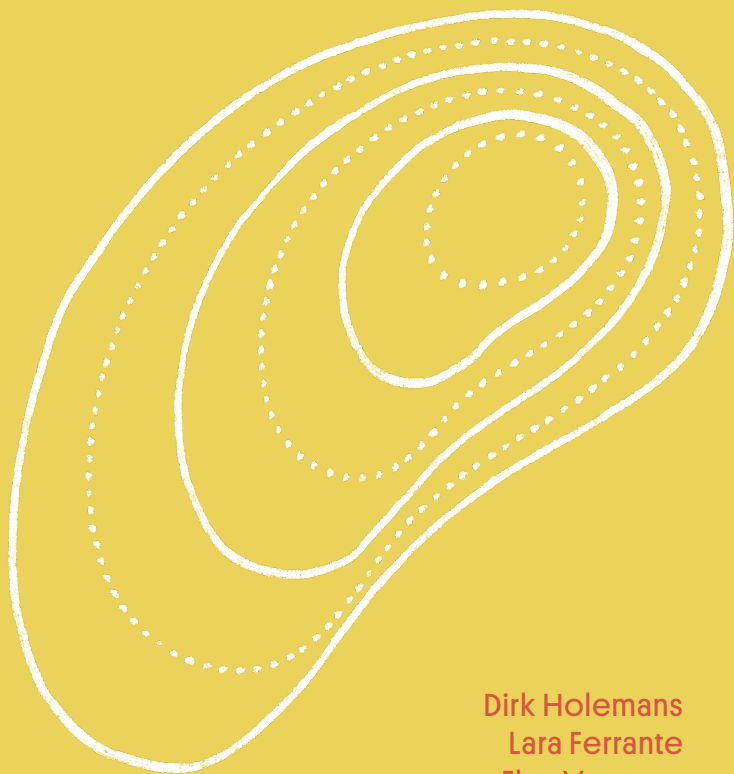


ENOUGH

Thriving Societies
Beyond Growth



Dirk Holemans
Lara Ferrante
Elze Vermaas

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About the authors :

Dirk Holemans is director of Think Tank Oikos and former co-president of the Green European Foundation.

Lara Ferrante is a staff member at Oikos and wrote a master's thesis on degrowth.

Elze Vermaas is a staff member at Oikos and former vice-chair of the Dutch young green think tank Jong Wetenschappelijk Bureau GroenLinks.

Contents

Foreword by Philippe Lamberts	5
Introduction	9
A world to win	13
PART 1	
What's going wrong?	37
1.1. Russian roulette with humanity's fate	37
1.2. Facing the harsh reality	42
1.3. Our fast-shrinking carbon budget	45
1.4. Systems thinking and tipping points	48
1.5. Beware carbon tunnel vision	53
1.6. The farce of green growth	55
1.7. Pretence: greenwashing	60
1.8. Growth in its current form is untenable	63
1.9. Shocking inequality	67
1.10. Capitalist growth is an intrinsically colonial process	71
1.11. The European Green Deal and its social dimension	77
1.12. Democracy	79
1.13. Meaning	82
1.14. Our narrative no longer holds true	86

PART 2

Thriving societies in a wellbeing economy **89**

2.1. Freedom is never a solitary pursuit	89
2.2. Starting from mutual dependence	93
2.3. Sufficiency: how much is enough?	98
2.4. Sustainable Welfare or the Wellbeing Society	102
2.5. The provisioning society	108
2.6. Proposal 1: Fewer and better products in a circular economy	111
2.7. Proposal 2: The redistribution of labour in a sharing economy	114
2.8. Proposal 3: Living in connectedness	117
2.9. Proposal 4: A Wellbeing Economy needs different kinds of businesses	121
2.10. Proposal 5: Democracy drives the economy, not the other way around	125
2.11. Proposal 6: Universal basic services	129
2.12. Proposal 7: A fair relationship with the Global South	134
2.13. Proposal 8: Resilient democracy	137
2.14. Towards an EU Wellbeing Economy	141
2.15. Outro: Back to the imagination	146

From the power of the imagination to the power of change **151**

The great transformation of our society	153
How radical should we be?	154
The 21st-century coalition	156
Revolutionary reformism	158
Relationships are paramount	159

Postface by Lukas Korpelainen **163**

Acknowledgements **169**

Bibliography **170**

Notes **180**

Foreword

by Philippe Lamberts

MEP and copresident of the Greens/EFA Group in the parliament

Why do the vast majority of holders of political and economic power remain wedded to the idea of permanent economic growth? First and foremost, it is because the idea of growth allows them to promise everyone more without asking anyone to accept less. If you assume that planet Earth can provide infinite energy and raw materials, that it is in effect a bottomless dustbin, then the fact that some accumulate more material wealth and do it faster than others is not a problem, since there will always be plenty for everyone else later on. This assumption of course denies the biophysical realities of our common home, but it has one key use: it sidelines the question of distributional justice.

If there are no boundaries, then distributional issues can always be solved. Ignoring the planetary boundaries thus gives the holders of economic power ever more time to extract wealth and cement their positions. No one should be mistaken: the lack of public action on making our societies fit planetary boundaries has nothing to do with a lack of information or understanding. The first major warning about the danger of overshooting our planet's capacity came when I was 9, in 1972. The Limits to Growth report, commissioned by the Club of Rome, had it all neatly laid out. However, for decades, it was – and largely remains – ignored by most political and economic decision-makers. Because this is about power, economic and political power.

Respecting the planetary boundaries lies at the core of the Greens' political engagement. Even if some of us still harbour illusions about the possibility of "green growth", our political family knows that without a fundamental paradigm shift – especially for our economic system – there will be no sustainable and shared prosperity for human beings on this planet.

For 15 years, I was a Green member of the European Parliament. I was elected in 2009 in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis; 37 years after the publication of the Limits to Growth report. At that time, José-Manuel Barroso was embarking on his second term as President of the European Commission, on an agenda of "smart, sustainable and inclusive growth". Five years later, he was succeeded by Jean-Claude Juncker, whose agenda was simplified to "jobs and growth". When Juncker gave his farewell speech to the European Parliament in 2019, he failed to utter the words "climate" or "environment" once in 25 minutes. Even though the now-famous Paris Climate Conference (COP 21) took place on his watch, it was not worth mentioning.

The arrival of Ursula von der Leyen at the helm of the Commission brought significant change. The European Green Deal (EGD), outlined in a communication in December 2019, was to become the central pillar of EU policymaking for the next five years. The document provides interesting reading, as it not only speaks about climate, but also about resources, pollution, biodiversity, and so on. For the first time, respecting planetary boundaries (even if not exactly in those terms) was front and centre of the EU agenda. But the president nevertheless made it clear: "This is our new growth strategy."

Despite the pandemic and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Putin's Russia, the European Green Deal became a political reality, at least in terms of climate policy. The other dimensions of planetary boundaries were missing. Even in

terms of climate action, the Green Deal still has major blind spots.

First, agriculture, forestry and fisheries have largely been untouched.* Second, EU trade policy remains driven by the ambition of increasing the volume of international trade (which seems hard to reconcile with reducing our ecological impact). Third, more importantly, the financial system, which is the real driver of our economic system, is also untouched by the Green Deal. Finally, the Green Deal has many regulatory achievements, but the question of how to fund the transformation remains unanswered. The adoption of new EU fiscal rules by the majority of the European Parliament and Council of Ministers in April 2024 has made the public part of the necessary investments (estimated at 1.6% of GDP by the Rousseau Institute) legally impossible.

At this stage, the Green Deal represents a major step forward but still a work in progress in terms of scope and funding. It is already the main target of national populists of all kinds. Having won the debate on asylum and migration, they have now set their sights on all things green. The risk that the traditional right-wing parties (European People's Party and Liberals) once again succumb and follow suit is already materialising.

The battle to align EU policy with the imperative of ensuring prosperity for all within planetary boundaries will inevitably harden. This alone is a sign that the Green Deal is making

* It is indeed remarkable that the Green Deal was made the main culprit of the 2024 farmers' demonstrations by all right-wing parties (European People's Party, Renew Europe, European Conservatives and Reformists, and Identity and Democracy). The EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) remains entirely untouched by the Green Deal. Whatever tiny green "constraints" did exist in the CAP were hastily removed before the 2024 elections.

a real impact. But winning the political battle starts with gaining ground in the public debate. In 2018, I sponsored the first edition of the European Beyond Growth Conference. The idea was to gather a group of MEPs from different political groups and external partners and bring the growth question and all the issues it links to into the heart of the EU. We succeeded in bringing about 400 people together for three days. Though the conference enjoyed some interesting media coverage, it remained a rather confidential event. At its conclusion, I committed to repeating the experiment in the new term. While the original plan was to hold the second edition in 2020, Covid got in the way and it was May 2023 when we could hold it.

While seven MEPs sponsored the first one, we had no difficulty finding twenty to organize the second, still in the same “ecumenical” configuration (Conservatives, Social Democrats, Liberals, the Left, and non-attached members). Dozens of external partners engaged wholeheartedly, and we even had too many excellent speakers who wanted to contribute. Contrary to her predecessor, the Commission President embraced the initiative and opened the conference. With a full house of 2000 people present and tens of thousands watching online, our success demonstrated that the issue of ensuring shared prosperity within planetary boundaries is gaining ground, not just in the wider public, but also at the institutional level. Not every politician who showed up embraced the magnitude of the changes needed, but at the very least, their attendance shows that the issue is no longer seen as a matter for loonies.

But the battle for the ideas is far from won. I am therefore very grateful to Dirk Holemans for his contribution. I sincerely hope that you, as a reader, will find it stimulating and that it equips you with new insights and ideas to share with family, friends, co-workers, and fellow citizens at large.

Introduction

Unless we collectively imagine a better society, we will not be able to realise one. We will need new visions of the good life we want and we will need to work towards it together.

This, the greatest challenge of our time, involves breaking with our old ways of thinking and our entrenched routines, leaving us free to develop new words and ideas for the future. In doing so, we have a lot to learn from people who occupy a different place in the world and who bring a critical and creative outlook to contemporary society. From where she stands, the American activist adrienne maree brown argues that ‘our radical imagination is a tool for decolonization, for reclaiming our right to shape our lived reality.’

In this essay – which we think of as a thought experiment – we gratefully place ourselves on the shoulders of visionaries past and present, in the knowledge that Earth is on loan to us from future generations. As such, we are indebted to existing ideas, and while we may not cover them all in detail, we do explicitly reference the sources that have nurtured us, thereby giving the hungry reader easy access to the rich world of thinkers of change. And since we highlight a wide range of perspectives, we are necessarily incomplete. Some issues have been left out or are not addressed here.

We are particularly inspired by the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh. In his book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, he describes the ecological crisis as first and foremost a crisis of the imagination. We can barely imagine

Earth's terrible plight and the impact of the ecological crisis on us, while we also struggle to envision how we might reshape society. That's why we start this essay with a fictional prelude about a radical transformation into a better world. While this story might strike some as too utopian, it is anything but unrealistic. It stretches our imagination and opens us up to a new vision and concrete proposals for change. It is twinned, in part 1, with a dark narrative and an analysis that shows why such a painful scenario is equally realistic. This section shatters the illusion that the shift towards the economy we need (one that respects planetary boundaries and aspires to a good life for all) can be achieved by making the current system a little more sustainable. Improving a bad system does not make it a good system. We need to question and rethink the system as a whole. In part 2 we talk about what this means and how various structural yet feasible changes can help us move towards a world with a better quality of life for all – within the Earth's limitations. Again, we envisage what such a world might look like using our imagination. Finally, we describe how this might all come together in a hopeful model of change.

As authors we are part of the growing group of thinkers, scientists and activists who are aware of the urgent need for an alternative to our capitalist, growth-addicted economy, which is destroying life on Earth and exploiting people. As part of that search, several new concepts have surfaced, including post-growth, beyond growth and degrowth. We think beyond growth best captures our perspective, if combined with the goal of a wellbeing economy for all. An attractive future, a thriving society, does not demand all-out shrinkage. Societies around the world experience shortages of various things. In high-income countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands, these include public transport, nature and open space as well as liberated time (time free from the demands of work and consumption). The other side of the coin is that we produce far too many greenhouse gases and too much waste, more and

more people are exiting the labour market due to excessive work pressure, there are too many cars causing endless traffic jams, etc. As well as a decent income for all citizens, low-income countries in the Global South* suffer shortages of essential infrastructure, such as schools, hospitals and rail networks. A wellbeing economy for all, implicating thriving societies beyond growth, therefore strikes us as a suitable concept for our narrative. At the same time, we recognise the major role of the term degrowth in contributing to the debate and kickstarting the movement as a whole. It is up to the countries in the Global South themselves to work out how they would like to shape a beyond-growth society. Doing so democratically is central to our future.

Despite using the term wellbeing economy, we certainly concur with this definition of degrowth from Sam Bliss and Giorgos Kallis:

‘[It] means equitably downscaling wealthy societies’ throughputs of materials and energy. It entails reorganizing the economy to meet people’s needs regardless of what happens with GDP.’¹

Only when high-income countries scale back their energy and resource consumption can we create space for countries in the Global South to meet the needs of their people within planetary boundaries.

* The terms Global North and Global South do not refer to geographical areas. The Global North broadly covers high-income nations such as Canada, the United States, Australia, Japan and countries in Western Europe, which have amassed some of their wealth through the colonisation of low-income nations in the Global South, including in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

Working towards a wellbeing economy is not an easy task, but it is necessary and inspiring. We will have to radically transform the course of our economy, and that calls for reducing or phasing out some activities (such as the use of fossil fuels) while stepping up others (such as agroecological farming). We relish the prospect of this positive spiral: much less of the bad and much more of all the good.

A world to win

‘Like throwing breadcrumbs to the birds.’

With a frown between her eyes, Yousra sprinkles the cornflower seeds into the black furrow that her mother Fatima has scored into the grass with the sharp teeth of a rake. Last summer, wild cornflowers grew in abundance in the verges and among the grain at the Farm Collective where Fatima has been one of the regular farmers for nearly ten years. Now they’re planting them here, at the foot of the granite boulder in the garden of the House of Silence. In the summer of 2024, the year before the Great Revolution, Fatima had scattered her mother’s ashes in this place – the grandmother Yousra had never known and after whom she’d been named. Comfort, that’s what her name means. Comfort and blessing, everything you need to protect or shield yourself from disaster.

After Yousra has shaken the last few seeds from her palms into the soil, she runs her fingers along the rock’s seams and protuberances. She can feel the sun sucking the early morning chill from the granite. It’s supposed to be another warm day, the umpteenth in a row. She’s totted them up in her head, the days without rain. She got to 57. The hand of the hygrometer has been quivering between orange and red. Farming has been difficult in these arid times. On the Farm Collective, they did everything they could to collect and store the water that would often bucket down during the winter months. The Incas in Chile’s Atacama Desert, the driest place on earth, harvested water from bushes and cacti

and captured condensed mist so they almost literally drank from the clouds. Like them, the farmers and those living near the Farm Collective had learned to gather dew. Thanks to these old methods for new times, they still managed to cultivate a varied selection of fruits, vegetables and herbs for the local area and beyond. It was just one of the lessons they'd learned. Lessons she counted among her blessings.

'Done!'

Yousra raises her hands up in the air and throws her mother a triumphant look. Fatima passes her the hoe and with a sweep of her hand shows her daughter how to close the gash in the soil again. It's not something she openly talks to people about, but when she caresses the ground on which she'd scattered her mother's ashes, it feels as if she's really touching her; as if her mother lives on in this soil, not as a human being, but in another form. She cherishes these ideas because they help heal the hurt.

She'd been one of the heat casualties, having suffocated in the searing air that turned her studio flat into an oven. By now, Fatima has a firm grasp of the theory behind death by overheating. When the outside temperature is higher than your body temperature and the relative humidity exceeds 75 per cent, you can no longer cool yourself down and one by one your vital organs will fail. It's known as the wet bulb effect.

For a long time, calculations had shown that this kind of phenomenon, while rare, might be possible in countries in the Persian Gulf or in the Indus River Valley, but scarcely conceivable in more temperate zones such as Western Europe, except in those badly ventilated flats that housed people that couldn't afford anything else.

It had been 47 degrees Celsius that day. A new heat record. The previous high had been recorded the day before. Her mother had woken up bathed in sweat. Fatima had sat by her bedside and had tried to drive the heat from her body with ice-cold washcloths.

‘What if.’

‘If only she’d.’

The short phrases with which she’d tried to rewrite the past had rattled around her head for months.

‘Da-da-da-daaaah’ blares from her backpack. Beethoven’s fifth, the symphony of fate, but also the song of the yellowhammer and the alarm on her mobile.

‘Ti-ti-ti-teeeh,’ Yousra repeats the melody while letting her hands dance like birds in the air in an effort to buy time.

Fatima laughs and twirls her daughter around.

‘Again! Again!’

‘No, my love, Mr Nelson is waiting.’

She’ll have to rush to get Yousra to school on time and then catch the tram to Brussels. Fatima is due at the television studio that afternoon. For a moment she closes her eyes and presses the palm of her hand against the granite’s rough surface, as if she wants to carry an imprint of the rock with her on her skin. ‘Bye grandma,’ Yousra whispers with her lips to the boulder.

‘Ten Years After the Tipping Point’ is the title of the special programme that will be recorded and broadcast in the evening. It’s an opportunity for the key players at the time to

tell their story. They couldn't do it without Fatima, the editor had told her over the phone. She'd wavered. The woman had talked her into it. She was a role model to others, her story was so remarkable. Fatima had heard it all before. She'd said 'yes' but regretted it barely a second later. Attention was the last thing she wanted.

'I planted seeds.'

With her hair in a halo around her head, Yousra looks up into Mr Nelson's eyes. They always have a naughty glint in them, as if the child, who not all that long ago was building tree houses and racing through the dunes, lives on inside. What has she been doing that morning, he was asking. Yousra takes the last wild cornflower seed out of her trouser pocket and holds up the concave shell. With its bristly hair it looks like a little shaving brush. When he clicks his tongue admiringly, Yousra promptly folds a protective fist around the seed.

'Good luck later!'

'I wish I could cancel, tell them I'm ill, you know, come up with an excuse not to have to sit in that studio.'

'You'll be fine.'

'Thank you,' Fatima says, as she waves one last time to Yousra. But the girl has already lost interest in her mother and is now showing the small seed to her friend. Fatima jumps on her bike and pedals like mad to get to the station on time. It's just the thing, she notices, for shaking off the doubt that swaddles her like the threads of a silkworm.

'A hero,' she scoffs as she parks her bike and scans her TravelSoft app. A ticket for all forms of public transport, bike and car hire included – the reforms had sounded simple on

paper, but it had taken some doing to get the various service providers on board. But once it had been achieved at a local and national level, an international network of 'soft', low-impact modes of transport was rolled out surprisingly quickly. It was just one of the changes that had improved and simplified life for many people in recent years.

There were times when Fatima forgot how far they'd come, that the world she'd grown up in had been so much tougher and that there were certain fights her daughter didn't have to fight because the battle had been won. There was the fact that she couldn't even begin to explain to Yousra what kind of work she used to do. She'd started young. Barely twenty and with a father who was suddenly no longer in the picture, she'd seen it as her duty to earn a living for herself and her mother.

She'd never felt like a hero. A disposable human being, more like. A disposable human being scanning disposable packaging. This had summed up her working life. The supermarket chain where she'd started as a student and had later become a full-time employee had been laying off its staff in the months leading up to the big protests. People had become too expensive, and at the end of the day scanning was something anyone could do. She now faced an impossible choice: start elsewhere at a lower wage or be out of a job. She was being passed along like the products she slid past the scanner. 'We ought to go on strike. Show them that we're indispensable,' some colleagues had suggested. Fatima had had her doubts. Not that she didn't want to go on strike, but she no longer believed that she was an essential worker. She'd spent too long assisting customers at the self-checkouts, helping them replace herself.

That morning, her mother had been too tired to get out of bed. Fatima had convinced herself that it was normal, that it was too hot for everybody, had pressed a washcloth

filled with ice cubes into her mother's hand and left with a promise to be back as soon as possible. But she'd barely made it outside when she was sent word about a double shift. She wouldn't be home before nine that evening.

At first the messages she dashed off were still answered, then they were not. 'She must be sleeping,' Fatima had told herself to ease the disquiet that ran through her veins. But when she rang the doorbell that evening, there was no answer either. Her fingers trembled as she stuck the spare key into the lock. She found her mother lying on her side on the tiled floor. Her head was purple, her arms and legs swollen and her hand clutching a warm, damp washcloth. She was dead. Steamed on the inside.

Fatima presses her temple against the tram window. These days she's seen as one of the main players of the Great Revolution, but she'd been desperate, that's all. She could either go mad or do something, and that something turned out to be protest. That's how she fell in with the countermovement. There'd been no other option, at least that's what it felt like. It was no longer a question of choice but of necessity.

All the ideas that she'd dismissed as nice but naïve dreams – now she was prepared to take them seriously. What was the alternative? Getting sold on yet again for less money? Getting crushed in that never-ending race to the bottom? Surely there had to be another way?

'System change not climate change,' she'd chanted during the famous climate march that later proved to be the tipping point. There'd been more than a million of them. It had been the start of widespread resistance. Young people went back to their weekly school strikes and more and more adults walked out of work, first once a week then daily, to demand a socially just climate policy.

She'd joined the 'New Farmers' movement. She could vividly imagine her mother's reaction. To her mind, becoming a farmer was a backward step. Why break your back digging the soil when the supermarket has shiny aubergines all year round? Perfectly formed, washed clean and unblemished but, unfortunately, also flavourless. The price of their availability had become abundantly clear in recent years. Heatwave after heatwave and severe flooding were destroying extractive, industrial agriculture. Only the centres of agroecology were holding out. And that answered the question of how the world could feed all its people. Again, it was no longer a matter of choice but of necessity. Not that it was easy. At the end of the day, humanity had never farmed in this climate before. These were unprecedented times for our species, tossed between hope and despair, between sadness and joy, between the pain of loss and the fire of change.

That's what those days, weeks and months in 2025 and 2026 had been like for her. The demands they'd formulated during the climate strikes and written up in a European manifesto for the future, signed by 50 million people, were perfectly clear. Citizens' Assemblies, a European Union based on restoring the fabric of life and not on economic pipedreams, and a global corporation tax of 30 per cent. The latter had been proposed by Claire, the Enlightened Asset Manager, as she was jokingly called. And sometimes 'the one from the dark side'. Until recently, she'd spent much of her time helping business owners and executives avoid tax, but after narrowly escaping an all-consuming wildfire that had very nearly burnt her daughter to a crisp, she'd opted for a radical U-turn. She went from being hostile to taxation to becoming the big defender of fair fiscal policy. The thought brought a smile to Fatima's face. No, it wasn't the editor who'd convinced her to travel to Brussels today, ten years after the events. It was the prospect of seeing Claire again. Claire, the financial expert who'd been converted by her daughter. And

Rudy. Of course, Rudy, the man who'd bombarded her with words that sounded hollow but were actually surprisingly concrete. They became the building blocks of this new era. He never stopped talking about cooperation, solidarity, sufficiency. 'There's enough for everybody,' he always said. 'But not for the greed of a few.'

