal basic services, ensuring access for all to the services that ensure the realization of human rights:⁷⁸ adequate housing, health care, nutritious food through school meals, water and energy, transport and digital access.⁷⁹ Well-known examples abound, from the National Health Service in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the 420,000 social housing units in Vienna, and from the provision of childcare in Sweden to the introduction of free public transport in Luxembourg in 2020.

48. If financed through strongly redistributive taxation schemes, universal basic services can contribute to reducing inequalities. The more basic needs are addressed by universal basic services, the less income differentials will matter, and the less low-income households will be penalized. The universal provision of basic services also avoids risks associated with targeting in means-tested allocation of services, which routinely result in underinclusion and high rates of non-take-up.⁸⁰ It can also be more politically sustainable, since taxpayers and voters may be more supportive of budgetary commitments that will benefit not only low income earners, but the population as a whole.⁸¹ Through social-ecological public procurement and eco-design, universal basic services can also ensure that the services are provided through means that reduce environmental pressures: social housing, for instance, can build well-insulated homes; clean energy can be prioritized in energy provision; school meals programmes can prioritize the local sourcing of food from small-scale farmers relying

⁷⁴ [A/78/175](#).

⁷⁵ Joseph J. Merz and others, “World scientists’ warning: the behavioural crisis driving ecological overshoot”, *Science Progress*, vol. 106, No. 3 (2023).

⁷⁶ [A/75/181](#), paras. 49–52.

⁷⁷ [A/78/175](#).

⁷⁸ See *Our Future is Public: The Santiago Declaration on Public Services*, adopted in December 2022 by a large coalition of civil society groups and experts.

⁷⁹ Anna Coote and Andrew Percy, *The Case for Universal Basic Services* (Cambridge, United Kingdom, Polity, 2020).

⁸⁰ [A/HRC/50/38](#).

⁸¹ Walter Korpi and Joakim Palme, “The paradox of redistribution and strategies of equality: welfare state institutions, inequality and poverty in the western countries”, *American Sociological Review*, vol. 63, No. 5 (1998), pp. 661–687.

on agroecological production; and investing in public transport can reduce the number of cars on the road.

IV. Outstanding challenges

49. Significant obstacles remain to steer the economy towards the fulfilment of human rights rather than towards increasing outputs valued in monetary terms. The cultural barriers are real: many people still believe that economic growth can be equated with human progress. Political economy issues too should not be underestimated: the players who gain from the status quo will seek to oppose change.⁸² Beyond creating the necessary support, policymakers face two key challenges, which are discussed below.

A. Financing State services

50. It is commonly believed that GDP growth is required to finance the services the State provides to the population, as well as to make the investments required for the green transition – in renewable energy or in public transport infrastructure, for example. Indeed, the welfare states that emerged in advanced economies in the early twentieth century were mainly funded by the contributions of workers and employers and by income taxes. The steady increase of economic activity, stimulated by consumer demand (itself supported, in Keynesian approaches, by income support schemes), thus allowed Governments to provide a range of services to the population (in areas such as health, education, public transport and housing), and to strengthen social protection (through both contributory schemes and non-contributory forms of social assistance). In the future, needs will continue to grow, particularly for health care and pensions, as countries face ageing populations (the result of increased life expectancies and lower fertility rates) and family changes (higher divorce rates and single-parent households): in OECD countries, the share of people aged 65 and older compared with the share of people of working aged doubled from 1950 to 2015, and may double again by 2075.⁸³ Moreover, the greening of the economy and, more broadly, the fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals, will require significant investment.⁸⁴

51. The challenge today is to finance these State policies without having to further increase the total flow of economic activity (as measured by the GDP indicator).⁸⁵ While States that are monetarily sovereign (issuing their own currency, which suppliers of goods and services accept as payment) can afford high levels of public debt,⁸⁶ significant constraints nevertheless exist. Excessive demand (including for public provisioning) may result in inflation if the real economy is unable to meet that demand, a prospect that is especially likely in a context in which certain forms of production will be discouraged or phased out (such as fossil fuels-based production). Moreover, monetary financing would be counterproductive if the increased demand resulting from public spending were to stimulate an expansion of economic activity, thus further increasing environmental pressures. Therefore reliance on public spending should be strictly targeted on socially and ecologically sustainable production: it should support the production of goods and services necessary for low-income

⁸² Hubert Buch-Hansen, “The prerequisites for a degrowth paradigm shift: insights from critical political economy”, *Ecological Economics*, vol. 146 (April 2018), pp. 157–163.

⁸³ OECD, *Pensions at a Glance 2017: OECD and G20 Indicators* (Paris, 2017).

⁸⁴ For estimates, see Vera Songwe, Nicholas Stern and Amar Bhattacharya, *Finance for Climate Action: Scaling up Investment for Climate and Development* (London, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2022); Vitor Gaspar and others, “Fiscal policy and development: human, social, and physical investments for the SDGs”, Staff Discussion Notes, No. 2019/003 (Washington, D.C., International Monetary Fund, 2019); and Homi Kharas and John W. McArthur, “Building the SDG economy: needs, spending, and financing for universal achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals”, Global Economy and Development Working Paper, No. 131 (Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution, 2019).

