

# Why only Degrowth Will Save The World

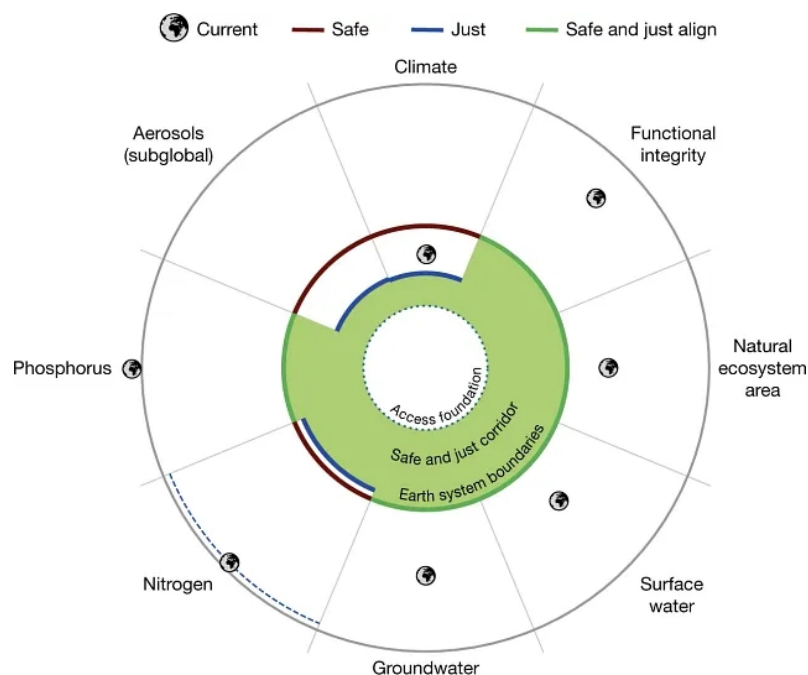
*And what we need to do it right*

By [Notes from the Understory](#), 9 juin 2023

*“What is the worldview of a people who mumble no thanks or prayers, who take what they want from the land, and pay it back with arsenic?” — Jo Sacco, in *Paying the Land**

## We are on the brink of ecological collapse.

Scientists reckon that the earth can handle a total material footprint of around 50 billion tonnes per year, and today we have exceeded this twice over. At a 1-degree rise in global temperatures, we are already experiencing severe droughts, floods, fires, and extreme weather events all over the world. Not to mention we are in the midst of a biodiversity crisis and [we have already crossed seven out of eight earth system boundaries](#).



To keep temperatures at 1.5 degrees or at most 2 degrees, we must cut global emissions in half by 2030 and get to 0 by 2050. But if we continue growing the economy at projected rates, it will more than double in size by 2050. It's already going to be difficult to decarbonise the existing global economy; continuing as business-as-usual would require we decarbonise at a rate of 7% per year to stay under 2 degrees (which is a dangerous threshold) or 14% per year to get to 1.5 degrees — [two to three times faster than what scientists say is possible under best-case scenarios](#).

*Let's be clear. It isn't 'climate change' that's the problem. It's a multitude of crises stemming from the fact that our current capitalist economy, predicated on endless accumulation and extraction, has tipped nature out of balance. And if we don't change this system, we are screwed.*

## **Degrowth — A Way out of the Abyss**

['Less is More' by Jason Hickel](#) talks about the main driver of ecological collapse i.e., Capitalism, the roots of which lie in enclosure (the appropriation of commons land and the dispossession of people), imperialism, slavery, and colonisation. Capitalism is predicated on the creation of artificial scarcity and the endless accumulation of energy and materials, which today is measured by GDP. This addiction to GDP for its own sake, what Hickel calls 'growthism', is wreaking havoc on people and planet.

Degrowth offers a solution to this problem. This idea, promoted by organisations such as the [Wellbeing Economy Alliance](#) and [Vikalp Sangam](#), states that we need to scale down our economy; reduce our material and energy throughput to bring it back into balance with the living world. It is the first step towards an Ecological Civilisation. And it requires a fundamental shift in how our economy functions, from one predicated on endless growth and accumulation, predominantly benefitting the richest 1% and the Global North, to one focused on human and ecological wellbeing for all.