Rudy was outspoken, forthright, and when he went for something, he went all in. His words became the backbone of a revitalised European Union. The 2007 Lisbon Treaty, with its Holy but hardly wholesome Trinity of privatisation, deregulation and liberalisation was overhauled, replaced by the new moral compass that was the Vienna Treaty. And yes, she'd been there, at the official signing ceremony. She'd travelled to Vienna on the night train – her first time, she hadn't slept a wink. The train had been chockful of people who'd helped draw up the new agreement. People who, like her, had joined the many citizens' assemblies that had sprung up everywhere in the wake of the protests, strikes and uprisings. Europe would reinvent itself and root itself in respect for life. In concrete terms this meant that everything a person needs to live a good life and flourish would become affordable to all. Education, healthy food, a comfortable home, renewable energy, quality care, you name it. Those who wanted more and who felt compelled to exhaust the earth's resources and to destroy living things could still do so but would have to pay full whack for their extractive urges. 'Polluting must become unaffordable!' She could still picture Rudy slamming his massive fists down on the small folding table between them. Claire had poured his demand into administrative language. It had become the principle of gluttony, popularly known as the tax on greed and selfishness.

'Aaargh, cold! Bliss!'

Rudy splutters to the surface. He rubs the water from his eyes and pulls himself onto the pontoon hidden among the reeds. Standing stock-still, the heron on the other side scans the river and all but ignores him. The bird's restrained stillness is in sharp contrast to the frenzy overhead. On the cycling superhighway on the embankment, morning rush hour is getting underway. The tinkling of bells, shouts of 'Watch out! Make way!' from the faster riders, people whizzing by on racing bikes.

Rudy digs into his ears with the tip of his towel. He relishes the momentary illusion of being closer to the heron across from him than to the humans above him. Since the Senne started flowing through as opposed to underneath Brussels again and the river went from being an open sewer to a place teeming with frogs, dragonflies and even fish, this has been his morning ritual. As soon as the temperature exceeds 15 degrees, which is earlier every year, he dives in. With heatwaves growing longer and more frequent, swimming in open water has become a basic human right. Cities realised they couldn't do without the rivers on whose banks they'd once been founded. One by one, the streams that had been filled in to build car parks and streets were uncovered again to create some breathing space for life.

Rudy closes his eyes and pricks up his ears. Against his better judgement – too much noise from people in a hurry – he hopes to hear it. The 'boom, boom', the loud, languid honking of the bittern, like a ship's foghorn in the dark. The bird's call, the melancholic, morose yet intrepid sound has embedded itself in Rudy's mind, where it's come to symbolise the intense and at times conflicting feelings inside him. However much has changed for the better in recent years, there's just as much that he misses in this world because it has vanished for good or become so rare

that people are at risk of forgetting it altogether. Like those icy days when it feels as if the wind has barbs that pierce every bit of exposed skin. The frosty edges around fallen leaves. Or the sound of footsteps on fresh snow.

Perhaps Rudy has this intense longing for bitter cold sometimes because he used to be a man of fire – for years, he'd worked in the searing heat of a petrochemical factory. It's known as 'ecological mourning'. He's not the only one to grapple with it. That's the good thing about the Houses of Silence that have been erected everywhere, even in the smallest towns and villages. If you're grieving for the world around you, you'll always find someone struggling with a similar burden.

Rudy unscrews his thermos and pours himself a cup of coffee. He's got plenty of time. He's not due at the television studios in the city until late in the afternoon. Until then, he has every intention of soaking up the beauty that is still all around. It's the biggest change, but the one that receives the least attention because it took place inside of him. He feels, how can he put it, a deep connection with all living beings.

'Green guru,' his three boys call him with mocking tenderness. Leon the illustrator, Nelson the teacher and Thor the afterthought – he'll be ten this year, born amidst the turbulence of the tipping era. Like him, his two eldest sons know just what a huge upheaval that metamorphosis was. They'd encouraged him, chipping away at the fear he'd disguised as cynicism, their desire for something better, for a living future, spurring him on, the way a south-westerly wind pushes an Optimist across the waves.

It's funny, he thinks to himself as he stretches on the wooden decking of the wobbly platform, how deep he has to dig to find the man he used to be and whom he's shed, like a snake sloughs its restrictive old skin and swaps it for a shiny new one.

When he was still doing daily shifts at the plant, overseeing the processing of crude oil into all kinds of usable derivatives, from petrol and kerosine to a whole raft of plastics, he used to joke with the men that he'd know what to do with those green lads. He could eat them for breakfast, he'd say and rub his belly. No, you wouldn't catch him becoming a vegetarian anytime soon, let alone one of those lame vegans. Of course, this kneejerk reaction had everything to do with the conversations at home. Nelson had already adopted a plant-based diet by then and was encouraging the rest of the family to avoid milk, eggs and cheese as much as possible. Rudy was still resisting, thrashing about like an eel in a net. He knew that his son was right, but boy did he hate the mirror he was holding up to his father.

Enveloped by the penetrating smell of benzene that may well have left them a little light-headed, he and his colleagues had genuinely believed that they were the ones who kept the world turning. Petroleum was the most widely traded commodity, and they effectively formed the economy's digestive system. The facts about the destabilisation that this petroleum was causing elsewhere were certainly trickling into the workplace, but never really sank in. They couldn't admit it to themselves. Somehow or other he was able to cover up the cracks in his fossil faith, as Rudy now labels his former convictions. That said, they were becoming bigger and harder to patch up. At home Leon never failed to point this out to him. It was a bone of contention between them. But Leon wouldn't be deterred. There was too much at stake. He'd go about it subtly and show his father short clips on his phone, about leaking oil platforms and the trials exposing the lies that the major oil companies had been spreading for years. Slowly, the doubts crept in and made further inroads into his steely defence. The decisions taken by his superiors only amplified the cracks.

For instance, there was the day when the big bosses in their offices in Houston, or perhaps in London or Singapore, decided that what Rudy and his mates had been doing for years could be done better and more cheaply by machines. 'It's all because of those Greens,' Rudy and his colleagues grumbled. After all, they were the ones who vilified oil even though the buses that were laid on for their protest marches, the paint they used on their banners and the keyboards on which they typed their pamphlets against the oil industry had all been made of oil. They were dripping in oil. Hypocrites, that's what they were, blind to their own hypocrisy. So yes, they could eat them raw. Especially that girl with the braids. Green Greta with her big mouth was like a red rag to their herd of raging bulls. 'Thunberg tartare,' they'd joke in the canteen in the morning when asked what they were having for breakfast. It was inconceivable to anyone that barely a year later he too would be out campaigning for the so-called Thunberg Plan.

His sons straying from their father's path – that had been the first domino to fall. A disintegrating bird in the rather sad green space opposite his workplace had caused the next tile to topple. With the tip of his safety shoe, he'd prised it from under the sand. Both skin and feathers had rotted away to reveal the dead creature's insides. It was a colourful tangle of plastic microbeads. The plastic for which Rudy proudly supplied the raw material. He dropped to his knees and pushed aside tufts of coarse grass here and there. The scrawny fowl were everywhere. The nature reserve was a bird cemetery and the silent killer's trail led straight to the factory across the street where he enjoyed his meal vouchers, mobility premium and end-of-year bonus. It rarely snowed these days, but this strip of greenery along the river was covered in plastic snow. Once you'd seen it you couldn't unsee it.

From then on Rudy had felt like a caged bird. He'd tried to suppress the doubt, wipe the image from his memory and return to the safe notion that those climate rebels were just seeking attention. He was like an addict having to kick his habit, defending the indefensible because he couldn't see the alternative.

The climate strikes came at the right time. 'What's stopping you, Dad?' Leon and Nelson asked. Indeed, what was stopping him? He clung to their energy and lust for life, to their belief in better and more beautiful, and hoped that their determination was strong enough to pull him out of the morass of self-hatred that was threatening to engulf him. What had he done with his life? Who and what had he fought for? 'It's never too late,' Leon daubed artfully on a protest banner. Rudy held it up, resolutely, like a shield against the cynicism that had shaped his thinking for so long. During quiet nights it would still occasionally gnaw at him. Perhaps that's why he pushed himself to the foreground the way he did. This change had to happen, because he didn't want to go back to squeezing out more shitty plastic beads. So when the Green Recovery working group was established, he'd thrown himself into it like a drowning man clutching at a lifebuoy.

'Krrrr, krrrr. Krrrr, krrrr.' A rasp can be heard from the reeds, as though someone's scraping their fingernails across rough wood. Krrrr, krrrr, krrrr. Rudy thinks he recognises the call, but to be sure he opens Merlin, his bird app. His sons think it's hilarious that he's now a man with a bird app. 'Great reed warbler,' it says on his screen; on the protected species list until ten years ago, but following the restoration of reed beds and riverbanks there have been more and more sightings. Such stories feel like a jolt of love or like that first cup of coffee in the morning, a real boost to the system.

He picks at the callouses on his fingertips. Some things never change, he reflects. He still has the hands of a manual labourer, rough and gnarly, like the trunks of ancient trees. Except that these shovels of his were no longer helping to destroy all living things, but to restore them instead. Literally. It had been one of the basic tenets of the European Thunberg Plan. He smiled to himself. Yes, that girl continued to haunt him, but whereas once he could have eaten her alive, he now owed his job to her. The Thunberg Plan was fully committed to the repair and share economy. Products now came with a mandatory five-year guarantee, while their repair guarantee was extended to thirty. The logic behind it was simple: a phone used twice as long would halve the use of raw materials. Everything had to be repairable. As locally as possible. That's how the neighbourhood factories came about, where Rudy worked as a repairer three days a week. Leon popped in regularly to piece together the artworks he made with found objects. These moments had once been the stuff of dreams. Rudy had always felt like there was too much of a distance between him and his eldest son. But repairing what was broken had unexpectedly brought them together. It was the transition income that had enabled his reskilling from petrochemical worker to repairer of all things electronic. The caged bird was slowly turning into a free spirit.

The heavy cycling traffic above him had died down and a silence had fallen over the landscape like a feathery blanket. Rudy now closes his eyes in the sun. Soon it would be too hot, but he can't make himself leave just yet. He really longs for that one sound. How's Claire doing, he wonders? Her face appears before his mind's eye. The determined set to her mouth, the tender, almost vulnerable film that came over her cold eyes whenever she dropped her guard.

The fact that money was made available to kickstart the sustainable economy had been largely her doing. She'd been

on the other side long enough to identify the weak points. She'd attacked them, mercilessly. 'The art of living on a damaged planet and how to restore it' is how she put it. Not her words, she was always quick to stress, but Anna Tsing's. He seemed to remember that she'd had them tattooed on the inside of her wrist on the day the global corporation tax was passed into law. That tattoo would undoubtedly come up in the broadcast. As he stuffs his thermos and towel back into his backpack, he wonders whether he should talk about his longing for the bittern. The time was ripe for it, he knew, so why not?

'Cargo on board. Ready for the journey back.'

Claire reads the message just before she steps into the meeting room. A picture of a grinning Victoria at the helm of a gigantic sailboat fills her screen. She uses two fingers to enlarge the image to check that the joy she's seeing isn't feigned in a bid to reassure her. Her daughter at sea – it still takes some getting used to. She's had to learn not to mentally go through and tick off all the things that can go wrong on a cargo sailing vessel out on the ocean. Trust. Claire has had to work on it.

'Shall we?'

Anuna, director of the European Investment Bank, sticks her head round the door. Claire nods, slips her phone into her blazer pocket and sits down at the round table. She has joined other managers of cooperative banks and funds to run through the investment agenda for the next few months and to release the annual budget that will give people on lower incomes the opportunity to buy shares in cooperatives. The EIB has long ceased to be the financial accessory to banks and businesses that prioritised shareholders' profits over the

wellbeing of society and the planet. Under pressure from street protests and ongoing strikes in the autumn, spring and summer of 2025 and 2026, the European Investment Bank morphed into a support fund for all kinds of cooperative enterprises and social-ecological initiatives. These ranged from energy cooperatives, agroecological collective farms and neighbourhood factories to a European rail company and the fast sailboats that shipped fairtrade coffee and cocoa beans across the oceans – the kind on which her daughter had embarked and which she now even captains. They've all been made possible by the EIB's change in direction.

Her phone vibrates. Her stomach lurches. Another message from Victoria.

'Perfect wind!'

She quickly replies with a thumbs up. Later Claire is supposed to reminisce about that remarkable year in a television studio. Part of her is looking forward to it. It's important to keep sharing these kinds of stories to raise morale, because however much has changed, for many people these are still incredibly difficult times. Climate change has slowed, and the emissions graph now shows the downward trend they have long aimed for, but the sooner CO₂ levels reach net zero the better.

She also feels the heartache. It's really Victoria who should be on the programme. Victoria and Raul. They awakened her conscience. But her daughter, who's 25 now, and her boyfriend always preferred action to words. That said, during that week in the summer of 2025 they drove her crazy with their incessant chatter. Like relay runners with battering rams, they had a go at her and her life choices. And if one tired of the discussion, the baton would be passed to the other. There was no escape for Claire.

‘But where does the money come from?’

Her daughter’s question had struck her like lightning. The sun had set – finally, they’d gasped. It had been another one of those unimaginably hot days; the thermometer on the patio that jutted out like a swallow’s nest over the Calanques de Sormiou, a bay not far from Marseilles, had indicated 48 degrees in the shade. The evening air had smelled of freshly burnt pine. The sky had turned red with the burning forests dozens of kilometres away. Claire had bought the country house with the money from her first big job as an asset manager for a dog food manufacturer. The owner had promised her half of the tax he’d saved and because property investments were always a safe bet she’d treated her family to this little hideaway. But she hadn’t counted on climate disruption. It was gradually becoming impossible to spend a pleasant summer holiday here. They seemed to be living like bats, taking refuge in the shuttered house during the day and only emerging at night.

Money, that’s what they were talking about that evening. That summer, her daughter Victoria had been studying the many catastrophes ravaging the world and had concluded that the rich were the greatest polluters with the most blood and oil on their hands. Her new boyfriend, Raul, encouraged her mission and fed her with what her mother described as ‘simplistic ideas’. In the absence of a father, they went after her.

Did it really matter where the money came from, Claire demanded to know. Couldn’t they just enjoy themselves? No, they couldn’t. Not anymore. They wanted to know what she did, how she earned all that money. Claire sighed, bent over backwards to avoid answering the question before eventually – with her back against the wall – blurting out that she ‘helped big companies pay as little tax as possible. Happy now?’

Ten years on, the look of revulsion on her daughter's face still makes her wince. It was like a blunt knife stabbing her in the heart. Raul pushed his chair back with such force that it clattered to the floor and had stomped off. Victoria leapt to her feet and yelled that she couldn't bear to spend another second in the same room as her, that her mother was complicit, a 'climate criminal, a silent killer'. Those were her words. The two of them disappeared together.

'Claire?'

Across the table, Anuna gives her a searching look. 'Everything alright?' That, too, was one of the positive aftereffects of the changing zeitgeist. Ten years ago, she'd have squared her shoulders, produced a forced smile and carried on with a 'Sure, why?' Now she gently shakes her head and explains that she's due at a television studio later to talk about events ten years ago – everybody nods in sympathy – and that she'd like to take some time to get her memories in order. Her colleague on her right – from the Banque Coopérative de France, officially a competitor, but can you still speak of competition when you often work in partnership? – puts his hand on her arm and tells her it's fine, that we all have our off days. She gathers her things together, walks out and parks herself on a bench in the urban forest close by.

'Safe passage,' she replies to her daughter's messages and adds a picture of a squirrel shooting up the trunk of the beech in front of her. 'Having a little breather,' she writes underneath.

'You okay?' is the immediate response from her daughter.

'Television broadcast about the big revolution later. Wish you, the two of you, were here with me.'

A beating heart appears on her screen.

The evacuation order came at one o'clock in the morning. Victoria and Raul were untraceable. The forest fires continued to rage and had now spread to within 20 kilometres of their house. Claire didn't want to leave and ran outside, where the smoke took her breath away. Everything around her seemed to be burning – cars, boats on the beach and with the flames reflected in the water even the sea itself appeared to be on fire. An inferno. The firefighter stopped her from going any further. 'My daughter, my daughter,' she screeched, shouted, moaned and finally snivelled. She sent message after message. And message after message remained unanswered. She tried 'Find my iPhone' but then remembered that Victoria had swapped hers for a Fairphone ages ago. 'No dirty business' had become her motto.

A smile slides across her face. Her daughter's motto has since been widely adopted. Everything she and Raul told her about, everything Claire initially brushed aside – no more flying, plant-based food, reuse, repair and share – has become the norm. 'Why,' Claire still often wonders, 'did she run that bloody rat race for so long?' So hard and so blind that she very nearly sacrificed her only child to that inexplicable yearning for more and better. She kidded herself that everything she did was for her daughter's benefit. Until that daughter of hers ripped that illusion to shreds.

'We've found your daughter.' The face of the firefighter who'd come to tell her at the shelter was blackened with smoke. She stared at it intently, wanting to read his expression, but all she saw was immense fatigue. Victoria and Raul were unhurt. They'd tried to persuade people in poorer neighbourhoods to leave their homes and seek refuge. And they'd wanted to save the wildlife too. Fires in Australia had claimed the lives of a million animals, and they didn't want the same thing to happen here, but it soon dawned on them

that there wasn't much they could do, just the two of them, to tackle the flames.

Claire wanted to wrap her arms around them, tell them she was sorry, that she wanted to change, but they recoiled as though she were a leper, a carrier of the virus that was threatening to destroy the world around them.

They sat in silence on their camp beds in the sports hall. In that tense atmosphere Claire made a silent promise. Words were too elusive to make any real difference; she'd have to speak through actions. From now on, she'd put all her knowledge and know-how at the service of this community of humans and nonhumans. The look on Victoria's face. She'd never forget that cocktail of disbelief, incomprehension and hope when they bumped into one another in the aftermath of the big climate march. It was Raul who embraced her and pulled Victoria into the hug. 'Welcome,' he whispered in her ear. 'We need you.'

That was all the encouragement she needed. Everybody wants to feel needed. She cleared her diary, took to the streets, had stimulating conversations, fought for global fiscal reform and helped write the European manifesto for the future that laid the foundations for a social-ecological Europe.

She put her weight behind a proposal that had been floating round the corridors of the OECD for some time, much like a zombie: a global corporation tax of 30 per cent. She went from tax avoidance to tax hike champion. To Claire's mathematical brain one thing was abundantly clear: it would take more than goodwill to achieve the transition to a society without fossil fuels but with respect for all living beings. It required lots of money. Money that was currently diverted to everything that was poisoning and destroying us. She established a platform for fair taxation and entrepreneurs

for the living, she told Victoria and Raul over dinner one evening. They, in turn, shared their plans for a merchant fleet using sailboats. She swallowed her initial reaction. Unrealistic, she reckoned. But they persevered. And she could only admire that, even if she was paralysed with fear every time Victoria and Raul embarked on another months-long voyage.

Alongside her daughter and son-in-law's fair merchant fleet, the New Farmers group around Fatima and Rudy's repair team were the first to apply for credit from her newly founded cooperative bank. Later they were joined by energy coops, local care facilities, sharing libraries, you name it. The Houses of Silence received financial backing too.

It was a real breath of fresh air to listen to all those exhilarating dreams and plans. Some of them were admittedly a bit rough and ready, but the enthusiasm and determination that Claire had seen in people had warmed the cockles of her heart.

'Good luck from us all!'

In the foam of the sea that fills the picture Victoria sent her, Claire can make out the silhouettes of albatrosses, the bird that soars so majestically above the oceans yet feels so unsteady on dry land. A bit like her girl these days. When on land, she and Raul have been feeling less and less at home. They've become people of the water.

'Rudy?'

The rugged man in the lobby of the television building slowly turns round and when he recognises the woman who'd spoken his name so hesitantly he spreads his arms like big wings.

'Fatima!'

His firm embrace dispels any remaining doubt. This reunion alone makes the broadcast worthwhile. There's so much she wants to know. How are his sons doing? Does his wife still work in a House of Silence? And wasn't she pregnant the last time they spoke?

'Another son,' Rudy beams and shows her a photo. 'Thor.'

'He who brings order to chaos.'

Rudy looks surprised. 'I'm amazed you know that! But you're right. It's almost symbolic. How about you?'

'Yousra.'

She clicks open the pendant that belonged to her mother and that she now wears around her neck and shows the double portrait. Grandmother and granddaughter.

'Have you seen Claire lately? Victoria and Raul are practically living at sea, I've heard.'

Rudy touches the trunk of the elm that grows next to the front desk as a natural air freshener and shakes his head no.

'They're doing great work.'

'That hand looks familiar.'

Claire. In a suit, with trainers on her feet, a computer bag dangling from her shoulder and clutching a mobile. 'Look', she says, holding up the picture of Victoria standing at the ship's bow with the wind in her hair and Raul behind her. For a split second, Rudy is reminded of the Titanic, but shakes off the thought. Together they look at the couple

with a mix of relief and delight, as though they're two rare butterflies that were thought to be extinct but have suddenly reappeared. While gathered there together, celebrating their small victories and counting their blessings, they fail to notice the woman approaching. Nor do they hear her gently clearing her throat. It takes an emphatic 'Are you ready?' to snap them out of their shared reverie.

'Yes,' Fatima says. 'We're ready.'

In writing this essay, we think it is important to provide space for multiple perspectives. We are aware that as writers we have blind spots too and that other people may be better placed to bring certain viewpoints to our story. That is why we interviewed Sibongwe Kanobana, a decolonisation expert and lecturer in sociolinguistics and post-colonial studies. Below, Kanobana, like Amitav Ghosh, highlights the importance of other narratives and visions that already exist but receive little or no attention:

On the face of it, subjective stories and perceptions rooted in experience may seem anecdotal, but I believe they are at least as valuable as a graph or table. Although we know that figures can be deployed to make pretty much any point we like, we still use them and end up making everything abstract. When talking about refugees or ecological issues, we look for abstract concepts and try to quantify things. You might say that by doing this we strip them of life, rendering the data sterile. It is only when sterile that the data are valuable to us. In a sense, that is an ideology of death: something is only interesting when devoid of life. I would even extrapolate this to the way we organise our political economy. It likewise lends great authority to data and little to subjective stories with life in them. This is deeply rooted in our colonial past, because we tend to view

all knowledge produced by the West – and produced is really the wrong word here: the knowledge that Westerners attribute to the West – as being the most valuable, as helping us all create a better world. It leaves us trapped in the authority of the white perspective, which holds that the Western bourgeoisie probably knows better than anyone else. We must challenge this and listen to those people we very rarely listen to. Places we routinely think of as ‘shitholes’ are not just home to horror, but to other developments as well. In Goma, for example, all kinds of sports and cultural activities are organised for street children, while women’s groups are taking a bottom-up approach to strengthening the social fabric. Or think of Rojava, the autonomous region in Syria, where a feminist anarchist state is emerging yet weirdly enough not receiving any attention. To this day, our worldview tends to divide humankind into civilised and barbarian. The dynamics at play here are those of race and cultural hegemony, prompting us to rank what is or is not worth listening to.