⁸⁵ Daniel W. O’Neill and others, “A good life for all within planetary boundaries”, *Nature Sustainability*, vol. 1, No. 2 (2018), pp. 88–95.

⁸⁶ Stephanie Kelton, *The Deficit Myth: Modern Monetary Theory and How to Build a Better Economy* (London, John Murray, 2020).

households to enjoy the full range of human rights and to achieve an adequate standard of living, and it should go hand in hand with an overall reduction in demand for unnecessary goods and services, especially those whose production is the most resource- and energy-intensive.⁸⁷

52. Many States are not monetarily sovereign in that sense, however, either because they do not issue their own currency (as member States of the CFA zone, for example, or of the eurozone), or because they depend on their exports to pay for the import of technology or capital goods or to serve a foreign debt, in situations in which such repayments are labelled in foreign currencies. Those States too should seek ways to finance the services that they provide to the population while reducing their dependency on GDP growth.⁸⁸

53. Various avenues can be explored. More of the State's efforts could be redirected towards preventative approaches focused on well-being: combating air pollution, improving housing conditions, nutrition or access to green spaces and to physical activity can reduce health risks, for example;⁸⁹ and investing in public transport will reduce the number of car accidents. Gains can also be achieved by investing in the ability of communities to provide support, for instance to allow more older persons to remain in their homes.⁹⁰ The innovations that emerged as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the delivery of food and medicines or the calling of isolated residents, have been described as “exactly the kind of preventative, relational, multi-level welfare that might be fit for a post-growth society”.⁹¹ Unnecessary and even damaging public expenses could be slashed: fossil fuel subsidies amounted to 6.8 per cent of the world's GDP (or \$5.2 trillion) in 2020, 90 per cent of this amount consisted of implicit subsidies resulting from the failure to force the internalization of negative externalities from fossil fuel energy use (in the form of air pollution, contributions to global warming, traffic congestion and road accidents).⁹²

54. While the overall effort required from States is therefore not insurmountable, significant additional funding will nevertheless be required. The key is to finance investments in the green transition and in public services and social protection without relying on growth, and in a macroeconomic environment that will gradually abandon its focus on increasing the value of total output. To solve that equation, States should turn to other sources of public revenue than income taxes raised on workers, or social contributions from workers and employers.⁹³ Various possibilities exist. In earlier contributions, the Special Rapporteur deplored that inheritance and gifts across generations were often not taxed, or taxed only at very low levels, not only depriving States of revenues, but also allowing the perpetuation of disadvantage.⁹⁴ He also argued in favour of a carbon tax, provided low-income households benefited from the reform by providing them with monetary compensation and with access to clean energy.⁹⁵ More should also be done to combat aggressive tax optimization strategies, which encourage fiscal competition among States: cross-border tax abuse by corporations and the diversion of wealth to low-tax jurisdictions or tax havens by individuals result in

⁸⁷ Christopher Olk, Colleen Schneider and Jason Hickel, “How to pay for saving the world: modern monetary theory for a degrowth transition”, *Ecological Economics*, vol. 214 (December 2023).

⁸⁸ Milena Büchs and Max Koch, *Postgrowth and Wellbeing. Challenges to Sustainable Welfare* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

⁸⁹ Olivier De Schutter and others, *The Escape from Poverty. Breaking the Vicious Cycles Perpetuating Disadvantage* (Bristol, Policy Press, 2023), pp. 18–43; and Commission on Social Determinants of Health, “Closing the gap in a generation: health equity through action on the social determinants of health” (Geneva, World Health Organization, 2008).

⁹⁰ Stephen Quilley and Katharine Zywert, “Livelihood, market and State: what does a political economy predicated on the “individual-in-group-in-PLACE” actually look like?”, *Sustainability*, vol. 11, No. 15 (2019).

⁹¹ Corlet Walker, Druckman and Jackson, “Welfare systems without economic growth: a review of the challenges and next steps for the field”, p. 8.

⁹² Ian Parry, Simon Black and Nate Vernon, “Still not getting energy prices right: a global and country update of fossil fuel subsidies”, IMF Working Paper, No. 2021/236 (Washington, D.C., International Monetary Fund, 2021).

⁹³ Kallis, Kerschner and Martínez-Alier, “The economics of degrowth”.

⁹⁴ [A/76/177](#), para. 52.

⁹⁵ [A/75/181](#), paras. 13–19.

losses in State revenue of, respectively, \$311 billion and \$169 billion.⁹⁶ Wealth taxes could also be raised on the wealthiest individuals: a 1.5–3 per cent wealth tax on the world’s richest individuals (the 65,000 centimillionaires) would generate \$300 billion a year in revenue.⁹⁷ That would not only raise public revenue, it would also reduce the need to encourage people to work more and to consume more in order to increase the amount of taxes accrued by the State; and it would address the absurdly high levels of inequalities that have been reached.

