

How to save the planet transcript

PROFESSOR JASON HICKEL: The global economy is driving dangerous ecological breakdown. With existing government policies, we're headed for 3.2 degrees of global heating this century within the lifetimes of present generations; humans have never lived on such a planet. Scientists warn of severe displacements, crop yield decline, species extinction and political upheaval. And climate is not the only crisis that we face: we're also overshooting five other planetary boundaries, including a staggering collapse of biodiversity.

This is not because of ignorance or individual behavior, or a lack of concern, it is due to structural features of the capitalist economy. And by capitalism here, I do not mean markets and trade and businesses; these existed for thousands of years before capitalism, and their innocence enough on their own. What distinguishes capitalism from other economic systems is that it is organised around and dependent on perpetual growth – ever-increasing levels of industrial production. It's the first and only intrinsically expansionary economic system in history. If it does not grow, it collapses into crisis – which happens, of course, every few years – with the devastating consequences for working class people and the poor. This system is profoundly unstable.

Crucially also, capitalism is undemocratic. The decisions about what to produce, and how to use labour and resources are controlled by the 1% who own the majority of corporate shares and who appoint the directors of firms. And as far as they are concerned, the purpose of increasing production is not primarily to improve people's lives or to achieve specific social goals. It is not about use value or social progress. Rather, for them, it is to extract and

accumulate an ever increasing quantity of profit. That is the overriding objective, and this leads to perverse forms of production, such as SUVs, instead of public transit or gadgets designed to break down and increase product turnover. The result is that we have an economy that massively overuses resources and energy, and yet remarkably nonetheless still fails to meet basic human needs; it is dangerously inefficient.

Now, scientists are clear that it is the rich economies of the Global North that are that are overwhelmingly responsible for the ecological crisis. Their use of energy and resources is extremely high and vastly in excess of what we know is required to meet human needs, even at a good standard. What is more, growth in the Global North relies on a large net appropriation from the Global South. This is draining poor countries of resources and energy necessary for developments, colonising their atmosphere and ecosystems, and offshoring the social and ecological costs of growth on to vulnerable communities. And yet, notes that despite this immense production and appropriation in the US – which is the richest country in the world – a quarter of all people live in substandard housing; half cannot afford health care. In the UK, we have 4.3 million children living in poverty. Why? It's because of the enormous productive capacity of these countries is organised in the interests of capital, rather than in the interests of people. This is not good enough – we can, and we must do better.

In our vision for the new world, we must be attentive to scientific evidence and insistence on global justice. In its latest reports, the IPCC points out that scholarship in degrowth offers an alternative. In fact, degrowth embraces efficiency improvements, and feasible and safe technological change, but it recognises that this alone is not enough and, therefore, also calls for rich nations to transition to a post-capitalist eco-social economy, abandon growth

as an objective, and focus instead on equity, sufficiency and human well-being.

We need to recognise that when it comes to well-being, it's not aggregate production that matters; what matters is what we are producing, whether people have access to essential goods they require, and how income is distributed. This focuses the mind on what is important, and the first step is that we need to decommodify and expand essential public services: health care, education, housing, public transit, energy, water, internet, nutritious food. Mobilise the productive forces to ensure that everyone has what they need to live a good life, regardless of fluctuations in aggregate output. This stabilises the economy, directly cuts the cost of living and improves the welfare purchasing power of income.

Second, introduce a public job guarantee with workplace democracy and living wages to empower people to participate in the most important collective projects of our generation – building renewable energy capacity, insulating homes, restoring ecosystems. This approach abolishes economic insecurity, improves the bargaining power of labour, delivers high levels of well-being and enables us to pursue radical climate action without anyone getting hurt. This is the bread and butter of a just transition.

In other words, we need to improve socially necessary sectors, and with this foundation in place, we can then scale down socially less necessary forms of production: private jets, SUVs, air travel, mansions, beef, fast fashion, single-use packaging, advertising and obviously the widespread practice of planned obsolescence. In other words, forms of production that are organised around capital accumulation and elite consumption, and which are largely irrelevant to human wellbeing.

Now, this is powerful in terms of climate mitigation because policies like these would dramatically reduce energy use and allow us to achieve a much faster transition to renewables. And as our society requires less aggregate production, we can shorten the working week, give people more free time and share necessary labour more evenly. This approach has been shown to have a strong positive effects on health, mental well-being and gender equality. It should therefore come as no surprise that core degrowth policies happen to be wildly popular: universal services, a job guarantee, working time reduction, living wages, an economy focused on well-being and ecology rather than growth. Polls and surveys repeatedly show strong majority support for these ideas, and official citizens assemblies in Spain and France recently have called for the very policies that I've mentioned. With this path, we can build a more efficient, more rational, more just economy that is capable of ensuring good lives for all with less energy and resources.

Models show that with a post-growth, post-capitalist transition, we can achieve our ecological goals and improve social outcomes. At the same time, it is technologically feasible, ecologically coherent, socially just and anti-colonial – that is a future worth fighting for.

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