PART 1

What's going wrong?

The prelude outlined how a different future is possible if we head in a radically new direction. Our story was inspired by the Indian author Amitav Ghosh, who argues that the climate crisis is first and foremost a crisis of the imagination. We struggle to picture a much better society, yet at the same time we can barely imagine what dire straits the Earth is in and how the climate crisis will affect us in the (near) future. That is why we are starting this first section with a look at a dark future. To really impress the gravity of today's polycrisis on readers, we will sketch the future in a business-as-usual scenario and show that superficial interventions alone are not enough, as our current economic system puts pressure on the planet's carrying capacity and contributes to social inequality and exploitation.

1.1. Russian roulette with humanity's fate

'The thermometer now said 42 degrees, humidity 60 percent.'² As a result, twenty million people in India were dead. Fiction? Yes, it is from the beginning of *The Ministry for the Future*, a novel by the American author Kim Stanley Robinson. But how long do we have before reality eclipses fiction? When both temperature and humidity are very high, a critical threshold is reached at which a body can no longer cool itself by perspiring because the sweat does not evaporate. Above this limit, a healthy person will last only six hours.³ This critical level has been exceeded for

one to two hours during heatwaves in multiple locations.⁴ Reality is already overtaking fiction and each time it catches us unawares. In September 2023, for example, a quarter of Greece's agricultural land became unusable after more rain fell in 48 hours than Belgium receives in a whole year. Climate hell has broken loose, making it essential for us to take inspiration from Ghosh and challenge our imagination by exploring just how badly it might affect our living environment.

Yet the description of a realistic but bleak scenario is not without risks. Firstly, we are writing this from the privileged position of Western Europe, a rich region in a temperate climate. We focus on the future because, relatively speaking, the present is not that bad yet. In doing so, we fail to acknowledge the fact that large groups of people have been suffering from the effects of ecological destruction for many years. When a third of Pakistan is hit by climate-driven flooding and farming communities in regions in Kenya are forced to leave their ancestral land because of a lack of rain, the climate catastrophe is well and truly underway for them. It exposes the reality of climate injustice, caused by a capitalist system that only benefits a minority of people.

Secondly, while we start from a radical change in, say, the climate system, we assume it will stabilise again in some shape or form in the future. For instance, during the summer of 2023 tour operators responded to the record temperatures in southern Europe by announcing that they planned to organise more travel to Scandinavian countries. Ironically, the ink had barely dried on those articles when Norway was hit by extremely heavy rainfall and unprecedented flooding. Will Norway have a stable climate in the future?

Nobody can vouch for that. Chances are that unless we call a halt to climate disruption or biodiversity loss soon, nobody will be safe. The last time greenhouse gas concentrations

in the atmosphere were as high as they are today was over 100,000 years ago. We find ourselves not in a slightly different situation, but in totally uncharted territory. And what to make of the latest report on sea level rises from the Royal Netherlands Meteorological Institute? It does not rule out a possible rise of 17 metres by the end of this century.⁵ Even those with lots of money are deluded if they think they can do nothing and expect to retire to a nice house and a quiet life in a stable climate in Norway.

But the fact remains that some regions will be far worse affected than others. Without a radical change in policy, the deadly combination of heat and humidity that Robinson describes will render parts of South Asia, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea unliveable by 2050.⁶ And under the current system of global inequality, the chance that the hundreds of millions who live there will all have access to air-conditioning is practically nil. By 2050, most European cities will be 5 to 6 degrees hotter during the warmest months, in part because urban areas tend to trap more heat than rural ones. It begs the question whether you would still want to spend the summer in a city. And that is a serious issue when you consider that three-quarters of Europeans live in cities.⁷ A recent European report shows that our current trajectory will lead to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Europeans from heat waves by the end of the century.⁸

So yes, close your eyes and imagine the reality of a day in 2050. The extreme events you hear about in weather forecasts – hailstones more than 15 cm in diameter, heat waves, storms, droughts, floods and wildfires – have become the order of the day. Weather events that were once a rarity will be more and more common. Water shortages in Spain and France will increase to 40 per cent and in summer many taps will run dry.⁹ South Vietnam, parts of Bangladesh and cities such as Bangkok, on the other hand, will be under water.¹⁰ Add to this the devastation of entire regions by fire

and flooding and it is clear that vast numbers of people will be forced to migrate. For many millions this will be the only survival strategy left. And every day the news will be dominated by the immense changes to our world, with huge migratory flows causing drastic upheaval in Europe – before we even get to the weather report.

This realistic, bleak scenario is as much about biodiversity loss as it is about the climate. Since 1970, species populations have plunged by an average 69 per cent.¹¹ This rate of decline is faster than in the previous five mass extinctions in the planet's history.¹² By 2050, this number is expected to go down by a further 10 per cent.¹³ As whole ecosystems unravel, many animals will be affected by food shortages, heat and drought. In short, we are looking at the loss of the beautiful, more-than-human worlds that have evolved over billions of years and, when viewed on a geological timescale, are being snuffed out by our industrial-capitalist society in the mere blink of an eye.

Anyone who believes that we can produce enough food for everyone in such a world is deluded. Field crops are incredibly vulnerable: one big hailstorm, one flood, one extreme heatwave... and an entire harvest may be lost. A return to widespread hunger in the world is one of the future trends we are most likely to see, and again, the low-income countries in the Global South will be bearing the brunt of it, as the richer nations will simply buy up everything that is available on the international markets. Unless, of course, major producers such as India decide to stop exporting their food. If so, sated consumers in Western Europe could wake up to a rather peculiar and unfamiliar feeling.

Short of a radical change in direction, we are looking at around 3 to 4 degrees Celsius of warming by 2100¹⁴ – a world we simply do not want to live in. There may be plenty of good climate and biodiversity initiatives out there, but

at this point we are only taking small steps in the right direction on a train that is still heading the wrong way. The world is already more than 1.2 degrees warmer, and the temperature in Europe is rising at double the rate of this global average.¹⁵ We could breach the worldwide target of 1.5 degrees, outlined in the Paris Agreement, as early as 2027.¹⁶ And instead of reducing our CO₂ emissions, we are actually emitting more year-on-year.

It is worth bearing in mind that climate scientists, especially in the IPCC reports, are often somewhat conservative in their forecasts. When faced with a wide range of scenarios, they tend to opt for the more moderate rather than the more extreme predictions.¹⁷ Besides, the calculations do not yet adequately reflect certain complex relationships, such as CO₂ emissions from wildfires and thawing permafrost.¹⁸

Complex mechanisms such as the earth's life support systems are prone to sudden collapse. This is all tied to feedback loops and tipping points, which we will address in more detail later.

Back to the heart of the matter: the ecological crisis is a crisis of the imagination, with many of us unable – or unwilling – to imagine how bad things can get. But having the courage to face up to this bleak future is crucial. While doing so, we should not just picture major catastrophes but also the simple fact that large parts of the Earth are set to become uninhabitable for humans. Scientists have put forward a range of plausible scenarios for this. The toxic combination of higher sea temperatures and acidification could result in a 'natural' catastrophe for humanity. Equally, an ice cap hurtling into the sea could trigger a chain reaction that could pose a serious challenge to liveability. In 2021 scientists reported that a significant part of the Greenland ice sheet is on the brink of a tipping point, after which

accelerated melting coupled with a rise in sea level will be inevitable, even if global warming itself is halted.¹⁹

It sounds implausible, but we had better get used to it: the powerful institutions and individuals on this planet are playing Russian roulette with humanity's fate, and there is more than one bullet in the chamber of the revolver against our head.

1.2. Facing the harsh reality

Unless we radically change tack, as described above, the future that awaits us is terrifying. It has become all but impossible to ignore the problem, and the reality of the situation – that we have no control over the increasingly extreme weather and climate disasters – (rightly) scares us. According to an extensive survey in 32 countries, nearly half of the population is 'very' to 'extremely' worried. This anxiety is felt most acutely by young people. A large-scale study in 10 countries found that 75 per cent of the 10,000 young people surveyed see the future as frightening, 55 per cent believe they will have fewer opportunities and less prosperous lives than their parents and over a third doubt they will ever want children. Tellingly, these negative feelings also include disappointment over policy failures and government inaction. Young people feel betrayed by leaders and policymakers. The fear, as well as the anger, frustration, grief, mourning and powerlessness are even stronger in countries where the impact will be most severe. For instance, while 28 and 26 per cent of young people surveyed in the United Kingdom and the United States reported daily climate anxiety, nearly three times as many did so in the Philippines and India. The gravity of the situation, and the fear, is nothing new for marginalised groups. Whereas in Western Europe we are only just starting to worry about the future, many others have had to live with this terror for

quite some time and climate misery has long been part of everyday life.²⁰

Coping with these feelings is not easy. There is a very real risk of slipping into naïve optimism ('it's not as bad as all that') or stubborn pessimism ('it's too late anyway'). Or else we respond by fighting, fleeing or freezing, as we do in other stressful situations. Knowing what is in store for us can have a paralysing effect, so we freeze, unable to proceed. Looking away and deliberately avoiding the problem is another defence mechanism. But our inability to confront our fear is also what is stopping us from taking collective action and causing climate apathy. In the best case, fear galvanises us, giving us the energy to actively fight for change.²¹

How can we turn fear into action, in a constructive way? 'The Work That Reconnects', described in *Active Hope* by Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, can provide us with a framework. The idea is to strengthen the connection with oneself, others and the more-than-human world, come to terms with our feelings of anxiety and view them in a different light, and then use this as inspiration for action. In essence, it is all about acknowledging that your emotions are an expression of your connection with and love for the world and drawing strength from this. In *Generation Dread*, Britt Wray, a climate change and mental health researcher, describes it as follows:

'The positive in all this is that the torment comes bearing gifts. If you explore its depths, you'll find a valve somewhere inside you that taps into the most existential part of yourself. Once you open it, a boundless stream of love, connection, and meaning will always be at your back, fuelling what you do.'²²

So we can learn to cope with anxiety or grief and then do something with it, or, as Wray puts it, develop an emotional reflexivity. It is a way of dealing with your emotions that also accommodates reason, a way of linking thoughts and feelings. This is in sharp contrast with the kind of extreme fear that can overwhelm, paralyse and shut down your capacity for rational thought. When you are aware of your emotions and capable of channelling them, they can change your relationship to the world.²³

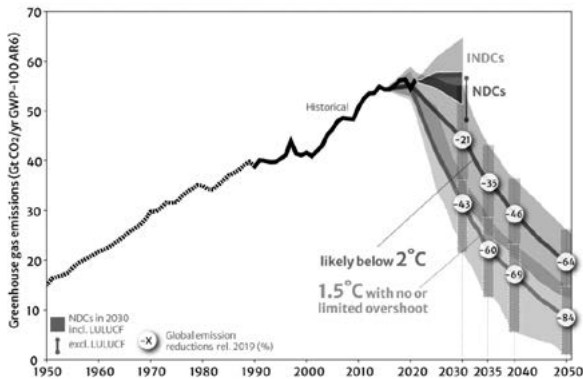
Add to this the fact that bottling up emotions can cause health problems and it becomes clear that it is best not to avoid or suppress anxiety and grief. If we learn to deal with our emotions, instead of walking away from them, we can translate them into concrete action. An important step in this process is accepting the feelings of fear and sharing them with others. This can be linked to what Hannah Arendt writes in *On Revolution* about the pursuit of public happiness, or the importance of a collective pursuit of universal freedom. The idea is to achieve public happiness as well as personal wellbeing through the individual and collective experience of social action. While we can, each individually, try to get a handle on our climate anxiety and grief, it is by connecting with each other that we can translate this into action. Activism alone will not resolve feelings of despair. We must first accept them and bond over them with others. As described in *Generation Dread*, activism is not just something external, expressed in actions such as taking to the streets and calling policymakers to account, but also a personal process that enables us to come closer to ourselves and get to grips with difficult emotions and fear. This internal activism leads to more effective and ultimately more sustainable external activism.²⁴ The connection with others gives us the strength to harness climate anxiety and convert it into action. You cannot do this on your own.

This process of emotional reflexivity also benefits from understanding how various aspects linked to our growth-addicted capitalist society contribute to the ecological crisis. Below we explain the consequences of blindly chasing economic growth without questioning the idea of growth itself and the entire system underlying it.

1.3. Our fast-shrinking carbon budget

The bleak picture we outlined above is nothing new. It is based on a sober analysis of facts and reports. Have a read through this: since the 1990s, the United Nations has organised an annual climate conference, known as the Conference of Parties, or COP for short. At the third such meeting, COP3 in Japan in 1997, the Kyoto Protocol was adopted. Dedicated to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, it was the first treaty that saw nations worldwide commit to fighting climate disruption. Unfortunately, it came to nothing: annual greenhouse gas emissions are now 60 per cent higher than they were when the summit took place in Kyoto. So a new and more ambitious accord was needed, which arrived in the shape of the Paris Agreement at COP21 in 2015. Its signatories agreed to limit global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius compared to pre-industrial levels, and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degrees. Significantly, the climate accord also explicitly states that the agreement 'will be implemented to reflect equity and the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities'. In other words, high-income nations that have historically been responsible for a greater share of emissions can and must do more than low-income countries. And if all humans have a right to the same emissions level, a country's climate actions should reflect the size of its population.²⁵

In September 2023, the United Nations published a global stocktake of the implementation of the climate agreement. The report identifies significant progress, but as the UN representative puts it: ‘it is a report card of our collective climate action – and not a good one. COP 28 is our chance to make a dramatic course correction.’²⁶ This is necessary, as the report shows that global emissions are not following the downward trend targeted by the Paris Agreement – quite the opposite – and that we have a ‘rapidly narrowing window’ to increase ambition to limit warming to 1.5 degrees. To achieve this, emissions will have to be reduced by 43 per cent by 2030. The figure below is a good summary:



Historical emissions since 1950, projected emissions in 2030 based on nationally determined contributions, and emission reductions required by the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). (UNFCCC, 2023, p.17)

The rising black line on the left reflects the actual increase in annual greenhouse gas emissions since 1990, the small dark triangle next to ‘NDCs’ the sum of all the contributions pledged by countries in their climate plans. At best, these

will result in a slight drop in annual emissions. In other words, countries' intentions and, hopefully, actions will get us nowhere near the required 1.5-degree limit. The falling lines on the right indicate how fast we must reduce emissions to keep our planet liveable. As climate reports stress, we can only achieve this through transformative change: radical transformation in every area of society. The graph also indicates that opinion makers and corporations that maintain that our climate policies are on the right track are making downright dangerous claims that undermine the necessary sense of urgency. Research shows that these voices are often backed by the powerful oil and gas lobby, which does not hesitate to cast aspersions on climate scientists.

The savings account of the future: the carbon budget

The carbon budget – the maximum amount of CO₂ humanity is allowed to emit to keep the Earth liveable – is another way of representing the immense climate challenge. Professor Kevin Anderson of Manchester University updated the carbon budget for January 2023.²⁷ The figures are alarming. For a 50:50 chance of keeping below 1.5 degrees of warming, humanity has only 380 gigatonnes* of CO₂ left to spend. This means that at current emission levels we have until mid-2032 before the budget is spent and we can no longer emit. Put differently, if from January 2023 onwards we would exponentially reduce our emissions by 10.7 per cent, we would reach real zero by 2040. A sobering fact: each month, we use up nearly 1 per cent of our carbon budget. If we were to accept 2 degrees of warming (which is really unacceptable), the remaining carbon budget doubles and we

*A gigatonne equals a billion tonnes.

squander 'only' 0.4 per cent every month. It is important to bear in mind that these figures are based on the IPCC climate reports, which do not make allowances for Earth system feedbacks (which we will address shortly) and therefore paint an overly optimistic picture of the carbon budget.

The carbon budget can be compared to money in your savings account: it is something you can only spend once. So each amount of CO₂ that the elite 1 per cent waste on private jets or mega-yachts is literally stolen from people in low-income countries who are in need of new hospitals, schools, public transport networks, etc. This makes it clear that climate disruption is always about climate justice and a fair distribution of the remaining carbon budget.

1.4. Systems thinking and tipping points

In 1968 a group of people gathered in Rome with the ambitious target of mapping the global problems facing humanity. Issues such as poverty in the midst of plenty, degradation of the environment, job insecurity and monetary and economic disruption were usually looked at individually, in isolation, but the group suspected that these problems were all interrelated – and set out to map these connections using the methodology of systems thinking. The research, which was carried out at the US university MIT, found that the fundamental problem was that exponential economic growth on a finite Earth is not sustainable in the long run and that its pursuit will ultimately lead to collapse. The results were published in 1972 by the Club of Rome as *The Limits to Growth*. The report showed that if the continued rise in world population, industrialisation, pollution, food production and resource depletion goes unchecked, the planet will reach its limits within the next 100 years and a sudden collapse of the system will be the likely outcome. It also argued that if the growth trends are stopped and an

ecological and economic balance is established, the basic needs of every human being can be met.²⁸

These conclusions remain relevant, yet more than half a century later we are still pursuing exponential growth. Business-as-usual was one of the scenarios that was modelled, and the findings correspond surprisingly well with the empirical data of the past 50 years.²⁹ The same scenario predicts a collapse in the coming decades.

It is not just the report's message but also its methodology that is of interest here. The authors rightly recognised that many problems are connected and ended up making an important contribution to systems thinking, which seeks to explain the behaviour of a system through the dynamic interplay between elements or subsystems interacting with each other. It is no coincidence then that one of the writers of the Club of Rome Report, Donella Meadows, became a leading systems thinker. In her book *Thinking in Systems* she describes how a system is made up of three kinds of things: elements, the interconnections between them and a function or purpose. The relationships between the elements are important and characterised by feedback loops. Such a feedback loop can have an amplifying effect or, in everyday parlance, a snowball effect. As it rolls down a mountain or a hillside, a snowball picks up more and more snow, thus gaining momentum and rolling down even faster, etc. It can derail a system. Alternatively, a system can have balancing feedback loops that will help stabilise it. For instance, when we realise that we are spending more money than we earn and in response cut back on our expenses, our finances will stabilise again. In this example, the system's purpose is to maintain financial security.

A more complex example is the Amazon rainforest. Situated around the equator, the temperature here is high all year round. The tree canopy stops sunlight from penetrating and ensures a high humidity throughout. The forest generates as

much as 45 per cent of the total precipitation by evaporating its own moisture, thus maintaining the distinctive climate of the Amazon and keeping the trees healthy.³⁰ The system is quite robust. In the case of a wildfire, for instance, the humidity will prevent it from spreading on its own, making it a balancing feedback loop.

However, this only works if there are not too many fires in the forest. Large-scale burning or deforestation by humans will create more and more open spaces where sunlight penetrates and the humidity is lower, which will be hotter and drier as a result. In a drier forest, wildfires can spread and the balancing feedback loop will be compromised. And because the trees have not adapted to this hotter climate, they will die faster. This means that for every five trees that are cut down, a sixth will also die.³¹ This is an amplifying loop that compounds the negative trend of deforestation. And all the while global warming is making the forest less resilient to start with.

At present, the forest is home to both feedback loops. However, when deforestation exceeds a certain percentage, the system will tip and create a snowball effect. This could turn much of the Amazon basin into a grassy savannah. The tipping point is the critical point at which a small change causes the entire system to break down.³² The Amazon rainforest is currently very close to this tipping point.³³

Another key feature of a tipping point is that the process that is set in motion is irreversible, because the amplifying feedback dominates and pushes the system into another qualitative state. The mechanism accelerates as it shifts the system from the previous stable state to a new one.

Systems thinking reminds us that we cannot see the Amazon basin in isolation from the Earth system as a whole. When healthy, the rainforest was able to absorb a quarter of all

CO₂ on land, but now it has become a net carbon source – especially in the east, where the majority of deforestation is taking place – with emissions totalling a billion tonnes of carbon dioxide per year. The vast rainforest that used to help mitigate the climate crisis is now responsible for accelerating it.³⁴

In those eastern parts the rainforest is already ‘dying’ faster than it is ‘growing’. And if the forest were to die back completely, it would also release all the remaining CO₂ it still stores.

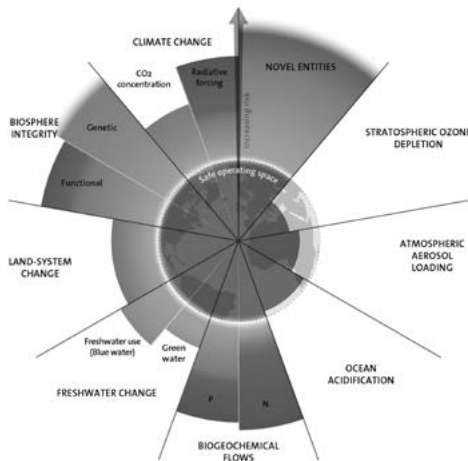
Crossing this tipping point will irreversibly cause further global warming. Several of the Earth’s subsystems are currently at risk of tipping. The ice caps could melt – in both Greenland and Antarctica – as could the permafrost, and low-latitude coral reefs, which are currently home to more than 25 per cent of all marine life, could die off.³⁵ A tipping point of one subsystem can also cause other subsystems to start tipping and contribute to a hotter planet.

The dire consequences of the Amazonia dieback become all too clear when you realise that the rainforest is currently home to more than 3 million species, including thousands of tree species.³⁶ Various populations sustain each other via an infinite variety of symbiotic relationships – a complex web of life – and thereby maintain a balanced and functioning ecosystem. We humans are also part of this complex web and highly dependent on properly functioning ecosystems for clean water, pollination and soil fertility as well as stability, food and our health. As ecofeminist Vandana Shiva says about the ecological crisis: ‘Nature? That’s us!’³⁷

When a system starts tipping, the repercussions may not be immediately apparent. But that does not mean that the point of no return has not already been passed. You can liken it to metal fatigue, which appears to occur out of the blue, or someone

'suddenly' developing asthma after breathing in polluted air for a long time. It is the moment when a system's capacity to cope with pollution or stress breaks down. But the actual tipping point, when we can no longer stop the ice caps from melting and the sea from rising, obviously predates the melting itself.

To assess the Earth system's current carrying capacity, scientists have developed the concept of planetary boundaries. You could compare them to the limits on exposure to toxic substances before they make us ill. These planetary boundaries are global warming, biodiversity loss, the nitrogen and phosphorus cycle, ozone depletion, ocean acidification, water scarcity, land use, chemical contamination and atmospheric aerosols. Six of these nine planetary boundaries have already been breached. They have been in the red for some time, as the figure below illustrates. The Earth's carrying capacity is under pressure and the risk of overshooting tipping points is increasing. And all this time we are only applying more pressure.



The nine planetary boundaries.
(Azote for Stockholm Resilience Centre,
based on analysis in Richardson et al., 2023).