B. Global interdependencies

55. The current growth model is the source of a deeply unequal exchange, in which growth in the global North relies on exploiting resources in the global South, and in which wealth creation in the global South largely depends on producing for the high-value markets of rich countries, in large part to pay back a foreign debt labelled in hard currencies.⁹⁸ Thus, while the North imposes social and ecological costs on the South, countries in the global South depend on transfers and on imports from the North. No “beyond growth” strategy can ignore such dependencies inherited from colonial patterns of domination.⁹⁹

56. Overcoming those dependencies requires a fair allocation of efforts. While the economies of rich countries have become obese, economies in low-income countries are still too lean: they should be supported in their efforts to expand further. The support of the international community in that direction should be guided by the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, to take into account both the past contributions of countries to environmental pressures and their ability to contribute to reversing this trend as measured by financial resources and technologies.¹⁰⁰ Developed countries bear “a special burden of responsibility in reducing and eliminating unsustainable patterns of production and consumption and in contributing to capacity-building in developing countries, inter alia by providing financial assistance and access to environmentally sound technology”.¹⁰¹ The principle of common but differentiated responsibilities also appears in the 2030 Agenda, particularly in targets 10.a and 12.1 of the Sustainable Development Goals, and in the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development.¹⁰² Similarly, whereas the Maastricht Principles on the Human Rights of Future Generations include the phasing out of unsustainable consumption and production patterns among the obligations to fulfil the human rights of future generations, they add that: “Wealthier States must proceed more expeditiously [towards that objective] under the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities.”¹⁰³

57. Even in low-income countries, however, development should not be equated with an increase in the aggregate value of production, for which GDP serves as an indicator.¹⁰⁴ The incremental wealth created should benefit the local communities, both by providing them

⁹⁶ Tax Justice Network, *State of Tax Justice 2023* (2023).

⁹⁷ Lucas Chancel, Philipp Bothe and Tancrede Voituriez, “The potential of wealth taxation to address the triple climate inequality crisis”, *Nature Climate Change*, vol. 14, No. 1 (2024), pp. 5–7.

⁹⁸ Prapimphan Chiengkul, “The degrowth movement: alternative economic practices and relevance to developing countries”, *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, vol. 43, No. 2 (2018), pp. 81–95; and Jeffrey Althouse, Giulio Guarini and Jose Gabriel Porcile, “Ecological macroeconomics in the open economy: sustainability, unequal exchange and policy coordination in a center-periphery model”, *Ecological Economics*, vol. 172 (June 2020).

⁹⁹ Claudius Gräbner-Radkowitz and Birte Strunk, “Degrowth and the global South: the twin problem of global dependencies”, ICAE Working Paper Series, No. 142 (Johannes Kepler University Linz, Institute for Comprehensive Analysis of the Economy, 2023), p. 18.

¹⁰⁰ See Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, principle 7; United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, art. 3; and Convention on Biological Diversity, art. 20 (4).

¹⁰¹ New Delhi Declaration of Principles of International Law relating to Sustainable Development, para. 3.4.

¹⁰² See in particular paragraph 59.

¹⁰³ Art. 20 (c) (ix).

¹⁰⁴ [A/HRC/54/27](#).

with decent work opportunities and by increasing investment in public goods, including infrastructure for human development.

58. Structural dependencies between North and South may require de-growing North-South trade patterns and instead developing South-South trade and local and regional markets;¹⁰⁵ increasing the capacity of developing countries, particularly low-income countries, to produce to satisfy their own needs, including by technology transfers and infant industry protection;¹⁰⁶ and favouring debt restructuring and forgiveness to ensure that heavily indebted poor countries are not forced to produce for global markets, and can instead prioritize the needs of local communities.

V. Conclusions and recommendations

59. **The transition to a post-growth development trajectory, focused on the realization of human rights rather than on an increase in the aggregate levels of production and consumption, should be explicitly mentioned in A Pact for the Future, which will be adopted at the Summit of the Future, in September 2024. That, however, cannot be achieved at once; nor can it be achieved locally or at country level alone. Escaping growth dependencies will require multi-year strategies and it will require an effort at different levels of governance.**

60. **The overall objective should be to reshape the economy in order to produce more socially useful and ecologically sustainable goods and services, and to significantly reduce unnecessary and wasteful production. Appropriate sequencing and coordination of the transition at multiple levels of governance is key.**

61. **Taking the present report as an initial assessment of why a post-growth approach to poverty eradication is required and what it could look like, the Special Rapporteur will launch a round of consultations in preparation of a road map, to propose how this transformation could be achieved. Growthism needs to be abandoned. It is an unnecessary distraction from the urgent requirement to move away from economic arrangements that are inefficient and wasteful, while failing to respond to the essential needs of people in poverty.**

¹⁰⁵ Michael J. Bloomfield, “South-South trade and sustainable development: the case of Ceylon tea”, *Ecological Economics*, vol. 167 (January 2020).

¹⁰⁶ Ha-Joon Chang, *Kicking Away the Ladder: Development Strategy in Historical Perspective* (London, Anthem Press, 2002).