*Degrowth is based on what ecological economists call principles of a steady-state economy. These are:*

- 1. Never extract more than ecosystems can regenerate*
- 2. Never waste or pollute more than ecosystems can safely absorb.*

Hickel explores some policy options that we need to implement to slow down material use. What he calls 'the emergency break' to our current trajectory, includes:

- 1. End planned obsolescence** — Guzzling materials and energy only for them to be useless in a few years, all in the name of the growth imperative, is madness. Policy options include extended warranties on products and the right to repair products. Take the [Fairphone](#), for example.
- 2. Cut advertising** — Advertising, especially when tied to social media giants like Google and Facebook, is mass manipulation on an unprecedented scale. Hickel calls it an "assault on our consciousness — the colonisation of not only our public spaces but our minds, to make us desire things we don't need". Policy options include quotas on ad expenditure, legislation, banning ads in public spaces, and social policies to reduce inequality.
- 3. Move from ownership to usership** — especially for equipment that is necessary but rarely used. Take lawnmowers, for example, or cars. [Common Asset trusts](#), anyone?
- 4. End food waste** — Around 50% of all the food produced in the world, about 2 billion tonnes, is [wasted every year](#). This is an insane ecological cost, in terms of

energy, land, water, and emissions. Ending this could cut the scale of damage caused by the agricultural industry in half.

5. **Scale down ecologically destructive industries** — such as the fossil fuel industry (obviously), the beef industry, the arms industry, the commercial airline industry, etc.

To implement these steps, governments need to roll out concrete degrowth targets. We need hard caps on energy and resource use.

It's also clear that these ecologically just steps must go hand in hand with **social justice**. Some social justice policies that we could implement along with degrowth include:

*1 - **For labour** — Shortening the working week, while introducing a job guarantee and retraining programs. [Studies](#) have shown that shortening the working week leads to improved life satisfaction and health outcomes, gender equality, more time for hobbies, creative pursuits, building communities, and caring.*

*2 - **Reducing inequality** — Through a living wage policy or universal basic income, a cap on wage ratios between CEOs and employees, and a wealth tax on the rich.*

*3 - **De-commodifying public goods and expanding the commons** — This allows people to access the things they need to live well without the need for additional income.*

*What we must recognize is that it's not income that's important for well-being, but the welfare purchasing power of income. By expanding people's access to public services and the commons while introducing job guarantees and a living wage, we can improve the welfare purchasing power of people's incomes. What then is the need for additional economic growth?*

*We may make less stuff and less money, but our lives are all the richer for it. It may seem like a paradox but degrowth isn't about limits — it's about abundance.*

*Capitalism, on the other hand, creates artificial scarcity to drive capital accumulation. Hickel writes, "From enclosure to colonisation, scarcity was created to get people to submit to low-wage labour, to pressure them to engage in competitive productivity and recruit them as mass consumers." As a Palestinian worker laments in the 1975 Syrian film *Kafr Kasseem* about working for Israeli landholders, "They took our land and forced us to work on it for a wage". A similar logic is at the heart of planned obsolescence, advertisements, inequality, and commodifying public goods so that people have no choice but to work more to pay for private alternatives.*

*Degrowth seeks to reverse this logic. Capitalism requires scarcity to generate growth. By creating conditions of abundance, degrowth renders growth unnecessary.*

## The Challenge

We don't need more growth. We need better distribution. The poorest 60% of humanity contributes most of the world's labour and resources but receives only 5% of total global income. The richest 1% capture 19 trillion in income annually, which represents nearly a quarter of global GDP ([World Inequality Database](#)).

Think about that for a second. Hickel uses World Bank data to show that to completely get rid of global poverty i.e., to bring everyone in the world above the income poverty line of \$7.40 a day and provide them with universal public healthcare to the standard equivalent of Costa Rica, it is estimated to cost \$10 trillion. That may seem like a lot of money. But it's just half of the income the global 1% captures in a single year.

Right now, the rules of the game are rigged in favour of the rich and powerful. As inequality has increased, economic power has translated directly to political power. Political advertising (for example, [Rupert Murdoch](#), whose misinformation campaigns have devastated the media discourse in the US, Australia, and the UK), corporate lobbying (for example, the [presence of fossil fuel lobbies at COP27](#)), and power hierarchies in global institutions like the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO have rendered the system completely corrupt. So, implementing degrowth policies is going to be immensely challenging.

*Hickel writes: "The preference of the majority who intuitively want to sustain the planet for future generations, is completely trumped by a minority of elites who are quite happy to liquidate everything".*

*The antidote to growth is justice. The only way to create a post-capitalist society, is to expand democracy.*