1.5. Beware carbon tunnel vision

Systems thinking and the concept of planetary boundaries also allow us to cast a critical eye on current debates about the ecological crisis. Tunnel vision is a very real danger here. While climate destabilisation rightly receives a great deal of attention, the ecological crisis encompasses far more than just the climate. The aforementioned study on planetary boundaries reveals that we are already overloading six out of nine crucial processes. In 2023, the research was broadened to include the concept of ‘safe and just’ Earth system boundaries.³⁸ One of the lead researchers, Professor Joyeeta Gupta, stresses:

‘it is not a political choice. Overwhelming evidence shows that a just and equitable approach is essential to planetary stability. We cannot have a biophysically safe planet without justice. This includes setting just targets to prevent significant harm and guarantee access to resources to people as well as just transformations to achieve those targets.’³⁹

Research has shown that biodiversity loss may be an even greater threat than climate breakdown. At least a million plant and animal species are threatened with extinction. And the history of our planet has shown that when too many species die out, this can tip over into total ecosystem collapse.⁴⁰ A system that consists of a great many mutual feedback loops, such as an ecosystem with lots of animal species, is much more resilient than one with few such interconnections. Each individual animal species that is lost will weaken the system as a whole. Between 1970 and 2018, animal populations have declined by 69 per cent.⁴¹ It is worth bearing in mind that during the previous five mass extinction events on Earth – defined as a loss of over

75 per cent of all species – the extinction rate was lower than it is now.⁴² The disappearance of species is directly linked to our extractive economy. According to the United Nations Environment Programme, resource use is the main driver for the triple planetary crisis – the crisis of climate change, the crisis of pollution and waste and the crisis of nature and biodiversity loss.⁴³ At least a million plant and animal species are endangered and ecosystems that are keeping the biosphere on an even keel are on the verge of collapse.

A look at the link between economic growth and the use of raw materials reveals that each rise in global economic growth is accompanied by an increase in the use of resources. High-income countries are incredibly greedy, with annual consumption per person amounting to nearly 30 tonnes, compared to a sustainable level of 7 to 8 tonnes.⁴⁴ We are highly unlikely to achieve such a reduction in the current economic system, even if technological breakthroughs – which we need anyway – were to lead to a drop in consumption. This sounds abstract, but there is no such thing as sustainable mining, for example. In many cases, the extraction of raw materials results in the destruction of both ecosystems and people's living environments. Some of the lithium for electric car batteries comes from extremely arid regions in South America. The extraction, however, requires vast amounts of water, which could spell the end for farming communities that have lived there for centuries. Meanwhile, a similar problem is likely to arise in France where there are plans to mine lithium in the Auvergne, a region full of rich beech forests that is already suffering from extremely low ground-water levels.

Carbon tunnel vision poses the very real danger of replacing the climate disaster with a biodiversity catastrophe. Take mobility, for example: from a green growth perspective, the solution lies in trading in conventional cars for electric models. But that Tesla whizzing by contains a 500-kilogram

battery with several kilos worth of cobalt and lithium. If we were to swap all existing cars for electric ones, it would be game over for our stable and precarious biosphere. And not just that. We would also be reinforcing neocolonial climate inequality by our unequal appropriation of raw materials, because many of the resources needed for the green growth solution to the climate problem will come from the Global South. It would be more honest not to outsource such destructive extraction to the Global South. But whether we obtain our materials from South America or from the Auvergne, it is important to remember that we can live without cars, but not without forests.

1.6. The farce of green growth

Defenders of the capitalist growth economy are convinced that the current economic system, with its focus on free-market principles, can solve the climate problem. This also happens to be the easy 'solution', one that does not require a structural overhaul of the system and will not hit those currently profiting from the growth economy. The green growth perspective adheres to the idea that the economy must continue to grow, as measured by GDP (Gross Domestic Product), albeit in a green or 'sustainable' way, whereas post-growth thinkers argue in favour of abandoning this fixation altogether. Green growth adherents are pinning their hopes on future technological innovations (think carbon capture and small nuclear reactors) that should enable us to decouple economic growth from greenhouse gas emissions and thus grow without exacerbating our impact on the environment. What's more, in the event of a complete decoupling, our impact would actually lessen as efficient technologies continue to fuel growth. So we could use twenty per cent less energy to produce ten per cent more cars. But while adherents of green growth believe that we can grow out of the ecological crisis, this blind faith in growth undermines

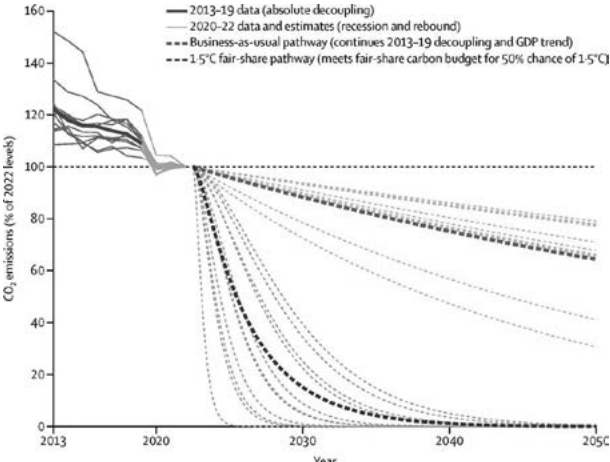
the urgent need for an ambitious climate policy and in that sense depoliticises the debate. Put differently, green growth has turned environmental challenges into opportunities for expanding instead of shrinking the market economy. In fact, the term 'green growth' promises new business models. By this logic, development is sustainable only when it is first and foremost profitable and marketable. It is in effect a business-as-usual, albeit slightly 'greener' development, and does not represent a structural or systemic change.⁴⁵ That being so, you will never catch green growth adherents such as ecomodernists challenging the existing power relations. They make a song and dance about upcoming technological innovations so they do not have to pursue a radical climate policy now. It is no wonder then that energy experts refer to small modular reactors as 'PowerPoint reactors': they are still in the design phase and not expected to go live before 2035. But we have to achieve maximum emission reductions within the next few years, or else we risk gambling away our future.

Why is there no such thing as green growth?

Decoupling, as described above, has already been established in some high-income countries. And that should come as no surprise: when a coal-fired power station is replaced with wind turbines, emissions from electricity generation will drop sharply. But the key question is whether this decrease will be big and fast enough to meet the targets set out in the Paris Agreement. Based on in-depth analysis, researchers Jefim Vogel and Jason Hickel have come up with a clear-cut answer.⁴⁶

They rightly argue that we can only speak of green growth if countries whose economies are still growing achieve a degree of decoupling fast enough to comply with the Climate Accord. To this end, they calculated whether these high-income countries remain within their per capita carbon

budget. The results are sobering. So far only 11 out of 36 high-income countries have realised absolute decoupling. As the figure below shows, the corresponding drop in emissions (slowly declining dotted line) is nowhere near drastic enough for even a 50 per cent chance of remaining below 1.5 degrees of warming within the fair global carbon budget. At their current rate of decoupling, it would take these eleven countries an average of 220 years to reduce their 2022 emissions by 95 per cent, and they would be emitting 27 times their share of the carbon budget. Their current reduction rates are between 1 and 6 per cent, but they would have to be at least 30 per cent by 2030. The rapidly declining line shows what is needed.



Emission reductions achieved in high-income countries through recent absolute decoupling are highly insufficient for complying with their fair share of the 1.5°C global carbon budget. (Vogel & Hickel, 2023)

The researchers are clear: labelling the decoupling that has been achieved to date as green growth is misleading and a form of greenwashing – further economic growth in these countries is directly at odds with the targets set by the Paris Agreement. The logic underlying this conclusion is simple: it is much harder to quickly and comprehensively reduce greenhouse gas emissions when an economy is growing and producing many more products and services. The researchers are in fact still rather restrained. Their calculations do not factor in the historically immense emissions of high-income countries, nor do the figures consider the emissions of the international aviation and maritime sectors, or those of agriculture, forestry and land use. It would only make the challenge of decoupling combined with economic growth more impossible. Sticking with the idea of avoiding carbon tunnel vision, we can say that there is certainly no decoupling of economic growth from resource use. Vogel and Hickel therefore conclude that instead of pursuing GDP-based economic growth we should develop post-growth approaches that target sufficiency, equality and wellbeing. A study analysing 835 scientific articles⁴⁷ likewise determines that rapid, large-scale and absolute reductions of resource use and greenhouse gases cannot be achieved at existing decoupling rates. What this implies is that decoupling must be accompanied by sufficiency-oriented strategies – more about this later – and strict enforcement of absolute reduction targets. We should also mention here that the situation in low-income countries is different: given that per capita emissions are considerably lower, the necessary support and an economy focused on human wellbeing can enable these countries to effectively remain within their carbon budget while selectively increasing production and consumption to realise a dignified living standard for all.

Why efficiency is necessary but not sufficient

None of this is to say that we do not need environmentally friendly, efficient appliances and well-insulated homes. On the contrary, we need to invest fully in them. However, their impact in our growth economy is far more modest than generally assumed. This can be explained by the Jevons paradox, which is also known as the rebound effect, in which efficiency gains are undermined by a rise in consumption. As early as 1865, in his book *The Coal Question*, the English economist William Stanley Jevons described how improved efficiency does not automatically lead to a drop in energy use. The introduction of James Watt's steam engine was a profound technological innovation in his day: it generated more energy from a given quantity of coal than any other machines at the time. You would think that this increase in fuel efficiency would lead to a drop in demand for coal. But the opposite happened: more and more factories switched to using the successful steam engine, causing an explosion in the demand for coal. What we save in energy, material and money is used to consume more of the same product (for example, cars have become more economical to run, but there are more of them now and we drive them further) or is spent on other polluting consumption (the money saved on a more economical car or a more energy-efficient home now goes on, say, flights for a city break).⁴⁸ In a capitalist growth economy, any environmental efficiency gains are invariably translated into a drive towards increased production and consumption, improved sales and profits, so that ultimately the environmental benefits end up being much smaller and sometimes even non-existent.

What this means is that unless we place limits on production and consumption, more efficient technologies do not lead to the rapid and large-scale emission reduction we need. It is crucial, therefore, that in addition to decoupling we also introduce sufficiency strategies and absolute reduction

targets. In other words, green growth paints a misleading picture. What we need is a fundamental transformation of our economy and society.

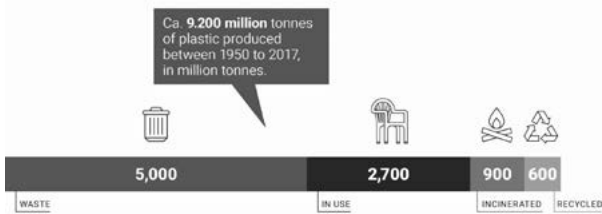
1.7. Pretence: greenwashing

The continued pursuit of economic growth comes with the very real danger of greenwashing, that is, pretending that we are on the right track. While green growth can be described as a form of systemic greenwashing at macro level, greenwashing is also woven into society at meso and micro level, in business and in everyday life. Everything is described as sustainable, local and circular these days, yet we keep consuming more, planned obsolescence is still a common practice and the quality of our products seems to be going downhill. Unfortunately, the many promising initiatives out there that deserve support are mere drops in the ocean that is an economy addicted to growth and raw materials.

Electronic appliances, for example, are still designed and manufactured in such a way that they cannot be fixed; fast fashion continues to dominate the fashion industry; plastic packaging and other waste ends up in the ocean – and back in our food chain – and is not recycled on the scale that we are led to believe. Every year, at least 12 million tonnes of plastic wind up in the ocean,⁴⁹ resulting in a plastic soup, or the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, three times the size of France.⁵⁰ The diagram below, published by the Plastic Soup Foundation, clearly shows that only a fraction of all the plastic produced between 1950 and 2017 has actually been recycled. Figures from Eurostat confirm that in 2019 only 12 per cent of all new raw materials were recycled.⁵¹ What this means is that our economy still runs almost exclusively on newly extracted materials.

THE LIFE CYCLE OF PLASTIC

Global production, use and disposal of plastics, 1950 to 2017 in million tonnes.



The life cycle of plastic.
(Plastic Soup Foundation, 2019)⁵²

Aside from the fact that the aforementioned industries are extremely polluting and take an immense toll on the Earth, most of them are also underpinned by neocolonial relationships. We obtain our raw materials from countries in the Global South and afterwards, when the products have served their purpose, dump our waste there again – which is effectively a form of waste colonialism. For example, in 2021 the Netherlands exported over 200 million kilograms of plastic to various nations in the Global South, making it the biggest per-capita plastic exporter in the world. In the same vein, clothing and textiles are systematically exported to countries such as Ghana, which sees the influx of some 15 million items every week. Despite the 30,000 labourers who sort, transport, repair and resell it, 40 per cent of it still ends up in landfill or in incinerators, causing health problems for the underpaid workers there and destroying entire ecosystems.⁵³

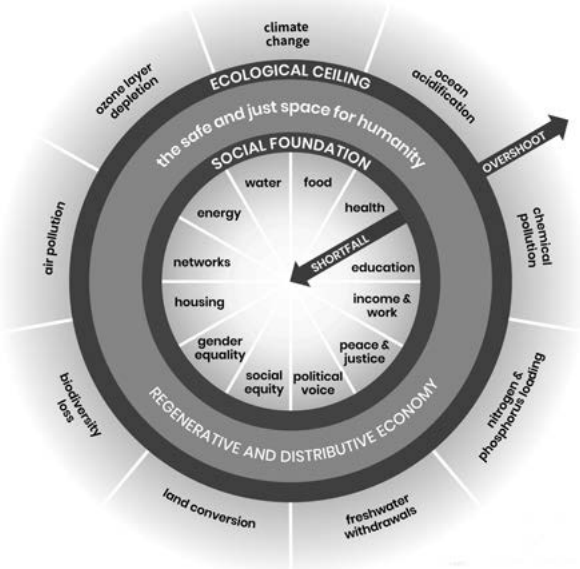
More and more companies now claim to be socially and ecologically fair, but greenwashing practices are rife. On the face of it, businesses appear to be sustainable, but research shows that greenwashing is found at every level and is perhaps even more widespread than we think. A study by TerraChoice identifies seven 'sins' or ways in which we are being misled, including little or no evidence of a positive environmental impact; irrelevant claims such as being 'CF-free', when CFCs (chlorofluorocarbons) are in fact banned by law; the use of fake eco-labelling or certification, for instance in clothing; promoting the lesser of two evils, such as organic cigarettes or fuel-efficient cars; and exaggerating sustainability claims, as we see in banks that offer sustainable investment funds, but still invest in the fossil fuel industry and aviation sector. Providers such as BlackRock and BNP Paribas, for example, have 8.5 billion euros invested in fossil fuels, while under European legislation their entire portfolio is meant to be sustainable.⁵⁴ The negative impact of these various forms of greenwashing far outweighs any positives. By chipping away at our trust, the practice also undermines initiatives that are genuinely sustainable and trying to make a difference.

These forms of greenwashing have hijacked the term 'sustainability' and have robbed it of much of its meaning. While we think we are on the right track by making everything sustainable, our economic system remains fundamentally the same and we are merely shifting the problem from, say, CO₂ emissions to a biodiversity crisis by mining for the many raw materials used in so-called sustainable innovations. Similarly, because of waste colonialism, the emission figures of rich countries do not reflect the full extent of their pollution, as much of it is outsourced to poorer nations.⁵⁵ In other words, data showing 'how well we're doing' are another form of greenwashing.

It goes without saying that while both technological innovations and a circular economy are vital, we must recognise their limitations. We can never be 100 per cent circular. A system predicated on growth, which will always need new resources, makes this especially difficult.⁵⁶ A circular, but still growing system drives a constant demand for raw materials. Besides, we cannot make every product that pollutes our planet repairable or recyclable. The question we must ask ourselves is what we really need to live a good life. The answer is unlikely to be drawers full of household items, wardrobes bursting with clothes or storage units filled with old furniture. So let us not waste energy and resources on too many products and possessions. Instead of aiming exclusively for a circular economy, we would be better off working towards a circular society, according to scholar Irma Emmery. By doing so, we can 'bypass market-oriented solutions and economic concerns and embrace circularity as a holistic social transformation. Once we have moved beyond today's technocratic, growth-obsessed "quick fixes", we can finally embark on the fundamental transformation of the structures that drive social and ecological degradation'⁵⁷ and opt for a sufficiency economy.

1.8. Growth in its current form is untenable

The challenge we face has been visualised by economist Kate Raworth. She describes our economic system's safe operating space with the help of a doughnut, as pictured below. The outer circle depicts the planetary boundaries, or the Earth's carrying capacity, as touched upon earlier in the section on systems thinking. But the doughnut also has an inner circle that represents the social foundation: the minimum social standards within which human beings can thrive. The green space inside the doughnut signifies the 'safe and just space for humanity'.



The doughnut of social and planetary boundaries.
(Kate Raworth & Christian Guthrie, 2017)⁵⁸

As outlined earlier, we are currently overshooting multiple planetary boundaries. But what we have not addressed is the fact that the basic human needs of quite a few groups in society are not being met either. That is to say, our economic system is currently transgressing both boundaries.

To understand why this is happening, we must look at the fundamental design of capitalism and the resulting dynamics. The problem is that while the system demands constant growth, GDP is the wrong measuring tool.

Politicians, chief economists and opinion makers talk non-stop about the growth or decline of GDP and directly equate it with ‘the wellbeing of society’, but the economist

Simon Kuznets, who developed the concept of GDP in the 1930s, warned that it should never be used to measure economic progress.⁵⁹ GDP calculates the monetary value of all products and services within a specific time frame. However, economic activities that are widely seen as destructive can boost GDP, whereas some worthwhile endeavours are not taken into account. For example, when we clear forests or deplete the seas GDP increases in absolute terms, even though we are destroying our ecological capital. More traffic accidents equals more economic activity in hospitals and garages, while making people work longer and harder will likewise increase GDP. Conversely, taking care of our loved ones, running a household and having forests that purify the air are not included in GDP as long as none of these involve financial transactions. They are not seen as something that has 'value' in and of itself. GDP will only go up when care for a loved one is outsourced to someone else who is then paid for the service. This shows that it makes no sense to automatically equate GDP with progress.

Besides, within a capitalist model, GDP has to constantly grow in order to remain 'stable', or as the British ecological economist Tim Jackson puts it: 'Its natural dynamics push it towards one of two states: expansion or collapse.'⁶⁰ That the outer boundary of the doughnut is exceeded as a result of this growth imperative makes intuitive sense: infinite growth on a finite planet is logically impossible. All the more so because GDP growth is exponential. Within the current system, a 'healthy growth rate' sits somewhere between 2 and 3 per cent annually. But this means that in the space of a century the global economy would increase 20-fold. As mentioned earlier, GDP is coupled with a material footprint. Knowing this, it soon becomes clear that an economy that is expected to be 20 times bigger in a period of 100 years is neither realistic nor something you should want to pursue.

We are also dropping below the social foundations. You might expect that when the economy grows everybody benefits, but we are actually seeing an increase in inequality. This is explained by what Raworth describes as ‘success to the successful’: the ‘winners’ of the system have advantages that improve their starting position and enable them to make even more profit.⁶¹ Looking at very long cycles lasting several centuries, the French scholar Thomas Piketty has shown that in our economic system the rich are becoming progressively richer than wage labourers. This is because the interest on wealth is consistently higher than the growth of wages, which at best increases at a percentage equal to economic growth. Only in exceptional circumstances, such as in the 20th-century with its world wars and profound economic depression, do governments have the courage to increase wages at a faster rate or to levy a wealth tax. Meanwhile, in the United States, inequality is at least as high as it was a century ago. In a country where the economy grows year-on-year, workers’ real spending power has been falling for decades.⁶²

The economic system does not operate in a vacuum; it is embedded in society and takes advantage of it too. Feminist economists speak of the ‘reproductive economy’: unless some people perform the daily tasks of looking after children or parents, cooking and washing, others cannot pursue paid employment. And society (of which the economy is a component) is entirely dependent on nature, which encompasses all life-giving systems, such as fresh water and a liveable temperature. But our economic system and its ambassadors stubbornly deny this dependence, allowing them to exploit society and the environment for the holy grail of GDP growth and profit maximisation. Society and the environment have to ‘work harder and harder’ to generate greater monetary value to boost the economy – whether this is good for us or not – while the carrying capacity of these other domains – care, the social fabric and nature – is disintegrating.

Or in the words of Jason Hickel:

‘Under capitalism, the rate of growth is the rate at which nature and human lives are being commodified and roped into circuits of accumulation. That we have come to rely on this as our primary indicator of progress reveals the extent to which we have come to see the world from the perspective of capital rather than from the perspective of life.’⁶³

The economic system as it is values ‘taking’ over ‘giving’ and ‘caring’. We will have to design one that finds a balance, so it can operate within the safe and just space of the doughnut. We need to go back to the drawing board. There can be no ecological justice without social justice.

1.9. Shocking inequality

If there is one term that we ought to use sparingly in the ecological debate it is the word ‘we’. Before you know it, you will have made a sweeping, but imprecise statement like ‘we ought to emit fewer greenhouse gases’. Society is extremely unequal, and that applies to emissions as well.

Let us take a quick look at the figures: the richest 10 per cent together own 82 per cent of all wealth. In fact, the richest 1 per cent of adults on this planet own nearly half of all wealth, while the poorest half of the global population owns less than 1 per cent. And inequality is increasing. In the early 2000s, the richest 1 per cent owned ‘merely’ a third of all wealth.⁶⁴ The same is true at a European level: in most countries the gap between the poorest 10 per cent and the richest 10 per cent is at its highest in 30 years, with 22 per cent of all Europeans at risk of falling into poverty or facing social exclusion.⁶⁵

This does not just happen on a global scale, even within countries the lack of equality is shocking. One in ten children in Belgium are forced to miss at least one meal a day because they live in extreme poverty.⁶⁶ In the Netherlands, one in every twelve children grows up poor, with families often lacking the resources to buy their offspring bikes to cycle to school.⁶⁷ In Germany, more than one in five children and one in four young adults is at risk of poverty. Poverty shapes the lives of young people. At an early age they are already aware of their limited opportunities and feel less of a sense of belonging in society. They experience acute shame, are less likely to go on school trips and invite friends to their home and cannot afford to do something with friends that costs money, such as eating an ice cream or going to the cinema together.⁶⁸ This inequity is also reflected in health inequalities. In the UK, research has shown that between 2011 and 2019, before Covid, over a million people died earlier than they would have done had they lived in areas where the richest 10 per cent of the population reside.⁶⁹ The result of living in these precarious circumstances is that these households are under constant strain. That this is happening in rich nations is, quite frankly, appalling.

