

We Economists have done the Maths: ‘Growth’ is a Doomed Strategy – There is a better way

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We live in an age of manufactured scarcity. In a world richer than ever before, roughly one 10th of the world’s population still lives in extreme destitution. Millions of people cannot afford enough food, proper housing or basic healthcare, while a tiny minority accumulates unprecedented wealth and power. At the same time, droughts, megafires, floods and heatwaves remind us that our economies are pushing the planet beyond its limits.

These are not separate crises. They are symptoms of an economic model that has reached the end of the road. Poverty and inequality are not accidents; they are predictable outcomes of policy choices: how we design tax systems, regulate labour markets, value care, structure public services and decide whose needs and whose voices matter. Crucially, if governments can manufacture poverty, they can also dismantle it.

For decades, the recipe was simple: grow the economy, and poverty would gradually disappear. But the promise that economic growth would “lift all boats” has not been kept. While national incomes expanded, wages stagnated, work became more precarious and public services were cut. At the top, fortunes ballooned; at the bottom, families turned to food banks. Growth has become decoupled from shared prosperity.

It has also become ecologically unsustainable. We are edging towards a “hothouse Earth”, where rising emissions and biodiversity loss are destabilising the conditions that support human life. Around 92% of excess global carbon emissions can be attributed to the global north, and the wealthiest 10% of individuals are responsible for nearly half of global emissions, while people in poverty are the first to face crop failures and rising food prices. An economic model that depends on endless expansion on a finite planet is not just unfair; it is dangerous.

Many low-income countries still need growth to build roads, hospitals, schools, renewable energy and decent jobs. But the dominant path to growth – based on resource extraction, cheap and compliant labour, export dependence and deepening debt – has widened inequality and degraded the environment. The real question today is not whether growth continues, but what kind of economies we are building, who they serve and whether they allow everyone to live in dignity within planetary boundaries.

That is why we have come together to develop and support the “roadmap for eradicating poverty beyond growth”. The roadmap provides a range of alternatives on how to move beyond the narrow “grow-tax-transfer” approach that has shaped policy for decades. It is not a blueprint shaped by a handful of experts. It is the exact opposite: over 18 months, more than 400 people – UN agencies, national governments, academic experts, civil society organisations, trade unions, social and solidarity economy actors and grassroots movements, from the global north and south – worked to answer a simple question: how can we end

poverty and reduce inequalities without treating GDP growth as the primary condition for progress? More than 350 signatories have put their names to the plan, including Jean Drèze, Pavlina Tcherneva, Tim Jackson, Bhumi Muchhala, Julia Steinberger, Ndong Samba Sylla, Timothée Parrique.

We do not agree on every policy detail. But we are united in the conviction that our economies must be redesigned around the fulfilment of rights and collective wellbeing within planetary boundaries, rather than maximising output at any cost. Human rights here are not an afterthought; they are the organising principle for how we measure progress, set priorities and resolve trade-offs. Social protection and public services are essential, but they cannot indefinitely compensate for economies that by design generate poverty wages, insecure jobs and unaffordable housing.

We need to change the rules upstream. That means, for instance, decent work and employment guarantees, living wages and fair remuneration, stronger unions and workplace democracy, tackling discrimination and valuing the paid and unpaid care work on which our societies depend. It means investing in children, housing, health, education and transport through universal public provisioning. It means public control of strategic assets, credit guidance to steer investment towards social and ecological priorities, and support for the development of the social and solidarity economy.

Implementing this vision means changing the rules of the global economy. Today, governments in the global south are chided for not doing enough to tackle poverty, while being squeezed by unilateral sanctions, restrictive trade agreements, unequal exchange and debt burdens rooted in centuries of colonial dispossession. About 3.4 billion people live in countries that spend more on debt servicing than on healthcare or education. Meanwhile, global supply chains enable a vast net transfer of labour and resources from south to north. International solidarity is therefore a legal and moral obligation rooted in the historical reality that many rich countries built their wealth by impoverishing the south, through patterns of extraction that continue today in new forms. A just transition beyond growth must include debt justice, increased south-south cooperation, reparative climate finance and support for universal social protection floors, rooted in the principles of non-domination and self-determination so that countries can chart their own sovereign economic futures.

Equally crucial is who gets to shape this transition. All too often, policies affecting people in poverty are designed without them – and sometimes against them. When welfare systems are built around suspicion, sanctions and humiliating conditions, they deepen stigma and deter people from claiming their entitlements. Those who live in poverty know better than anyone how systems can fail in practice. Their expertise must guide the design, implementation and monitoring of anti-poverty strategies, from local councils to parliaments and international forums.

We are not starting from zero. Around the world, Indigenous struggles, feminist organising, trade unions and climate justice movements are defending and building alternative futures rooted in collective care and territorial rights. New coalitions of states are advancing new visions of global economic governance, and governments are experimenting with rights-based anti-poverty strategies, citizens' assemblies and community wealth building. The UN and many partners are exploring “beyond GDP” indicators and new institutions, such as an international panel on inequality, to help chart this shift.

Our roadmap builds on these efforts, connects them and pushes them further. We offer it now as a common reference point for those who refuse to accept that poverty and ecological breakdown are the price to pay for how we currently define economic “success”. Governments and multilateral institutions have a choice: double down on a failing growth-first model or commit to eradicating poverty by transforming the economic rules that produce it.

Poverty is manufactured. That is the bad news – and the good news. What has been manufactured can be dismantled and replaced. We are putting concrete options on the table, all backed by detailed policy profiles that spell out evidence, implementation steps and real-world examples. We call on political leaders at all levels to use them, to listen to those most affected, and to treat the end of poverty, the reduction of inequalities and the effective realisation of human rights as the measure by which economic policy should be judged.

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