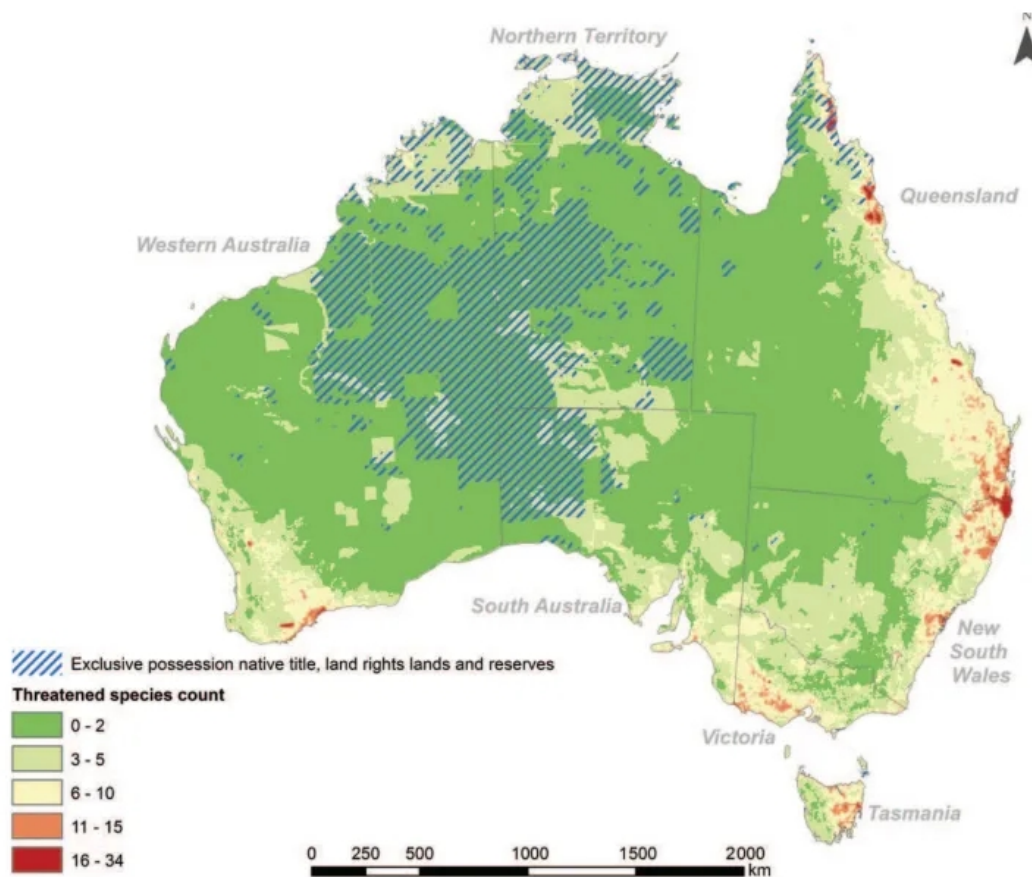
## It's about a Way of Being

However, growthism, capitalism, and imperialism are all symptoms of a larger problem. It is a problem at the core of the ontology, or way of being, driving most of the world today i.e., **that humans and nature are separate, not interconnected**. It is this dualist belief system, espoused by Western philosophers such as Descartes during the Enlightenment and institutions like the Church, that writer Amitav Ghosh in his book 'The Nutmeg's Curse' calls 'the world as resources' worldview. Living beings, nature, and humans have to be rendered as objects, 'resources', in order to be legitimately exploited.

*This ontology is the root of the ecological crisis. It finds direct expression in our lexicon — in the words 'natural resources', 'raw materials', 'ecosystem services'; in the practices of environmental managers, in the self-assuredness of technocrats. The environment is something out there. Either it needs to be saved from us humans, or we feel so disconnected from it that it does not warrant saving at all.*

## But we are the environment. And other ontologies exist.

Across the world, Indigenous peoples from regions as diverse as Australia, Canada, South America and South Asia possess a different way of being. Their ontologies are one that emphasises relationships of reciprocity and kinship with lands, waters, forests, and other species. The world is not seen as resources, but as a living, conscious being; and this creates unique relationships between it and people, as well as laws regarding permissible uses and obligations of care. It's no wonder that even though Indigenous peoples comprise only around 6% of the global population, they [protect 80% of the biodiversity](#) left in the world.



*The Bedamuni people of New Guinea have a saying, "When we see animals, we might think they are just animals, but we know that they are really like human beings". Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples all over the Australian continent talk about Country as a person, about caring for it like a relative, about only taking that which you can give back to Country. Indigenous North Americans talk about paying the Land, about reciprocal relationships.*

The key principle is reciprocity. We are all in relationships of interdependence. As writer and scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer argues, the ethics of exchange

must begin with the awareness that we are engaging with sovereign beings.  
We should treat what we receive not as right but as a gift.

Let's go back to those steady-state principles, the core tenants of degrowth.

1. *Never extract more than ecosystems can regenerate.*
2. *Never waste or pollute more than the ecosystem can safely absorb.*

*Care for Country. Pay the land.*

I believe that degrowth is the way toward a post-capitalist society. Without degrowth, there is no escaping ecological collapse. But there can be no degrowth without a change in ontology; without decolonisation, First Nations rights, protecting, and learning from the Indigenous stewards of the world.

As Jason Hickel writes, degrowth stands for “the de-intensification of work and life. It stands for the de-thingification of humans and nature, de-escalation of the ecological crisis. What begins as a process of taking less, moves us from scarcity to abundance, from extraction to regeneration, from dominion to reciprocity, and from loneliness and separation to connection with a world that's fizzing with life”.