When it comes to CO₂ emissions the figures are very similar.⁷⁰ Worldwide, at least half of all greenhouse gases are emitted by the richest 10 per cent on Earth, while the poorest half of the population emit only 10 per cent. The ecological footprint of the richest 1 per cent is 35 times bigger than the target for 2030 and 100 times bigger than that of the poorest 50 per cent of the population. In Europe, a person within the richest 1 per cent emits on average 14 times more carbon (CO₂) than someone in the bottom 50 per cent. The outsized emissions by Europe's richest will cause 67,800 heat-related excess deaths by 2100, or almost 850 deaths every year.⁷¹

While the people who gain from this system are happy to talk about fighting extreme poverty, they are often quick to dismiss efforts to address structural inequality, arguing that the economic system actually benefits from inequality because it leads to economic growth that will eventually filter down. But the trickle-down effect has long been discredited by data. An equal society is good for the economy and gives more people the chance to fulfil their potential and play their part.⁷² Trickle-down arguments merely divert attention from the real issue. Any solutions to the ecological crisis will have to include an answer to this appalling inequality, which is both socially and ecologically indefensible. Piketty puts it bluntly: 'It is impossible to seriously fight climate change without a profound redistribution of wealth.'⁷³ Or as the UNRISD report *Crises of Inequality* states: 'Inequality has been a driver, amplifier and consequence of multiple and overlapping crises—economic, social, political and ecological. The result is a vicious cycle which is disrupting the basis for human life on this planet and eroding prospects for a dignified and peaceful life for all. Vulnerable and marginalized groups, who face multiple intersecting inequalities, are worst affected, falling further behind. Elites, on the other hand, can largely shield themselves from adverse impacts of crises and often even exploit crises for their own gain.'⁷⁴

The ultra wealthy drive overconsumption and overproduction in three ways: through their ecological greed, as members of the powerful elite who uphold the status quo and by pushing up what is perceived to be a normal level of consumption.⁷⁵ For instance, 300 mega-yachts belonging to the super-rich emit just as much CO₂ as all 10 million inhabitants of Burundi. Worldwide, there are 56 countries with annual per-capita emissions that are lower than those of a single individual taking a commercial flight from London to New York and back. These examples show that, in the words of philosopher Andreas Malm, there are two types of

greenhouse gas emission: luxury and subsistence. If we do not have the guts to radically crack down on those luxury emissions, how will we ever reach net zero?

A transformation towards a beyond growth society means that certain groups will have less. That is certainly true. To handle our shrinking carbon budget responsibly, we would call for, among other things, prohibiting private jets, banning heavy vehicles such as SUVs for private use and an embargo on advertising in public spaces. The carbon budget is like money in your savings account: you can only spend it once. Every kilo or tonne of CO₂ that is squandered on luxury goods is no longer available for meeting people's basic needs.

Climate expert Kevin Anderson spells out why the inequality we have outlined is so appalling. If all countries were to act on the climate emergency and made it compulsory for their richest 10 per cent to bring their CO₂ emissions down to the EU average, but not ask the other 90 per cent to take action, it would reduce global CO₂ emissions by a third. For Anderson it is a no-brainer: why would we not do that now, within the next year or so?

As Kim Stanley Robinson writes in *The Ministry for the Future*:

‘To be clear (...) there is enough for all. So there should be no more people living in poverty. And there should be no more billionaires. Enough should be a human right, a floor below which no one can fall; also a ceiling above which no one can rise. Enough is as good as a feast – or better. Arranging this situation is left as an exercise to the reader.’⁷⁶

1.10. Capitalist growth is an intrinsically colonial process

It would be too simple to look at present-day inequality without taking its history into account. Then you would see only half the problem. In his book *The Divide*, Jason Hickel, one of the leading authors in the field of degrowth, describes the creation of global inequality as a historical process, as the result of human choices and not as a 'natural course of events'.

Before colonialism, in which Western European nations were the primary drivers, the world economy looked totally different. India and China controlled 65 per cent of the global economy in 1500 and the quality of life of people in Latin America and Asia was often better than that of Europeans.⁷⁷ As Indian ecofeminist Vandana Shiva points out:

‘The ecological problem began with the colonial problem. And so much is made of “we need to grow the markets in order to have the finances to save the planet...” Well, we know in India how every step of the colonial process created growth for England and tremendous poverty for India. We used to be 25 per cent of the world’s economy before the British invaded. With one line all the land of India was turned into a commodity and private property owned by the little island [in Europe]. Forty-five trillion dollars was extracted from India. We were reduced to 2 per cent of the world economy. Sixty million died of famine, the peasants who were generating this growth. So growth has always been an extraction system.’⁷⁸

The constant pressure to pursue economic growth is closely tied to colonial history. Major corporations have played a

significant role in this, as scholar Koen Bogaert stresses in his book *In het Spoor van Fanon (In the footsteps of Fanon)*:

“The initial expansion and exploitation of the colony was mostly the work of “entrepreneurs” and companies [...] The British colonial empire, like all European colonial empires, was largely shaped by private enterprises, usually via concessions and monopolies granted by European governments. In the main, the exploitation of these colonial empires was financed by private capital.”⁷⁹

It consisted of subjugating both people and nature in order to generate profits, which is intrinsic to capitalism, as explained earlier in the section on growth in its current form. The proceeds mostly benefited the elites in Europe and the United States.⁸⁰

It is important to call out the violence that accompanied this, although we only have enough space for a few examples. In 1621 Jan Pieterszoon Coen, the highest ranking official at the United East India Company, committed genocide on the Banda Islands to safeguard the Dutch trade monopoly on nutmeg.⁸¹ The famines in India that Shiva refers to took place amidst an abundance of grain, which was exported to England for profit.⁸² The number of people killed in the process of harvesting the unrealistic rubber quotas imposed by the Belgian King Leopold in the Congo, saw the raw material labelled ‘blood rubber’.⁸³ All this violence is inextricably linked to economic interests.

But while the history of colonialism is characterised by violence and profits for the Global North, it is worth bearing in mind that the exploitation of the Global South continues to this day.

After the colonies gained independence, many were governed by democratically elected leaders. They tried to protect their economies and harness them for the wellbeing of their own population by introducing better wages for their workers, levying high taxes on expensive imports from the Global North, curbing foreign capital flows and nationalising companies in their own territory. Between 1960 and 1980, the gap between the Global North and the Global South narrowed for the first time in history. In the same vein, wealth was more equally divided within these countries. In Latin America, for example, inequality between rich and poor fell by 22 per cent. And on top of that, life expectancy in the Global South rocketed from 40 to 60 – the fastest rise in history.⁸⁴

But the Global North feared it might lose access to cheap labour and cheap materials in the Global South. If their economic interests were to be safeguarded, the development of the Global South had to be stopped. That is by and large exactly what happened. To begin with, the democratically elected leaders, who were charting a new course, were deposed and sometimes even murdered in coups supported by the West. They would usually be replaced by someone, often a dictator, who was in thrall to the Global North. Also, from the 1970s onwards, countries in the Global South that needed capital for development received a great deal of credit. In the early 1980s, it emerged that some of them were unable to repay these loans – chiefly as a result of global developments outside their control. In response, the Global North imposed structural adjustment programmes provided by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These programmes forced them to cut back on public services such as healthcare, education and subsidies that bolstered their own economies – all things that were indispensable in these countries – just so they could pay off their debts to the Global North. At the same time, they were required to introduce all kinds of measures that just

so happened to benefit the Global North, among them the lowering of trade tariffs, opening the market to foreign investors and rescinding legislation aimed at protecting the environment and workforce. The World Bank soon adopted these structural adjustment programmes for any country that wanted to borrow money, whether it was in debt or not. The result, as Hickel points out, was that ‘power over macroeconomic decisions was shifted from national parliaments and elected representatives [...] to bankers and technocrats in Washington, New York and London.’⁸⁵

These structural adjustment programmes purported to help the economies in these countries and make them ‘more efficient’, but the Global South rapidly deteriorated and their economies now became especially beneficial for the Global North. Altogether, countries in the Global South lost an average of 480 billion dollars per year because of these programmes. The burden of debt rose from 25 per cent of GDP in 1980 to 38 per cent within a single decade. As Hickel puts it: ‘It was de-development in the name of development.’⁸⁶

And so the inequality between the Global North and the Global South began to grow again. Towards the late 1990s the programme began to attract criticism, but today the World Bank and the IMF use a variant that is effectively the same and therefore little more than a PR stunt.

Anyone looking at the current figures can only be outraged. Almost half of the human race lives in a country that spends more on the interest on its debts than on education or healthcare – especially the poorest countries.⁸⁷ At present, the Global South is drained of 2.2 trillion dollars annually, 15 times more than the sum needed to solve extreme world poverty once and for all.⁸⁸ In comparison, the money the Global South receives in development aid is a pittance. Put differently, with the colonial past behind us, neocolonial

mechanisms are now being harnessed to see to it that the economic interests of the Global North prevail and huge profits can be made on cheap resources and cheap labour.

The power relationships and oppression in this history reveal a correlation between capitalism and racism, a link that requires a closer look. Sibongiseni Kanobana explains how racism – and the violence that went with it – served capitalism, and continues to do so:

Capitalism benefits from a division between people, and we know that the main function of racism is to control the behaviour of white people, something that historian Robin D. G. Kelley has also spoken about. In this way, racism ensures that white people who are exploited and themselves victims of the system nevertheless support that system. It affords them relative privileges, or at least allows them to think they are better, and dissuades them from showing solidarity with other oppressed peoples.

If we define racism as an ideology that prompts us to come up with a hierarchy that determines which human lives are worth saving and which are not, we can identify a direct link with how we treat nature. We can see that in the white imagination, black people very often represent the boundary between humans and the animal kingdom. In a sense they embody racial boundaries. We have come to divide humanity into those we can exploit and whose land we can steal on the one hand, and those who have civil rights on the other.

Race-based slavery, for example, was introduced first and foremost to divide the exploited classes. But slavery and racism were not always linked. In the 16th and 17th centuries, slaves could be white, brown and black and you would usually be temporarily enslaved before you could buy your freedom after ten years – although

few survived that long. Towards the end of the 17th century, legal acts were drawn up, distinguishing between white and black people and condemning black people to eternal slavery. It was a way of dividing the working classes, or lower classes, amongst themselves and was in fact the primary function of racism. Slavery was not abolished until politicians and big capital began to realise that it was inefficient. Gradually, the realisation grew that slaves do everything they can to work as slowly as possible, to sabotage machines and to organise uprisings – since they are not paid, they have nothing to lose. When you remunerate people for their labour, they will work harder. The slaves were only freed once the powers that be recognised that they could earn more by freeing them. But unlike their owners the slaves themselves did not receive compensation. So the exploitative, destructive and structural character of capitalism – and of colonial capitalism – was not really questioned and simply continued. In the same vein, one hundred years on, Africa was declared independent after a lengthy battle – a battle for equal rights and justice. Independence was a means, not an end in itself, but it was suddenly granted when the realisation dawned that it cost too much, made us look morally suspect and required an awful lot of violence to maintain, and we needed a different, more efficient and more lucrative system. That system is post-colonial Africa and essentially builds on the same logic.

Racism is deeply rooted in an ideology that seeks to justify the exploitation of people and planet. Inherent to capitalism, it is legitimising or normalising that exploitation. By the same token we abuse nature. We labour under the illusion that our role in developing land goes hand in hand with the right to destroy nature. All in the name of that accumulation. This is how racism serves capitalism. It is something we have seen throughout history and that continues to this day.

1.11. The European Green Deal and its social dimension

At the end of 2019, the Von der Leyen Commission launched the European Green Deal as its flagship policy, a package of initiatives aimed at transforming the EU into a climate-neutral, resource-efficient and competitive economy by 2050, and promising to 'leave no person and no place behind'.⁸⁹ Compared to the previous EU Commission, the Green Deal was an important change of direction. Its policy goals were more ambitious and, without any doubt, great steps forward were made, such as the Climate Law of 2021, which sets the legal obligation for the EU of reaching climate neutrality by 2050. And the EU and its member states committed to cutting net greenhouse gas emissions in the EU by at least 55% by 2030, compared to 1990 levels. The political context of recent years has made the transition towards the Green Deal complex. On the one hand, the implementation of the Green Deal has not delivered (think of the promising Farm to Fork strategy, for instance, which has not been translated into a radically different Common Agricultural Policy – CAP – budget). On the other hand, against the backdrop of multiple crises, vested interests (such as agribusiness) have been lobbying to slow down or even abandon some of the Green Deal policies. The lobbyists became more successful and visible as centrist parties watered down their progressive policies in response to the pressure of the far-right parties. Sadly, this resulted in the failure to pass the Nature Restoration Law, even though it had gone through all phases of the decision-making process. So, the complex situation is that in the light of scientific reports demanding rapid and far-reaching changes in all areas of society, ecologists and other green actors have defended policies which, in some respects, they did not find ambitious enough. The Green Deal will undoubtedly remain central to the debate for the foreseeable future, as it should if the EU wants to stay a frontrunner in climate and other ecological transition policies.

One crucial weakness of the EU Green Deal is its social dimension. Certain measures (e.g. specific social funds) have been developed to counterbalance the negative social effects of existing policies (such as applying Emissions Trading System – ETS⁹⁰ – to housing and transport). So far, it rests on a ‘compensation logic’ – providing funds to compensate for the negative social impact of climate policies, for example – whereas we need a holistic approach that integrates social rights from the beginning, as the climate crisis should be understood and addressed as an inequality crisis.⁹¹ To go one step further, social-ecological policies would need to address the ‘double injustice’ whereby the poorest household groups, i.e. the ones least responsible for environmental damage, are worst placed to cope with mitigation and adaptation.⁹² Thus, it is unclear, and rather doubtful, whether the Green Deal contains the necessary transformational approach that rises to the challenge of providing a good life for all within planetary boundaries. If, for instance, support for home insulation in many member states is given in the form of subsidies, households that can afford these investments will make use of them, unlike low-income groups. This is the so-called Matthew Effect: ‘For to him who has will more be given.’

The key question is then: how can we settle for policies that are not inherently social and that exclude the most vulnerable groups from the necessary transition? The concept of Just Transition explains the importance of ‘leaving no person and no place behind’ in the move towards an economy and society that respect planetary boundaries. It could be seen and used as an overarching framework to make sure that this transition towards an ecological society is done in a socially just and equitable way. A just transition should be a constant guiding principle in policymaking and not just an afterthought. In other words, we should not have to compensate for the negative impact of climate policy on vulnerable groups. Instead, climate policy should be

inherently social, or it will not be at all.⁹³ In this sense, the EU Just Transition Mechanism, as part of the Green Deal, is not fit for purpose. Its budget is too small given the huge transitions needed, and it starts from the compensation logic to ‘alleviate the social and economic costs resulting from the green transition’.⁹⁴

To go further, it is not only important to implement social justice for the effectiveness of climate and broader ecological policies, but it is also crucial for ensuring public support and acceptability, as a lack of social justice and an uneven transition is likely to trigger public discontent and political backlash. In addition, if citizens are completely excluded from the process of policymaking, and do not feel sufficiently informed, consulted, and listened to, they will experience climate policies as undemocratic, which, again, can lead to political backlash. Therefore, drafting and deploying these policies should happen in close cooperation with local representatives and civil society actors close to targeted groups.⁹⁵

It remains an open question if the EU Green Deal, even if fully implemented, can future-proof the EU amidst the multiple crises. We need a broader vision of a future we want to live in that ensures a good life for everyone within planetary boundaries.

1.12. Democracy

We cannot have a discussion about an alternative economy without addressing decision making: who decides, and in what way, how our economy and society are shaped? This is particularly pertinent in light of the ecological crisis, which calls for a democratically supported and approved reform of the economy. The Club of Rome expressed this in 1972 in *The Limits to Growth*:

‘As soon as a society recognizes that it cannot maximize everything for everyone, it must begin to make choices [...] society will have to weigh the trade-offs engendered by a finite earth not only with consideration of present human values but also with consideration of future generations.’⁹⁶

But just when democracy ought to be on top form to make these important choices, it is under unprecedented pressure. For instance, just four in every ten people in high-income countries worldwide say they have confidence in their national government or parliament. And only a quarter of the population has faith in political parties. Similarly, less than a third feel that they have a voice – or that the government would adopt ideas put forward in a public consultation. And a majority think that the government would not respond to policy feedback.⁹⁷ In Belgium, 71 per cent agree with the statement: ‘We should get rid of today’s elites (economic, financial, political, media) because they do not act in the best interests of ordinary people like me.’⁹⁸

The shortcomings of our current electoral-representative democratic model of governance, as developed in the 19th century, are numerous.⁹⁹ More and more people feel hard done by in a system in which, as a voter, they only get to tick a box beside a name once every few years. And as a citizen, how do you find out what parties stand for when politicians specialise in soundbites and polemics and oversimplify things on social media? In short, citizens are cast in a passive role with regard to democratic decisions and given little room to ‘join in’. Even if we were to accept a representative democracy – with members of parliament representing the people – we would still have a problem with representation: parliament does not reflect the population at all. There are more men than women in parliament, relatively few young people and minorities are often much

less if at all represented.¹⁰⁰ In Western Europe we also have what can be described as a diploma democracy. In 2017, research showed that 9 out of 10 MPs in Western European parliaments had the equivalent of at least a college degree.¹⁰¹ The issues of those groups that are overrepresented – again, the elite – are given more attention, resulting in solutions that tend to originate in a single perspective – that of the overrepresented groups. It means that many people in society do not see their own situation reflected in the decisions taken.

The rise in inequality in Europe also demonstrates that the welfare state is functioning less and less well. It goes without saying that this also undermines confidence in the state and in politics, which really ought to protect its citizens from social insecurity and the stress that goes with it. The Dutch government, for instance, has made this worse by outsourcing more and more services to the market, which has resulted in a sharp drop in facilities such as primary schools, libraries and courts in rural areas.¹⁰² In Italy, libraries in remote rural areas are disappearing – along with schools, post offices and banks.¹⁰³ Those living in the countryside also have to travel much further to see a doctor or visit a hospital, a trend that can be observed across the whole of Western Europe.¹⁰⁴

Another major shortcoming of today's democracy is the market and lobbying power of major multinationals. We must beware the slow shift from one person, one vote to one dollar, one vote.¹⁰⁵ The economic and democratic systems do not share the same interests, which is why it is so alarming that our parliaments are surrounded by an army of lobbyists. There are no fewer than 25,000 of them in the European Union and those advocating for major corporations greatly outnumber those lobbying for NGOs, unions and other groups pursuing social interests. The financial sector in particular is disproportionately

represented, with spending on lobbying at 30 times that of spending by NGOs. Three-quarters of all deals between lobbyists and high-ranking officials within the European Commission are done on behalf of big business.¹⁰⁶ This is bound to have an effect on democracy, which ought to look after the interests of its people first. Furthermore, we have free movement of capital around the world, yet no democratic checks and balances at this international level.¹⁰⁷

All this calls for a thorough overhaul of the democratic system, and if that was not hard enough in itself the ecological difficulties we face make this an even greater challenge. There is a structural discrepancy between environmental problems that invariably play out across national boundaries and prolonged periods of time, and the electoral cycle that is confined to a particular territory and timespan. Elections mean that politicians do not look beyond a single term in office, whereas the ecological crisis demands a long-term approach. And compounding all this is the fact that the voice of future generations is completely overlooked in the current model.

In brief, we will not be able to reverse this trend unless we shore up our democracy, so it can pursue a robust ecological policy, complete with trust and active participation from the people.

1.13. Meaning

So far, we have cast a critical eye on the economy and democracy. We are going to dig even deeper in the remainder of this section. What matters to us in life? What does it mean to be a good person or to have a successful life? And what role does something like advertising play in all this?

Our current economy lacks a deeper meaning. Tim Jackson, known for his bestseller *Prosperity Without Growth*, wonders why we are consuming more and more when we know that it harms the planet. In the absence of grand narratives that provide a sense of meaning and community and strong social ties, he sees consumption as a contemporary but ineffective substitute. We find ourselves in the golden cage of consumerism, with each purchase giving us a moment of happiness that lasts nowhere near as long as we had hoped. The need for expression through consumption is tied to social status – you are what you buy and show off, and then social media allows you to present yourself as the person you want to be. We can only escape this if we make more space for other forms of meaning and purpose, developing places and activities dedicated to non-consumption.¹⁰⁸ The lack of such space is largely down to the role and impact of advertising.

Every day we are at the receiving end – either consciously or subliminally – of thousands of advertising messages, a number that increases every year. We have grown used to it in a way, but it is actually quite bizarre that we are having to process all these stimuli on a daily basis. Weirder still, advertising agencies themselves complain about it, because this overstimulation is making it harder for them to grab our attention. Before you know it, they will be jumping through even more elaborate hoops, introducing scent to commercials and built-in TVs to outdoor urinals.¹⁰⁹ This battle for our attention does not do our mental wellbeing any good, as our daily attention span is limited. Advertising infiltrates our moments of rest, the moments you could use to reflect on yourself and feel what is going on inside. The war for our attention that is waged by advertising invades our personal space. Social media – which we carry in our pockets – does the same. It is no surprise then that the burn-out epidemic is linked to a shortage of healthy moments of calm.¹¹⁰

Advertising does not deliver a dry, objective account of a product's useful properties; where possible it tries to bypass our rational ability to choose – otherwise you might realise that perhaps you do not need all this stuff. It deliberately plays on our fears, our yearning to fit in and the idea that we are worthy only if we own a particular product. The French philosopher Bernard Stiegler refers to this as a 'libidinal economy' aimed at mobilising our deepest desires and life energy and hijacking what inspires us, all for the sake of economic growth and profit maximisation. In other words, advertising and marketing seek to channel our desires towards more consumption and encourage us to adapt our way of life to what the market can offer us. In this way consumption temporarily and artificially fills the hole left by meaning.

However, from a material perspective, high-income societies are saturated: at least two-thirds of the population own more than enough for a comfortable life. But because the economy has to keep growing, we have to keep being seduced. The effect on the precarious biosphere that underpins our lives is secondary to the businesses in question. And consumers themselves are never truly satisfied, because ads are always promoting something new that they simply cannot do without. Advertising has an even more injurious effect on the state of mind of those people in our society who are unable to make ends meet, as it makes them feel that they are not good enough.¹¹¹ In a word, we are all trapped in the consumerist rat race.

Advertising clearly has a huge hold over us. With all these messages being fired at us, especially subliminally, how free are we to make our own choices and to find our own meaning? This is compounded by the fact that social media platforms collect data about us and sell it to advertising agencies that then use it to influence our behaviour and our choices. The same social media have a negative impact on our mental health. Constant comparisons to all

the supposedly 'perfect' lives and bodies on display are detrimental to our self-image. Meta, the parent company behind Facebook and Instagram, has long been aware of the harmful effect on young people but effectively ignores these findings and carries on refining its algorithms to keep us glued to our screens.¹¹²

The good news here is that while advertising works, so do bans. In 2019 London banned fast food ads on its entire public transport network, a move that is thought to have prevented an estimated 100,000 cases of obesity.¹¹³ São Paulo became the first city to ban all ads in public spaces in 2006 after the mayor described them as 'visual pollution'. In 2014 Grenoble also replaced all of its billboards with trees or notice boards.

What would it be like if we were no longer at the receiving end of advertising or if we in fact saw positive things every day? Messages that would draw attention to totally different values, such as care for one another and for the planet. What would it mean to be a 'good person' and to have a 'successful life' in that world?

In essence, the advertising machine that works at the behest of consumer society hijacks our imaginative ability to design and realise a different world. With religion slowly on the way out, it has given a neoliberal twist to meaning, or the narrative of the 'good and successful' life. In his book *What About Me*, Belgian psychologist Paul Verhaeghe notes that in today's society a good life equals a rich material life. It also demands accomplishments that should definitely be shown off – 'look at me being successful'. In this scenario, success is only ever our own personal achievement and has nothing to do with chance, favourable conditions and the people around us. This stands in sharp contrast to, say, the players of Morocco's national football team, who credit their success as much to themselves as to those around

them – just think of the photos of the players celebrating with their parents at the World Cup. Their behaviour goes to show that, in the Global North, we are trapped in a narrative of individualism.

1.14. Our narrative no longer holds true

Unbridled economic growth not only pushes us to systematically breach planetary boundaries, but also undermines our wellbeing and equality between different groups. Even without an ecological crisis there would be plenty of compelling reasons to introduce an alternative economy based on wellbeing. Here we discuss three.

Figures from various sources confirm that more and more people are struggling to keep up in a rat race that demands ever-increasing efficiency, ambition and productivity. We are seeing an explosive increase in the number of mental health problems such as depression and burn-out. In the last twenty years, the consumption of antidepressants in Europa has more than doubled.¹¹⁴

But while the statistics are alarming, the problems are not purely work-related. Given that for years now we have been working fewer hours a week,¹¹⁵ it is clear that these cases of burn-out are a response not just to work but to a whole lifestyle that exhausts us. The pressure to be ‘productive’ at all times and to constantly consume and ‘experience’ is immense, and social media only exacerbates this. Leisure time has effectively become production time. In short, in this performance-driven society nothing is ever good enough and ‘being busy’ is a status symbol.¹¹⁶ Ambition, efficiency and working hard are sacred, but why are we doing it? Just so we can boost our economy’s growth figures?

Burn-out, depression, exhaustion and our performance-driven society as a whole all originate in a system that keeps pushing for more and faster. A capitalist system has everything to gain from us producing and consuming more. It recognises neither planetary boundaries nor our emotional, mental and physical limits, but needless to say there are limitations to what we as humans and the planet can bear.

The second reason for introducing an alternative approach is that the current economic model props up inequality and (neo)colonial structures. Various studies have shown that inequality has grown in recent decades, especially between the wealthiest and the rest of the population. In fact, there is a direct link between GDP growth and rising inequality. In the past 40 years, we have seen a shift, with less of the national product going on wages and more to capital owners.¹¹⁷ The rich are getting richer without even lifting a finger, while the rest trail behind. The Covid crisis was a classic example of just how unequal our economic system is: during the global pandemic, the world's 10 richest people doubled their wealth while an additional 120 million people were plunged into poverty.¹¹⁸ The wealth of this upper crust stems directly from the exploitation and exhaustion of people and planet. The structural adjustment programmes imposed by financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank continue to put pressure on the Global South to comply with the dominant economic model, in which it serves as little more than a source of exploitation.

Thirdly, as described above, we have lost a sense of deeper meaning within our current economy. A fulfilled life hinges on a range of factors, including physical and mental health, social networks and relationships, job satisfaction, as well as social and public services such as education and healthcare. A growing economy, or a rising GDP, does not automatically translate into improvements across the board.¹¹⁹ We cannot

possibly say that when the economy is growing, everything gets better and our wellbeing improves.

In short, our current economic system is letting us down. While the economy may be growing, more and more people are failing to keep up, we are destroying nature and inequality is on the rise. The dominant narrative no longer holds true. Business as usual is not an option anymore and we are in urgent need of a radically different story. It is foolish to believe that we can solve this polycrisis by sticking with the same system that caused it in the first place.¹²⁰

The transformation to a post-growth economy is necessary if we are to avert the worst of the ecological catastrophe, but it will also help us create a slowed-down, fairer and more inclusive society. Post-growth thinking is often linked to planetary boundaries and the Earth's carrying capacity, but it is also a healthy response to an economic system that weakens our human capacity to cope and fosters inequality. This is about putting the wellbeing of people and planet at the heart of political-economic decision making and doing so fairly; about an economy that gives everybody the chance of a good life within planetary boundaries; about a different and a better society, not just our present one dialled down a little. That is why we champion the Wellbeing Economy. Our current economic system needs a radical U-turn, and while some things will be curbed or stopped altogether, quite a few others will be given more space, most importantly our quality of life.

PART 2

Thriving societies in a wellbeing economy

The debate sparked by the beyond growth perspective is, at its root, a debate about values, about the way we shape society in our precarious biosphere to allow people to develop and grow, pursue happiness and give meaning and purpose to life. Taking our cue from the many consequences of blindly clinging to a growth-addicted, extractive economy, as described in Part 1, we will address some of the core values that inform the transformation towards a wellbeing economy and that recalibrate our relationship with one another and with the Earth. In a series of proposals we will detail the structural, but realistic changes that can help us arrive at a new vision of the future. We will then conclude this section with a brief imaginative exercise that combines our vision with those propositions.

2.1. Freedom is never a solitary pursuit

Our contemporary capitalist society is centred on the pursuit of consumer hedonism; that is to say, we look to consumption to give us pleasure and enjoyment. We even suffer from FOMO, the fear of missing out. Likewise, interaction on social media often revolves around doing better than others, having more likes, more views, etc. On holiday, especially, everybody seems to be having the trip of a lifetime every single year. But are we really having all that

much fun, living as we do like isolated islands in commercial markets, constantly pushed to the level of consumption that undermines social connections and destabilises the biosphere? We alluded to it at the end of the previous part when we cited the rising numbers of people on antidepressants and/or dropping out of the labour market. It gives the lie to the notion that we are on the right track if we pursue personal happiness through overconsumption, if the national economy keeps growing and GDP goes up. The dominant narrative in our society no longer holds true.

Enjoyment is certainly part of life and does not have to be consumerist. But fun alone does not lead to fulfilment. We can also opt for a narrative that centres on humans and their environment, and as well as material things this includes meaning and purpose, personal development and human relationships. Thinkers such as Martha Nussbaum, Amartya Sen and Manfred Max-Neef have set out how we can organise society based on what people aspire to and how they can learn to thrive in supportive communities.

Their starting point is the finite number of needs we all have, including subsistence (shelter, food, etc), protection, as well as opportunities to participate and be creative. We need good physical and mental health as well as the capacity for critical reasoning, fantasising, having social ties and living in harmony with nature. What matters, ultimately, is the ability to shape our environment, which presumes a level of political participation as well as access to decent employment.

This gives us a sense of the building blocks of an economy and society that are fit for the future. These revolve not around the manufacturing of goods or GDP, but around human beings and their opportunities for meeting their basic needs. We will never get to that stage without different measures for economic success, based on wellbeing. This

will give us an economy that is centred on people's essential needs, which are both limited in number and finite, and not on the insatiable appetites of consumers, let alone the extreme impulses of the 1 per cent who own yachts longer than a football pitch. And unless we view the labour of care and domestic work as building blocks of every economic system, we will perpetuate structural inequality. This economic vision chimes with both systems thinking and ecofeminism, which we will look at shortly. The crux of the matter is that people are social beings; nobody is an island.

A central concept in our different understanding of the good life and the way society is shaped is 'autonomy in connection'.¹²¹ It builds on what Nussbaum describes as 'respect for self-determination', but stresses that we all build our identity and capabilities in constant interaction with others and more-than-human worlds. We can only develop and grow because our environment gives us the opportunities to learn and acquire qualities and skills. Lack of access to decent education and health care leads to forms of structural deprivation. It goes to show how incomplete our understanding of freedom really is. Perhaps more than knowing what you want in life and going for it, freedom is collectively working on the culture and structures that people need to prosper.

The concept of 'autonomy in connection' also encompasses basic human needs. We are all social beings and connection gives us a sense of security. The importance of this is brought home by a unique longitudinal study carried out at Harvard University.¹²² In 1938, scholars there began to monitor a group of students in the hope of uncovering the key to a healthy and happy life. Over time, the research was extended to include the children of the original cohort and control groups from outside the university. The most surprising finding is that our relationships, and how happy we are in them, have a powerful influence on our health.

Looking after your body is important of course, but so is cultivating social ties. More than money and fame, close relationships keep us happy throughout life. They help us deal with the impact of setbacks and are better predictors of a long and happy life than social class, IQ or even genes. People's satisfaction with their relationships at the age of 50 was found to be a better indicator of physical health at a later age than their blood cholesterol levels. The absence of a social support network has a significant impact and is found to be just as harmful as smoking or alcoholism. As the study's director puts it: 'loneliness kills.'

Other studies confirm the importance of social connect- edness and add two elements. First, the feeling that you matter, that you as a person – and the things you do, the responsibilities you shoulder – are seen as meaningful. Second, the profound experiences made possible by the worlds of art, science and belief systems. Feeling deeply moved by a piece of music, being fascinated by the way trees work together, finding peace and silence in meditation are just a few examples.¹²³

The German philosopher Hartmut Rosa coined the concept of resonance to capture the meaningful relationships that a person can establish with other people, nature, objects, cultural expressions and the world at large. In doing so, he draws on the French sociologist Bruno Latour who argues that you feel alive when you have a vibrant connection with something outside yourself. You feel resonance when something or somebody touches you, when you have a reciprocal relationship. These kinds of experiences are now increasingly under attack. Not only is everything supposed to happen faster and faster, but we also think we can control the world, claim it as raw material and backdrop to our lives. This manifests itself most acutely in the form of capitalism that packages itself as the experience economy. However, these commodified experiences are far more superficial

than the real-life experiences that resonate with us, move us and leave a lasting impression on us.

The concept of resonance shows how today's neoliberal society, with its focus on working hard and consuming even harder, gets in the way of a meaningful and dignified existence in which we enjoy a good standard of living alongside others. That is what a wellbeing economy represents.

2.2. Starting from mutual dependence

The beliefs that we are separate from nature and separate from each other, which are so prevalent in the Global North, stop us from seeing or acknowledging the exploitation of both the natural environment and our fellow human beings. Ecofeminism shows that these two destructive convictions are inextricably linked and share a common origin. As such, it finds itself 'at the juncture between the destruction of nature and social oppression'.¹²⁴

Both convictions reflect the binary and hierarchical thinking that emerged during the Enlightenment. In her book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, ecofeminist Val Plumwood outlines how this way of thinking creates oppositions that are characterised by a 'master and slave' relationship. It engenders dualisms such as man versus woman, culture versus nature, white versus black, rationality versus emotion and barbarian versus non-barbarian. Or as Dirk Holemans, Marie-Monique Franssen and Philsan Osman put it in their essay *Dare to Care*:

'The crux of the problem can therefore be traced back to the development of hierarchical and binary thought, which casts everything in terms of higher or

lower, more or less intelligent, better or worse. These artificial constructs legitimise the oppression of the other, that is to say, everybody who is not included in the cultural category of the western, “rational”, white male.’¹²⁵

Plumwood also identifies the mechanisms that produce and reproduce these dualisms. One of them is backgrounding, which involves services being used but not acknowledged. It includes work done by nature, for example, or the labour of running a household and making sure that everybody goes to school in clean clothes and on a full stomach – still predominantly seen as a woman’s responsibility. Another mechanism is hyperseparation, in which differences are magnified and any similarities erased, so the other can be cast as a stranger, with an unbridgeable gap between us and them. Through incorporation or assimilation the other is viewed only in relation to the dominant culture or vision, or as philosopher and feminist Simone de Beauvoir put it: ‘Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not considered an autonomous being.’¹²⁶ In the same vein, the other is objectified and seen as an instrument for the master to use, with their identity construed in terms of these uses: the subservient housewife, the grateful colonised people. The diversity of the other is denied through homogenisation, a mechanism that draws on stereotypes: they’re all ‘savages’ or ‘refugees’ rather than unique individuals.

Sibo Rugwiza Kanobana also touched on this in our interview:

Every binary worldview is inherently, or implicitly, hierarchical, with some things seen as better than others. And this is constantly being reproduced. There is a gender component to this as well as a race and class dimension. Within our binary worldview, women and

people of colour are generally viewed as being closer to nature, which is not positive so much as a mark of inferiority. Nature is good enough for leisure time but should not really be taken seriously or used as a foundation for the way we organise our world.

Picking up on Kanobana's words: what if we were to organise our world around different values, ones that start from our shared vulnerability and our dependence on each other and nature? This way of thinking flies in the face of binary and hierarchical thought.

A value that is at the centre of ecofeminism is caring. This holistic definition by researchers Joan C. Tronto and Berenice Fisher is often quoted, and for good reason:

[caring is] a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair "our world" so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our body, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.¹²⁷

As described in the section on systems thinking, we are part of this life-sustaining web. This is not merely an abstract or scientific given, but an intuitive one as well. When asked 'where do you feel most alive and where are you most likely to find inner calm?' many people say: 'in nature.'¹²⁸ Research also increasingly shows how much we benefit from being in natural surroundings. Spending time in a forest can ease symptoms of stress, depression and hostility, as well as improving sleep, vigour and our sense of satisfaction, joy, wonder and curiosity.¹²⁹ Incidentally, it is typical for the Global North, and something that originates in the

dichotomy between reason and emotion, to believe that nature is good for us only when we have scientific evidence.

Sibo Rugwiza Kanobana:

What if we start seeing the Earth as having a consciousness? What if we view animals, plants, trees, mountains and the sea as conscious entities? I believe that before the calamitous spread of colonial-capitalism, most people related to the world in this way. Mountains and volcanoes and the like were thought of as conscious beings. But there is no way of proving this; it is a claim that is not falsifiable, that is to say, it cannot be tested and is therefore not scientific. But so what? If the idea allows us to treat our environment with more respect, then scientific verification becomes irrelevant. Take a forest, for example. Science can give us quantitative data on how much we can earn from it and how important that makes it. The calculations could even include ecological considerations and suggest that you plant as many trees as you cut down. All that is scientific knowledge, but why accept scientific or unscientific as value judgements? If a particular idea is likely to contribute to a more balanced existence, to a happier life even, to greater quality, I would find that notion more valuable than the potential profit generated by a forest. It is time we pay more attention to what we might call the spiritual, because we are denying part of our humanity and our nature.

Acknowledging the value of nature is perfectly normal in many places around the world. Instead of clinging to a single dominant take on the world, fed by the mechanisms of incorporation and homogenisation, we could try to be open and learn from these other societies that have already woven caring for one another and for the Earth into their way of life. Indigenous peoples, for example, look after

22 per cent of all land on Earth as well as an impressive 80 per cent of global biodiversity, using techniques developed over generations.¹³⁰ The Amazon forests that they manage sequester 36 per cent more CO₂ than other parts of the Brazilian Amazon.¹³¹ Ubuntu refers to a set of principles that originate in Africa. Desmond Tutu, the late South African archbishop and Nobel Peace Prize winner, described it as follows:

‘The profound truth is you cannot be human on your own. (...) We are human only through relationships. (...) We are really made for the delicate network of interdependence. (...) We are made for complementarity.’¹³²

The First Nations, the indigenous people of North America, live by the principle of seven generation stewardship. They consider how everything they decide and do is informed by the seven generations before them and how it might influence the seven generations to come. Their reaction to a concept such as ‘poverty’ is revealing too. In his book *Decolonising Wealth*, Edgar Villanueva quotes Dana Arviso, head of the Potlatch Fund and a member of the Navajo Nation:

‘They told me they don’t have a word for “poverty”. The closest thing that they had as an explanation for poverty was “to be without family”. Which is basically unheard of. They were saying it was a foreign concept to them that someone could be just so isolated and so without any sort of safety net, family or a sense of kinship that they would be suffering from poverty.’¹³³

In short, ecofeminism exposes the overlap between various forms of oppression as well as their underlying mechanisms. In their place it offers a whole new way of thinking, providing inspiration for a different relationship to the world based on planetary and human wellbeing.

2.3. Sufficiency: how much is enough?

A central tenet of the beyond growth perspective is sufficiency, or the question 'how much is enough?' When you think about it, it really is rather strange: nobody within the capitalist system ever asks whether we might be producing or consuming too much, yet we are obsessed with unlocking new markets and reaching and seducing more consumers via clever marketing. The more energy-guzzling oversized cars such as SUVs and the more junk food we produce and manage to sell the better. And if you are wealthy, you simply order a 200-metre yacht. To the super rich, the 'polluter pays' principle is not a barrier; for them it is simply a matter of 'if you can pay, pollute away'. Shareholders are happy as long as the money keeps coming in and the quarterly results are good. Our economy effectively produces a plethora of wholly unnecessary items and services aimed at satisfying artificially created needs that will only accelerate climate meltdown.

Unless we put a cap on the number of things we produce, just making these items and their manufacturing methods more sustainable is like rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic. Greening the supply, without challenging the scale of that supply, is what we have been doing through green growth for decades. But if, say, cars are 10 per cent more efficient but we buy 20 per cent more of them or drive them 20 per cent more, there is no ecological benefit whatsoever. Should we not be asking if there is some way of redesigning society so fewer people need a car?

Luckily, some progress is being made. One hopeful sign is that in 2022, for the first time, an IPCC report¹³⁴ explicitly mentioned sufficiency as a crucial strategy, describing it as ‘a set of measures and daily practices that avoid demand for energy, materials, land and water while delivering human well-being for all within planetary boundaries’. This definition clearly avoids carbon tunnel vision and makes the case for a structural approach. Compared to other policy scenarios, sufficiency strategies allow us to achieve a minimum 50 per cent drop in emissions by 2050. We are now seeing the first steps towards a policy that recognises when something is enough while also asking what ‘enough’ actually is. Amsterdam Schiphol Airport, for instance, has banned night flights and private jets, while the city of Zurich has ratified the 2000-watt society. This concept seeks to not only provide renewable energy, but also to substantially reduce demand for electricity without lowering the standard of living. Another compelling example comes from the city of Utrecht, which is planning a car-free district for over 10,000 residents. The challenge in a sufficiency economy lies in facilitating lifestyles that place few demands on the Earth and in curbing the ecological greed of many in high-income groups. One possible tool would be a frequent flyer tax, with air passenger duty rising in direct proportion to someone’s flights.

A look at the etymology of enough is enlightening here. The word comes from the Old English *genōg* or *genōh*, meaning adequate or sufficient in number or quantity. The Dutch ‘*genoeg*’ gave rise to the medieval verb ‘(iemand) *genoegen*’, pleasing (someone), which in turn is linked to the noun ‘*geneugte*’, or pleasure. Pleasing someone is making sure that that person has enough and is pleased with what they have, so they can enjoy the pleasures of life. It is taking delight in having enough. From there it is only a small step to asking: what is good enough? It is a pertinent question in a world where many people still have too little, and where

high-income groups are gobbling up the Earth's riches with their ecological greed. Opting for good enough is opting for a rewarding life of solidarity, sharing space with other people, animals and rich ecosystems. It is the best possible response to contemporary fears that our children will be less well off than the current generation. By opting for enough now our children will have a better chance of living in a stable ecosystem, with living oceans, sufficient drinking water, etc. The strategy of 'good enough' also ensures that nobody goes without; quite the opposite, it means that life will improve for those who have too little now.

Although there is clearly an ethical dimension to sufficiency, raising questions about how we live our lives, we must beware the pitfall of moralising, of reducing it to a purely individual choice for the 'virtuous'. There is little point in encouraging people to eat healthily if they live in food deserts, are surrounded by fast food outlets. Many would like to slow down, aware that working and consuming less can improve life, but when all the messaging and incentives actually point in the other direction, we will never get there. We need to design society in such a way that its structures actively support lifestyles based on taking pleasure in having enough and they become the subject of new collective narratives. This involves not only drastically cutting back on advertising, but more generally reducing the commercialisation of our lives. Provisioning systems are a key lever in this, as we will explain in the next section. What we need are changes to structures that facilitate and underpin different social practices. It is no surprise, for instance, that car sharing is particularly successful in cities that have both a good cycling infrastructure and an efficient public transport system. With those things in place you no longer need to have your own car.

If we want a society that gives us the space to realise pleasure in enough, we need less commercialisation, or demarketing,

in all areas of our lives. It may seem like a trivial example, but it is quite telling: when children go camping with the Scouts or other youth organisations, they never wonder how much they will get out of it in a material sense. They enjoy being creative together. Children can play and have fun for hours on end without merchandise coming into the picture. It appears to be something we unlearn as we grow up. Closer to home, too, building dens has long been a favourite children's activity. As such, more green space in every neighbourhood, for every generation to enjoy in their own way, is a crucial component in a society that aspires to a sufficiency economy.

A potential argument against sufficiency is that 'people don't want it'. However, a recent study suggests otherwise. A group of researchers reviewed the proposals drawn up by the many citizens' assemblies that are looking at climate policy across Europe (more about this later) and compared them with governments' own energy and climate policies. The research showed that 40 per cent of the proposals put forward with a clear majority by citizens' panels are sufficiency plans.¹³⁵ Specifically, they suggest such things as curbing livestock numbers in the agricultural industry, extending guarantees on purchases and reducing advertisements for products with a negative environmental impact. People also express a preference for strong government regulation and fiscal measures. In contrast, the energy and climate policies of national governments contain a third fewer sufficiency plans and focus more on market-based instruments such as subsidies and voluntary frameworks without binding regulations. It is no surprise then that the researchers describe the recommendations made by citizens' assemblies as a critique of the dominant green growth approach.

Sufficiency is important in several areas, from the personal to the structural. On a personal level, it allows us to be

healthier and have a better quality of life. A shorter working week and less pressure to consume create more time for family and friends, taking care of loved ones and the environment, and other meaningful activities. And that should not be seen as the soft option in countries where cases of burn-out are soaring and more than a million people are on antidepressants. On a structural level, sufficiency is an essential part of the energy transition we need. We can only make the change to 100 per cent renewables if we bring down the overall demand for energy. Renewable energy cannot be plucked out of thin air: wind turbines and batteries, for example, require a wide range of metals from mines that are mostly located in the Global South. In that sense, sufficiency aligns with the protection of worldwide ecosystems and international justice.

2.4. Sustainable Welfare or the Wellbeing Society

The 20th-century welfare state as we know it was an incredible achievement for its time, coming as it did after decades of social struggle. Poor working and housing conditions improved, and countless people saw their lives change for the better in many areas. But the welfare state also breaches planetary and human boundaries and is based on colonial power structures. As we outlined in the previous part, our narrative no longer holds true and we need to make the switch to a radically different system, one that redefines prosperity. What does prosperity mean and – with sufficiency and ecofeminist ideas in mind – what do we want the new welfare state to look like? And would it not be better to speak of a wellbeing society?

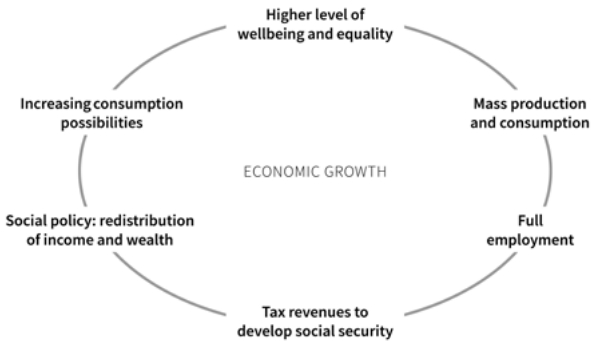
If the creation of the welfare state, based on an extractive economy and therefore harmful to humans and planet, was the greatest achievement of the high-income countries in the 20th century, then how can we recast it into a new,

ecological welfare state? German professor Max Koch has put forward the concept of sustainable welfare, which puts social policy on a par with ambitious environmental targets. Unlike the 20th-century welfare state, sustainable welfare revolves not around providing for the happy few in the West but around meeting the basic needs of all people now and in the future (using such instruments as social tariffs, limits on income and wealth and universal basic services, which we will consider later). By targeting a truly fair transition and making social principles an inherent part of climate policy we are forced to think about whose wellbeing, or prosperity, should be represented in contemporary society. This includes taking responsibility for future generations and those most affected by climate change, and acknowledging critical boundaries and limitations as well as the fact that needs and wishes will have to be reviewed and possibly curbed. Put differently, sustainable welfare is aimed at satisfying human needs within planetary boundaries, from an intergenerational and global perspective.¹³⁶

This is why a social-ecological welfare state has two mutually reinforcing objectives: environmental sustainability and the eradication of all forms of social injustice. In keeping with the doughnut economy and the ‘safe and just space for humanity’ outlined earlier,¹³⁷ we must redefine welfare in terms of sufficiency, sustainability and redistribution.¹³⁸

Finnish researcher Tuuli Hirvilammi calls for a transformation from the ‘virtuous circle’ of 20th-century welfare to sustainable welfare.¹³⁹ During the interwar period and after World War II, ideas about the positive cumulative effects between the economic and social domains were successfully framed as the positive spiral, or virtuous circle, of the welfare state, as pictured below. Policies were pursued on the assumption that economic growth, employment and social progress would reinforce one another. It meant

the focus shifted from individual policy decisions to the interconnections between various policy goals.

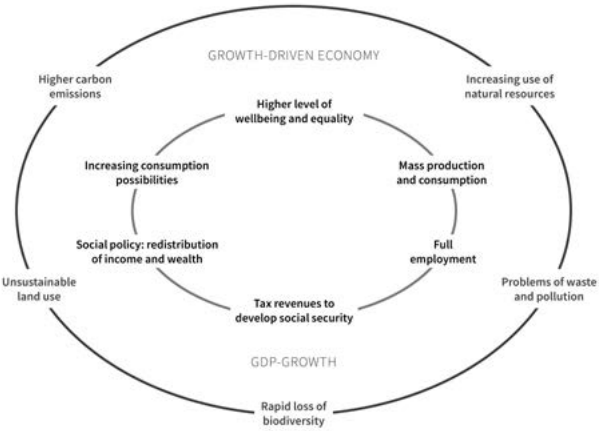


Virtuous circle of the 20th-century welfare state.
(Hirvilammi, 2020)¹⁴⁰

It was the rise in GDP that powered the virtuous circle of the 20th-century welfare state. Economic growth set the circle in motion and triggered a positive social trend, which was then reflected in further economic growth. When this left people better off, with more money and greater social security, households' greater spending power in turn boosted the economy.

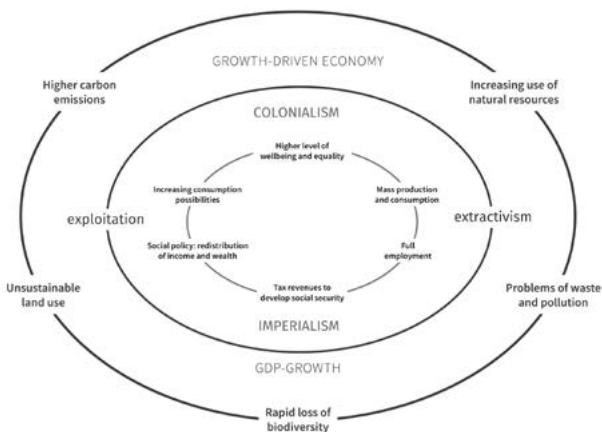
However, with the advent of neoliberalism, social policy was placed at the service of economic growth. In fact, it was gradually stripped to its bare bones, as public spending could not be too high or detrimental to economic growth. Whereas social policy and economic progress had been mutually reinforcing in the virtuous circle, excessive social spending was now seen to be putting economic growth in jeopardy. Economic growth became the ultimate policy goal and a solution to social and environmental problems. As Hirvilammi puts it, the thinking was: 'Without growth, no sustainability, but for the sake of growth, no sustainability policy.'¹⁴¹

This brings us to another design fault of the 20th-century virtuous circle. The illustration above appears to suggest that economic growth and social policy exist in a vacuum, as though the system does not operate within an ecological setting and no raw materials are being extracted from the Earth. Without factoring in planetary boundaries, the traditional circle will lead to environmental collapse. For a more complete picture, we need an extra circle that represents the climate impact.



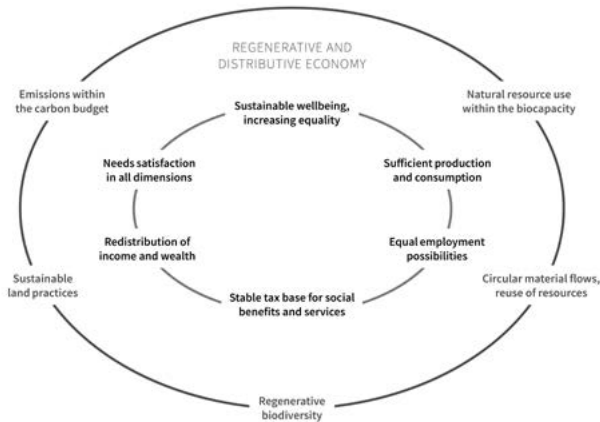
Virtuous circle of the 20th-century welfare state in ecological context. (Hirvilammi, 2020)

Building on Hirvilammi’s analysis, we can argue that the traditional circle of the 20th-century welfare state fails to take the global context into account, as if the nation state also exists in a vacuum. But as we explained earlier, rich Western welfare states owed their existence to colonial power structures and exploitation of the Global South. So to complete the diagram above, we should add a third circle with a global geopolitical context.



Virtuous circle of the 20th-century welfare state both in ecological and geopolitical context. (Our diagram, building on Hirvilammi, 2020)

We are clearly in need of a new virtuous circle of ecological prosperity in a beyond growth society, one that espouses a holistic vision that considers both the environmental and geopolitical context. To complete the diagram, we must add just and equitable power relations. The new circle is underpinned by a regenerative and distributive economy, with care at its centre. Growth is no longer the driver of the circle or the policy objective that must be pursued. The aim is wellbeing for all and social justice within planetary boundaries, so everybody's basic needs are met now and in the future within planetary boundaries and based on sufficiency. This is something Max Koch also calls for and Kate Raworth describes as the 'safe and just space for humanity'.



New virtuous circle of 21st-century sustainable welfare. (Hirvilammi, 2020)

Ultimately, it is all about imagining and realising a 21st-century vision of welfare: not growing but thriving in a flourishing world. Where authors such as Koch and Hirvilammi redefine the 20th-century welfare state as a social-ecological welfare state based on sustainable welfare and a new virtuous circle, we like to speak of a wellbeing society in which everybody can live a good life based on social and ecological wellbeing. Not because we disagree with these authors, but because we want to sharpen their ideas by making it clear that we are shifting the focus from 20th-century welfare to wellbeing for all. As the Wellbeing Economy Alliance puts it, ‘a Wellbeing Economy is an economy designed to serve people and planet, not the other way around. In a Wellbeing Economy, the rules, norms and incentives are set to deliver quality of life and flourishing for all people, in harmony with our environment, by default.’¹⁴²

2.5. The provisioning society

In their efforts to shape the wellbeing society, researchers are looking to the concept of provisioning systems.¹⁴³ We should not be surprised, as the etymology of the word provision reflects our culture's long tradition of 'foresight' or 'providing beforehand': making the necessary preparations so we can meet certain human needs in the future. In times of climate crisis this is paramount.

Provisioning systems are structures that use energy and resources to meet human needs. Examples include our mobility and food systems. Transition thinkers such as Julia Steinberger explore how these systems may be able to satisfy human needs in a way that respects planetary boundaries while also giving people the social rights they are entitled to.¹⁴⁴ Or, framed in terms of the doughnut economy: how can a provisioning system sit within the 'safe and just space for humanity'? How do we organise such a system and how do we address unequal power relations? Let's look at the mobility system. All people need to get around, but the current system is heavily biased towards cars, with the carmaker lobby exerting undue influence. Given the one-sided focus on car ownership, its electrification will lead to exploitation of both humans and nature, especially in the Global South with the extraction of metals for batteries.

Interestingly, in their efforts to define a wellbeing economy, researchers do not use efficiency in the traditional economic sense (where it is linked to the aforementioned problem of the rebound effect) but recast it as the extent to which human wellbeing can be achieved at low energy and resource use. Seen in this light, an electric SUV is extremely inefficient compared to the electric vehicle that has been in use for over a century: the tram. Transition thinkers' attention to the concept of appropriation systems is useful here. Some actors profit unduly from their control of strategic reserves,

knowledge or infrastructure. A pharmaceutical company like Pfizer posting a whopping 70-billion-euro profit in 2022 is a painful case in point, as are companies that speculate on grain and take advantage of the war in Ukraine to post huge profits. Whereas provisioning systems aim to meet basic needs for all in the most efficient way, appropriation systems are geared towards siphoning profit from the system on behalf of a small elite. In recent decades these systems have soared in our neoliberal capitalist economy in which cutbacks and privatisation are rife. In the Netherlands, for example, a lot of social housing that was originally owned by housing associations has been sold off and is now investment fodder for the speculative property market. It has made these homes unaffordable for the people who used to live in them. So crucially, while provisioning systems are aimed at meeting universal and limited human needs, appropriation systems take profit (or interest) out of a system to satisfy the wants of a small group at the expense of the former's efficiency.

So how can we best organise these systems? The housing example shows that assigning too big a role to the market can have a devastating impact. It is imperative therefore that we reassess the role of both the state and that of citizens' initiatives or commons. When it comes to accommodation, the government plays a crucial role in providing enough social homes for those on the lowest incomes, while citizens can develop a range of sustainable dwellings for a mix of people by establishing housing cooperatives.

Systems theory has taught us that the most effective way of realising transformative change in a system is by redefining its objectives. For project developers, house building is all about getting maximum returns on investments, about optimising profits for themselves and their backers. Within a wellbeing economy, on the other hand, a provisioning system aims to meet everybody's basic human needs

in a way that demands the least from the Earth. To put it bluntly: everybody needs a place to live, nobody needs five homes. That is not to say that economic institutions cannot own homes, but there is a big difference between a listed company speculating in property worldwide with the aim of maximising profits, and a regional cooperative owned by thousands of members with fair rents as its core value. Such a cooperative operates within the confines of the doughnut economy: it is regenerative and distributive by design. It generates different kinds of value (access to decent and affordable housing, awareness of social cohesion and attention to biodiversity, etc.) and also directly distributes monetary value (renters pay less than they would on the open market, members receive a reasonable and modest dividend of 6 per cent at most).

The concept of provisioning systems is well-suited to outlining paths towards a wellbeing economy based on sufficiency. There is a world of difference between a private energy company that benefits from its customers' overconsumption and an energy cooperative that actively helps its members use as little electricity as possible. In the area of mobility, the Oosterweel project (with billions of euros earmarked for extra motorways around Antwerp) may well be the Flemish government's biggest blunder. What if it had used the money to develop an effective tram network and cycling superhighways to enable all 6 million Flemish people to live and travel in a greener way? Utopian? Not at all. Early in 2023, for the benefit of future generations, the Welsh government decided to scrap all new major road building projects over environmental concerns and to focus instead on infrastructure projects that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and support the transition to public transport. It is a compelling example that sends the mobility provisioning system in a radically new direction.

The remainder of this section is devoted to proposals that will bring us closer to the future we envision. A new economy is not shaped by a single decision or change. It calls for a cohesive set of mutually reinforcing and accelerating measures across a range of domains and over a long period of time. What follows is based on the concepts and visions we outlined above and is by no means complete, but if implemented would certainly take us to a very different and better world.

2.6. Proposal 1: Fewer and better products in a circular economy

The best way of cutting back on energy and resources is by rejecting unnecessary things and overconsumption. Consuming less also means identifying less with possessions and purchasing things (at least for those who have enough). It allows us to look for and find meaning elsewhere, for instance in relationships with family and friends, being part of a community or a deeper connection with nature. Having enough lies somewhere between insufficiency, the inability to meet basic needs, and excess, for those on high incomes. Overconsumption depletes the Earth, often creating more stress and pressure due to the incessant stimuli from advertising and the media.

In essence, this means making the radical switch from a linear to a circular economy, or better still, to a holistic circular society. But this circularity must not remain embedded in a growing system, or in an ideology of green growth, where it keeps encouraging us to buy more. What is the point of technocratic solutions that make everything repairable/recyclable and hence circular, if the core values of a growing system remain unchallenged? Circularity should be part of a broader beyond growth framework. In other words, a

circular economy should go hand in hand with a sufficiency economy and the relocalisation of consumption.

Likewise, we must aim for redistribution and staying within the doughnut's 'safe and just space for humanity', so we can meet everybody's basic needs for a decent standard of living in conjunction with, for example, universal basic services (which we will look at later). Calling a halt to overconsumption creates the space for those who do not have enough yet to improve their lives. 'How much is enough?' is a good question to ask when it comes to consumption, especially for the wealthiest. After all, who needs two, three or even four homes, when many others cannot even dream of quality housing? Or who needs multiple cars when we could use all the room that automobiles take up in the public space for more greenery, public transport and places to gather, as well as nicer cycle- and footpaths?

Making the transition from the current focus on private property to more sharing schemes would give everybody equal access to a range of products and services. A typical household in the European Union owns in the region of 74 electrical and electronic devices, of which 17 sit unused in our cupboards and drawers – all valuable raw materials that need not have been extracted.¹⁴⁵ Likewise, cars are parked for an average of 22.8 hours a day, or 95 per cent of the time. If we were to share more, we would need fewer things. If we had sharing schemes at neighbourhood level we would only need one piece of equipment (a drill, for example) for an entire street, while a single shared car could replace 12 private vehicles.¹⁴⁶ And not only that, sharing can also strengthen a (local) community and bring people together. Owning and managing things together is a form of commoning, which we will touch on later. Imagine if every neighbourhood or town had a 'community factory' where citizens could work and learn from each other to repair, reuse or upcycle products. It would make a circular

economy a concrete reality at a local level and also create social cohesion. Combine it with a tool library and our lives will be the richer: instead of owning tools we rarely use, we have access to more specific ones.

The fact that products are still designed to break after a certain period of time is absurd of course and a direct consequence of a linear make-use-waste economy. The right to repair is a response to the planned obsolescence that prompts people to buy more things and allows manufacturers to make more profit. Ambitious legislation is needed to turn the tide. In concrete terms, we are calling for a guarantee of five years and a reparability period of thirty. Products that cannot be repaired should no longer enter the market. This could make a huge difference: if all our belongings last twice as long, we can buy far less and make do with half the raw materials and energy. It places responsibility squarely on the manufacturer and cuts back greatly on resource and energy use and waste. Withdrawing cheap, poor quality and often more energy-guzzling appliances from the market is a social policy too. People on low incomes find themselves with no choice but to buy items that are more likely to break and need replacing. This social dimension is essential to a circular economy and requires innovative forms of collaboration. The Papillon Project achieves exactly that. Founded by Samenlevingsopbouw West-Vlaanderen (a community development scheme in the Belgian province of West Flanders), it gives socially vulnerable families who cannot afford to buy energy-efficient household appliances the opportunity to rent them at a modest monthly rate. The rental price includes maintenance and repairs if needed. The project is a partnership with Bosch Home Appliances, which supplies, maintains and, if necessary, replaces the devices, and uses refurbished appliances supplied by a social enterprise from Liège. It is a marriage of social and ecological objectives.¹⁴⁷

As a final point, once we have a decent standard of living based on sufficiency, we don't need as much spending power. How this gives us more freedom is addressed below.

2.7. Proposal 2: The redistribution of labour in a sharing economy

Buying less, sharing more and having access to basic services (such as decent public transport, more of which later) – all these things would help us get by with less spending power. That means we could work less, which in turn would boost our quality of life. Various studies have shown that a shorter working week gives us a better work-life balance. In Iceland, for example, a reduction in working hours produced happier and healthier employees, who reported feeling less stressed and having more time and energy for hobbies, sports, friends and family. According to the study, a shorter working week also sees a shift in focus from the number of hours you have to put in to the work that needs to get done, or put differently, from 'busy work' to the right work.¹⁴⁸

Likewise, a shorter working week facilitates a better distribution of labour, giving groups that are struggling to get onto the job market a better chance of finding paid employment. It would share the work between those who have too much to do and those who want to work but are not given the chance right now.

In line with labour unions and women's organisations, we are calling for a 30-hour week as the new full working week. This would allow people to combine their job with family and other commitments, to slow down and take back control of their agenda. Crucially, such a shorter working week must be supplemented with affordable universal basic services, so everybody is guaranteed a good life. A wealth tax ensures that those who work pay less tax.

This then begs the question: why would we want to increase productivity and work more and harder? Just to boost our economy's growth figures? A capitalist system benefits from us producing and consuming more and never stopping to rest or do nothing. As such, working less and resting are forms of resistance to the capitalist system, as activist Tricia Hersey suggests in her manifesto *Rest is Resistance*. Hersey explains that the time we spend doing nothing is actually hugely important for healing or stimulating our creativity. As she puts it:

‘You were not just born to center your entire existence on work and labor. You were born to heal, to grow, to be of service to yourself and community, to practice, to experiment, to create, to have space, to dream, and to connect.’¹⁴⁹

So we need to take care not to view rest as something whose sole purpose is to restore our productivity at work. Hersey also points out that we have been taught to think that the more we do, the more ‘valuable’ we are. It is a narrative that fits the capitalist system perfectly, but probably does not do us much good.

Working less and escaping our worker-consumer culture leaves us with more time for leisure, community building, care and voluntary work, rest and other pursuits and stimulates wellbeing in non-materialistic ways.¹⁵⁰ By choosing to work less we stop degrading our natural environment, while also taking care of ourselves and creating the space to look after each other. Care and reciprocity are the very things that are underrated in our current system. Until we consider the labour of caring and domestic work as building blocks of every economy, we will perpetuate structural inequality. And with household tasks still predominantly seen as a

woman's responsibility, a cut in working hours can improve gender equality in and out of the home, enabling men and women to divide their labour – both paid employment and reproductive work and caring – more equally. A country such as Sweden, which offers fathers decent paternity leave, has the smallest gender time gap.

A 30-hour working week also gives citizens the space to actively contribute to the transition by getting involved in citizens' initiatives. A fine example of this is the BEES Coop in Belgium, a cooperative supermarket by and for people who want sustainable food and essentials at affordable prices. This is made possible by each member putting in a few hours' work in the shop every month.

Finally, research has shown that people who have more time are more mindful about what they buy and consume. Taking the time to fix something, to (learn to) mend a pair of old trousers, try new things in the kitchen or plant a vegetable garden, these are all useful activities that change our relationship with consumption. It is so much more appealing than having to work excessively long hours, losing time in traffic and then rushing around the supermarket just before closing to pick an unhealthy ready meal out of the chiller cabinet.

And last but not least: the work pressure we face today also belies our naïve faith in progress. Historical research shows that pre-industrial workers had a shorter workweek than today's.¹⁵¹ Late medieval society had more than a hundred holidays, festive days and periods when people did not work. That does not sound too bad, does it, a hundred days off to celebrate life together?

2.8. Proposal 3: Living in connectedness

What values do we wish to prioritise? What would the world look like if we prioritised ecofeminist values: the importance of relationships, connectedness, interdependence, empathy and solidarity?¹⁵² What if we recognised that we are part of life-giving systems and depend on them, and we therefore want to take care of them, or as biomimicry expert Leen Gorissen puts it: 'Leave the planet a better place than you found it, that is how life on earth works. [...] It is not optional. It is what differentiates the survivors from the fossils.'¹⁵³

Plenty of initiatives are already rooted in these values. A growing number of pick-your-own farms are founded on the principle of community supported agriculture. From the outset, these CSA farms focus on developing a subscriber community. Members visit to pick food or collect a box or else they go to a local collection point. These places all serve as meeting points – lots of people stop by even when they do not need anything. The approach to the natural environment is completely different too. Instead of depleting nature, agroecology works with nature and tries to make it stronger at the same time. Hannes and Betse, who four years ago started a biological farm in Herzele, a small town in Belgium, took over a bare maize field and converted it into a pick-your-own farm. They have seen the soil change from dead dirt to a living entity with the help of regenerative agriculture: 'Nature is so resilient! Now when I pick up a handful of soil, it's teeming with life. We have a kestrel, moles and hares and enough predators, such as ladybirds, to keep the strawberry plants free from aphids.'¹⁵⁴ Agroecology acknowledges the strength of a complex ecosystem with a wide variety of mutual relationships, which will make a farm more resistant to pests.

Starting from different values also leads to a very different take on the built environment. As described earlier, nature plays a major role in our physical and mental health. But is it possible to have a building that seeks to care for both the social fabric and the natural world? Town hall De Kraai in Venlo, a town in the Dutch province of Limburg, proves that it can be done. It was built with the principles of the circular economy in mind – it is energy-neutral, has a pond for purifying water and boasts Europe’s biggest green façade. This frontage filters pollutants from the air, regulates the temperature and accommodates a range of different vegetation and wildlife. The interior also offers dynamic meeting places and spaces for contemplation. And, interestingly, the new town hall has seen a dramatic drop in absenteeism. In fact, anyone is welcome to work in the lower part of the building, it is an open house.

Important, too, are neighbourhood networks. In a society that is ageing and becoming increasingly individualistic, initiatives that bolster local connections are critical. A caring neighbourhood is one where young and old know and help each other. Caring neighbours not only help people directly but also serve as a bridge to professional social workers and caregivers. The focus is on quality of life and making facilities and services accessible to all.¹⁵⁵ As we touched on earlier, sharing products is easier in a strong neighbourhood network. We also propose a place of silence in each locality, giving everybody access to a quiet (non-consumerist) space. Silence enables us to find calm, make different choices and resist the many forms of distraction and overstimulation.¹⁵⁶

Separate from these initiatives, connectedness is also about our way of thinking and about the stories and voices we listen to. It is important here to prioritise a pluralistic vision over hierarchical and binary thought, particularly in a super-diverse society that will probably become even more diverse. In this context we cannot view efforts to achieve social

connectedness in isolation from forms of socio-economic deprivation, which is why universal basic services, which we will address later, are so important. When people of colour face structural disadvantages in education, on the labour market and in housing, working on connectedness is also about tackling these forms of injustice head-on. Dirk Geldof, sociologist and expert in urban diversity, argues:

[This] is unacceptable and calls for a structural approach: massive investments to tackle the disadvantages faced by all residents of the super-diverse neighbourhoods, in consultation with these residents. We can do so by pursuing not polarisation but connection based on redistribution and mutual recognition; by targeting integration from an emancipatory perspective, which assumes an active pluralism as the foundation for handling differences.¹⁵⁷

The stories we tell or do not tell also play a crucial role in this. The debate around statues in the public realm reflects which stories are told and which are not. The statue of Hermann von Wissmann at the University of Hamburg in Germany was removed in 1968 after student protest. In 2020, in Bristol in the UK, the statue of slave trader Edward Colston was toppled from its plinth by protesters and pushed into the docks during the Black Lives Matter protests. Discussions about other statues or street names – such as the fact that there are almost no metro stations in Paris that are named after women as well as the statues of Leopold II in Belgium and Jan Pieterszoon Coen in the Netherlands – show that we are beginning to challenge the dominant narrative and to create space for multiple stories.

In 2020, a sculpture of a young woman of colour was unveiled in East London – only the third in the UK of a woman of colour. She is wearing jogging bottoms while simply looking at her mobile phone. She was deliberately not placed on a plinth, but directly on the ground. She does not represent anyone in particular, but her presence transforms the public space. Or as artist Thomas J. Price puts it:

‘It really exposes this absolute lack of diverse representation in society – particularly through public sculpture. Public sculptures or monuments are used as these sort of silent messages of what is acceptable in the world around us, they tell us the power structures of the world around us. And I think, for me, *Reaching Out* [the sculpture] is about challenging those structures.’¹⁵⁸

The debate about *Zwarte Piet*, or Black Pete, in the Netherlands shows what telling different stories can achieve in the short term. The character is associated with the Sinterklaas holiday tradition that dates back to the 19th century. Saint Nicholas’s helper is traditionally dressed in blackface with an Afro wig, gold hoop earrings and large red lips. During the festivities, hundreds of adults and children dress up like him. When, in 2016, the debate about the racist figure gathered pace in the Netherlands, two out of three Dutch people believed that Black Pete should be retained in his traditional incarnation. However, the dialogue that was sparked, and that provoked strong emotions, did manage to change public opinion. In 2022, six years later, only one in three Dutch people still believe that the character should be retained.¹⁵⁹ This hopeful change shows that courageous activism and starting a dialogue can lead to a new discourse and new values, even in times of polarisation.

2.9. Proposal 4: A Wellbeing Economy needs different kinds of businesses

What are businesses for? It is a fundamental question, but one that is rarely asked. There are two dominant, frequently overlapping answers: businesses meet a demand and serve to make a profit for their owners. When we question whether filling such a 'gap in the market' really contributes to a better society, economists tacitly point to Adam Smith's 'invisible hand'. When every entrepreneur meets a particular need, society as a whole is said to be better off. But we know that this is not true. As discussed earlier, there are companies that clear forests for rubber plantations in the Global South, while in Europe companies such as Ryanair exploit their workers and wilfully push the legal boundaries. We are trapped in a growth-addicted economy that seeks to maximise profit for its shareholders. If Smith's theory were correct, the Earth would still be intact and there would be no huge inequality.

Instead, we live in a world that has breached planetary boundaries and that structurally undermines the life chances of entire communities. So to say that businesses are doing a good job when they are making a profit is to make a mockery of reality. Even if all big corporations were to take the major step of embracing the 'no harm' rule, it would still be nowhere near enough to achieve a U-turn or realise a wellbeing economy. Both the Earth and its communities have already sustained damage, so what we need is a type of business with different principles, one that prioritises people and planet over profits. Thankfully, these companies can be found all over the world and subscribe to the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE).

We have Kate Raworth to thank for formulating two clear guiding principles that inform businesses that prioritise people and planet and thus seek to remain within

the doughnut's 'safe and just space': distributive and regenerative. Distributive does not mean redistributing in the usual sense of the world. That is the situation we are in: companies get to manufacture what they want (including junk) and make profit by the bucket load as long as they pay tax (which they try to avoid as much as possible). We can then use this tax revenue to finance the welfare state (and to try and fix the flaws of the economic system and the damage caused by it). Distributive means sharing value from the outset with the help of different ownership and user models. For example, as a member of a housing cooperative, you pay below market rate rent, which allows you to work less if you want. It delivers value directly to you, not via corporation tax. This is not an argument against either taxation or the welfare state (both are crucial), but one in favour of a much broader understanding of how we can design a society fit for the future. Regenerative means that, instead of simply not causing harm, businesses are proactive in their efforts to make the world a better place. Instead of needing to grow to flourish, there is likely to be an optimum scale at which these economic actors can achieve their ecological and social objectives. Agriculture is a good example. Agro-industrial firms pursue maximum yields by scaling up monocultures on vast tracts of land, in conjunction with over-fertilisation and pesticide use, while the farmers themselves are paid a pittance. The result is dead soil, biodiversity loss, polluted rivers, etc. Conversely, a regenerative company, such as an organic or agroecological farm, will combine a range of crops with care for a biodiverse environment and restore the quality of the soil so it is full of life again, retains water and reduces the risk of pathogenic moulds. Its farmers are paid a decent wage and can build relationships with the people who come to buy food.

Legally, these 'doughnut companies' are cooperatives that observe the principles set out by the International Cooperative Alliance. The ICA defines a cooperative as

‘an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise.’¹⁶⁰

This chimes with what we said earlier, namely that commons (which include cooperatives) could play an important role in the development of provisioning systems that remain within the doughnut’s safe space. They foster a future-oriented form of enterprise with historic roots, and champion the values of ‘self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity’.¹⁶¹

This alternative form of collective enterprise is undergoing a marked revival, as evidenced by the emergence of a plethora of energy cooperatives, cooperative supermarkets, pick-your-own farms and housing cooperatives. Looking at the ICA principles they espouse, the fundamental difference with traditional corporations is immediately apparent. The organisation rests on democratic decision-making. All members have a vote regardless of their monetary contribution, use the services offered and receive only limited compensation. Working with other cooperatives is another central tenet, as is the autonomy mentioned in the definition. This is a concrete articulation for the economic field of what we earlier referred to as ‘autonomy in connection’. Alongside the market (traditional business) and the state, citizens play a central role in shaping society and meeting basic needs.

Energy cooperatives are a case in point. In the past two decades these have been set up across Europe. For the most part, they rely on their own wind turbines and solar panels to produce energy for their members, making them far less dependent on the vagaries of the energy market. This proved crucial in 2022, when the energy market in

the European Union collapsed. Consumers faced soaring energy bills, while oil and gas companies posted a record profit of 200 billion euros.¹⁶² Energy cooperatives have a business model that is different from that of traditional energy providers. Instead of trying to sell more and more of their product in order to satisfy shareholders, they encourage their members to use as little electricity as possible and offer practical advice on how to achieve this. Ecopower, Belgium's biggest energy cooperative, shows us how it is done. Because it informs members about ways to reduce energy usage, an Ecopower family typically uses 40 per cent less power than its average Belgian counterpart. And families with Ecopower membership paid up to 500 euros less for their energy in 2022 compared to customers of commercial energy companies.

This compelling example of a regenerative economy generates various forms of surplus value for the community, unlike the dominant extractive economy that withdraws it. And energy cooperatives are part of an increasing trend towards citizen participation in energy transition. A recent study identified more than 10,000 initiatives in which a total of over 2 million people in Europe are involved.¹⁶³ The researchers found 'strong evidence for the historical, emerging, and actual importance of citizen-led collective action to the European energy transition'. Meanwhile, the energy cooperatives have organised themselves into regional, national and Europe-wide federations, which allows them to play a significant role in the public debate and have some political influence.

Commons are, in the words of sociologist Karl Polanyi, examples of partial decommodification and the re-embedding of the economy in social relations. They show that it is possible to withdraw parts of the existing economy from the growth-addicted market society. Similar initiatives can be found in agriculture. In several European

countries there are initiatives that remove farmland from the speculative market by setting up foundations that buy up the land and make it available to organic farmers instead. Examples include the Ecological Land Cooperative (Bristol, UK), the Passeurs de Terres (Nantes, France) and Terre-en-Vue and De Landgenoten (Belgium). These growers invest a lot of time and effort in improving the quality of the soil year on year, so it is important that this well-maintained land does not revert back to agribusiness. And then there are housing cooperatives, who take homes out of the brutal property market and guarantee their members secure tenancies at affordable prices.

The good news here is that these examples show that the new type of enterprise that we need in a wellbeing economy already exists. As more and more citizens become involved in shaping this economy, the question that our politicians invariably ask – does the social-ecological transition enjoy sufficient support? – can be answered in the affirmative.

2.10. Proposal 5: Democracy drives the economy, not the other way around

It stands to reason: in a democracy, government and members of parliament direct the economy through policy and law making. Or at a minimum, the democratic system provides an ethical framework. However, investigative journalists have exposed the massive influence major multinationals such as car manufacturers have on legislation, which is like putting the cart before the horse. If we are to realise a profound transition, democracy will have to get a handle on the economy again. This of course means governing at a distance, providing a guiding framework that wastes no time in pushing the economy in the right direction.

For this we need a carefully designed set of mutually reinforcing and accelerating measures. Again, the cooperatives are a key starting point. They ensure that the economy is firmly anchored both locally and regionally, as each is in the hands of a large number of citizens and therefore represents a true localisation and democratisation of the economy. The companies themselves cannot be bought, split or moved at random by various hedge funds looking to make a profit.

If we are to achieve an economy beyond growth, we will have to provide systemic and maximum support for doughnut companies (that is to say, for cooperatives to begin with). This can come in the form of fiscal support – think of a cut in corporation tax and greater tax relief for people wanting to invest in these enterprises. After all, they benefit society instead of causing it damage as is so common in the traditional economic system. In those cases, it is usually the community that has to foot the bill. This includes people dropping out due to work pressure or pollution that requires cleaning up. There is also a need for support measures such as incubation centres and start-up subsidies so new ideas can quickly be converted into new economic fabric.

What we need is a social framework that provides maximum support for those at the forefront of a wellbeing economy, or generative enterprises, while nudging other companies towards the doughnut economy through legislation, taxation and reporting. Or as a British study describes it, the purpose of a corporation is to provide profitable solutions for problems of people and planet, and not profiting from creating problems.¹⁶⁴ For the traditional large corporations, it is a question of complying fully with what is already in place. We are thinking specifically about the directive on corporate sustainability due diligence that the European Parliament ratified in June 2023. It holds companies responsible if anything goes wrong in their global production

chains. And that is not a theoretical issue. In 2013, for example, a building in Bangladesh collapsed on thousands of workers toiling away for Western clothing brands. At the time, these companies were able to avoid responsibility. Due diligence has two components: the duty to care and the duty to remedy. Companies have to make sure that there are no human rights violations within their supply chains, and they are not plundering the habitats of, say, indigenous tribes. Their accountability extends to subsidiaries and also includes what happens after a product is sold. Companies must make sure that their products harm neither people nor planet.

Not everybody is in favour of due diligence. The CEO of Boskalis threatened to move his dredging company out of the Netherlands if the law was adopted.¹⁶⁵ It remains to be seen what the definitive version will look like in 2024, and which companies will really commit to it.

If implemented, the European corporate sustainability due diligence law would be a huge step forward, because all major corporations will have to comply. But to achieve the transition two other crucial changes are needed. First off, all big multinationals should pay tax in every single country where they operate. That is certainly not the case at the moment. They pay hardly any, by having their headquarters somewhere with very low corporation tax, and by playing countries against each other to obtain all manner of fiscal benefits. Researchers have calculated that American multinationals have avoided over a trillion dollars in tax simply by using Ireland as their tax haven. A trillion, that is 1,000,000,000,000. The OECD has put forward a proposal (which already has the backing of 135 countries worldwide), recommending that companies pay a minimum of 15 per cent corporation tax in every country where they operate. It invalidates the argument that businesses would move away if you were to introduce a fair tax system and creates

a level playing field between local enterprises and the big multinationals. And if the proceeds of the new global tax agreement were to go straight into a UN climate fund, the industrialised nations would finally deliver on their pledge to support countries in the Global South with their climate policy. With a lot of money, year on year.

This is obviously just one of the necessary changes to the tax system. As recommended by many, this is essentially about the shift from tax on labour to tax on the use of natural resources and on wealth. For natural resources, a carbon tax will be crucial to encourage companies to push ahead with decarbonisation, while thinkers such as Piketty rightly call for a progressive wealth tax. Oxfam in Belgium has proposed a progressive tax on assets over 1 million euros. With a rate progressing from 1 to 4 per cent, it would only affect a small proportion of the population but generate more than 20 billion euros. This ties in more generally with calls for caps on personal wealth, as outlined by Ingrid Robeyns in her book *Limitarianism: The Case Against Extreme Wealth*.

If we were to realise all that – and why not? It is perfectly possible – we would still be working within a Western paradigm. But bringing our imagination into play also means taking inspiration from other cultures. We can do this, as mentioned earlier, by looking at the principles on which indigenous people base their decision-making. As the First Nations of the Haudenosaunee in North America see it, those living today are merely borrowing the Earth from future generations. It means that whenever a decision is made, the impact on the next seven generations must be considered. We think it would be a great exercise for big multinationals to jettison their usual boardroom strategies and comply with this principle instead.¹⁶⁶

2.II. Proposal 6: Universal basic services

Sufficiency: meeting everyone's basic needs

As touched on earlier, universal basic services are an important instrument in our efforts to achieve a good life for everyone within planetary boundaries. Providing them involves recalibrating our idea of what the economy stands for and what its real purpose is. Such alternative economic conceptions include the post-growth economy, doughnut economy, foundational economy, and wellbeing economy – to name just a few.

More and more proposals and analyses now recommend universal basic services rather than a universal basic income. With good reason. A universal basic income 'merely' changes systems of redistribution and to some extent stimulates individualism without necessarily strengthening social security (if, for instance, public transport and healthcare are privatised and very expensive). Nor does it include any incentives for conscious consumption (it could in fact encourage overconsumption).

Universal basic services are founded on a different and simple principle: everybody should have access to basic needs, or to the minimum resources to not only survive but to actively participate in society and flourish. Clean air and water, food, care, education, a home, energy, security (physical, emotional, financial), internet access, etc. are all universal needs, as listed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Everybody has a right to have their basic needs met. Desires, on the other hand, can vary and increase exponentially and will not bring long-term fulfilment. In other words, satisfying basic needs rests on sufficiency, or a sufficiency economy, and on remaining within the 'safe and just space for humanity'. It allows us to guarantee

everybody good life within planetary boundaries, now and in the future.¹⁶⁷

The focus on meeting basic needs calls for thinking in terms of provisioning systems, as referred to earlier. This raises three crucial questions: who controls the provisioning system (government, business or citizens)? Is it using raw materials and energy as efficiently as possible? And finally, does it allow for a fair distribution?

For example, our current mobility system is clearly failing on both a social and environmental level. The one-sided focus on car ownership leaves many out in the cold (including those who cannot afford a car) and is not ecologically sustainable either. If we are to realise a fair transition, everybody's mobility needs will have to be met in an eco-friendly way. This can be done with the help of an effective public transport system, complemented by affordable sharing schemes, such as *Dégage* in Flanders, which enables people to share their car with others living locally.

Universal basic services are an essential tool in bringing about a fair transition, and as such are also compatible with the social-ecological wellbeing society or the new sustainable virtuous circle that we described earlier. Universal basic services are an investment in the future that benefits everybody. When people can rely on dependable and affordable services (such as first-class education, a decent home and care when needed), they will be better protected against a wide range of vulnerabilities and setbacks (including issues arising from unsuitable housing that will then need to be resolved). Universal basic services can prevent these problems in the first place, thus saving on money, time and energy to solve them later. They also enable people to work fewer hours without compromising their standard of living.

Needs are universal, their satisfiers are not

While basic needs are universal, the ways in which they are met vary greatly depending on culture and location. That is why services must be context appropriate instead of uniform and be perceived as adequate by all.¹⁶⁸ Many of our basic needs are currently met through market transactions (housing, food, healthcare and other forms of care), but while the market is an effective mechanism (if properly regulated) for selling clothing or communication devices, it is less or not at all suited to other matters. Many of our needs are best provided by the state, social and collective mechanisms. Our country's residential care homes are a case in point: it turns out that the most expensive ones offer the lowest level of care. The listed companies that own these homes view them as opportunities for profit maximisation, in which case it makes sense that they would save on staff and service costs. The goal therefore is to become less dependent on the market and to create a more de-commodified social-ecological society. The government itself can take the necessary steps to achieve this while also actively supporting (and of course regulating) non-profit initiatives. Final responsibility for ensuring that everyone has access to these basic services rests with the government.¹⁶⁹

It is important to distinguish between universal basic services and public services (provided by the state). The latter are obviously necessary in many areas (from public transport to accessible healthcare), but at the same time there is a need and room for collective services (commons) by and for citizens that are not profit-driven. The government cannot do it all, and in any case, why would we curb people's self-organisation?

We should start thinking about public-civil partnerships, as opposed to the public-private partnerships associated with neoliberalism. In the area of housing, for example, universal

basic services could be provided by public institutions (social housing for the lowest income groups) in conjunction with commons (housing cooperatives, community land trusts, etc.) for middle-income groups. With this combination, a large percentage of the housing stock will be collectively owned, and there is a greater chance of realising both ecological and social objectives than if market-based and profit-driven systems were in place.¹⁷⁰ In that sense, collective services bring more equality, efficiency, solidarity and sustainability.

A combination and partnership of state and non-state actors is certainly an option when it comes to providing universal basic services.¹⁷¹ That said, the state will still be responsible for providing and maintaining a democratic framework and offering appropriate financial support. Shifting the tax burden to the big polluters and the wealthy will create the fiscal space to do so.¹⁷² But the state does not have to cover all costs. Take housing cooperatives, for example, whose residents can help generate capital. This is what distinguishes a socialist vision, which wants the state to organise and finance all basic services, from an ecologist approach, which would like the government to guarantee basic rights but does not see a conflict with self-organisation by citizens who are working on the basis of autonomy in connection.

A real-life story

To illustrate what universal basic services can mean in practice, we are including an excerpt from an interview with Belgian politician Hafsa El-Bazioui. She is a local councillor in Ghent responsible for employment, youth services, facilities management and international solidarity.

I had a lot of friends with big bookcases at home...

We didn't have that at my house, so I was keen to find it elsewhere. I was lucky enough to live in a neighbourhood with a library and managed to get a library card. From then on it was easy to pop in after school and on Saturdays and while away many an hour in there.

My parents didn't have much money, but they had access to healthcare when my father needed extensive treatment, surgery and medication following an accident. Even as a child, the fact that this assistance was available gave me pause for thought, seeing that in quite a few countries a lot of services are privatised and there is no state funding available. Being unable to afford the healthcare you need can have a huge impact on your life or even your chances of survival.

Luckily we were entitled to social housing and we lived in a city that invested in that. It didn't really meet today's standards, and might have raised questions even back then. But when I look for the common denominator in quite a few crucial moments in my life, I keep coming back to education, libraries, healthcare and housing options as well as help finding employment and opportunities for life-long learning and development. Those have turned out to be the key forces in my life. That's no coincidence and it's something you see in quite a few stories, and yet we don't talk about it enough.

That takes me back to the importance of public services and governments that invest in them, because Ghent is now looking more closely at better cycle paths and connections. Unfortunately, there's still a lot of room for improvement in our public transport system, but that's an important point. You cannot expect people to initiate a just transition and system change all by themselves. You've got civil society, campaigners, interest groups, etc, but ultimately it's up to the government to make it their focus, to invest and make the sustainable option the obvious choice.

The emancipatory aspect of cycling as a woman is also incredibly important to me. Cycling in the city may seem like a trivial issue, but it's not. It reminds me of something my grandfather used to say: "Pilots who can't ride a bike need more training." You may be working on very weighty, conceptual matters, but if you can't independently get from A to B you're stuck. Transport poverty – not being able to ride a bike, having no safe roads or routes, no access to public transport – can really stop people from getting out and about and plunge them into isolation. That has an impact on their employment, education, leisure and overall personal development. Flemish friends always take it for granted that you can ride a bike and own one too, but that's certainly not the case for everybody in the city.'

2.12. Proposal 7: A fair relationship with the Global South

As discussed earlier, ecological and social justice are inextricably linked. Universal basic services are a good example of social justice within a country, but we should also take a broader, international view and improve relations between the Global North and the Global South.

In 1961, when the colonial era was coming to an end, the Martiniquan-French psychiatrist, philosopher and revolutionary Frantz Fanon wrote the following:

'Colonialism and imperialism have not settled their debt to us once they have withdrawn their flag and their police force from our territories. [...] The wealth of the imperialist nations is also our wealth. Europe is literally the creation of the Third World. The riches which are choking [Europe] are those plundered from

the underdeveloped peoples. So we will not accept aid for underdeveloped countries as “charity”. Such aid must be considered the final stage of a dual consciousness – the consciousness of the colonized that it is their due and the consciousness of the capitalist powers that effectively they must pay up.¹⁷³

There is simply nothing fair about the way the Global North continues to exploit the Global South over and above the riches that were already taken during the colonial period. It is paramount, therefore, that we break this neocolonial relationship.

An important first step would be to write off the debt and close the structural adjustment programmes. This will free up money for investment in services in these countries and give them the sovereignty to make their own decisions and protect their economies. At present, the debt burden leaves many unable to meet their people’s basic needs, thereby falling short of the doughnut’s social foundation. Writing off these debts is also far more effective and fairer than providing development aid, which is more like a sticking plaster and deflects attention away from the structural injustice. More often than not this debt is an accumulation of interest upon interest. Through interest alone the original debt grew from 100 billion dollars in 1973 to 1.5 trillion dollars in 1993 – of which only 400 billion was borrowed money.¹⁷⁴ Most countries have now paid off the original sums, or even double that, yet remain heavily indebted.¹⁷⁵

This neocolonial relationship with the Global South has been institutionalised as well. The West currently holds majority voting rights in the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, leaving the Global South without fair and democratic representation in these institutions and without sufficient say in their policies. This

must change. The World Trade Organization will have to see to it that international trade decisions are as fair as possible and do not disadvantage the Global South. One way of doing this is by making sure that countries there are represented in equal numbers at meetings that impact them.

One example of this exploitative relationship is agriculture. Subsidies make it possible for farmers in the Global North to sell products in the Global South below cost and thus destroy local markets. Without those grants, farmers in the Global South would finally have some breathing space. If they were able to sell their products at a fair price, the profit would flow back into the local community and relieve poverty and malnutrition. Moreover, small farm holdings have proven to be just as productive as big agribusinesses but take much better care of nature and ecosystems.¹⁷⁶

There are inequalities in the medical field as well. The patenting of Covid vaccines exposed a painfully obvious 'vaccination apartheid' during the coronavirus crisis.¹⁷⁷ The fair alternative would be to share knowledge of medicines, so the Global South can manufacture their own and make them available to their populations. The usual argument that the profits generated by these patents are meant to cover the cost of research does not apply here, as most Covid-19 vaccines came out of public funding.¹⁷⁸ Patents are also a problem in agriculture – with those on conventional crops, for example, forcing smallholders to buy seeds instead of saving their own. They generate huge profits for multinationals from the Global North and directly disadvantage the Global South. Food security and access to medication should never be restricted by patents.

As Hickel writes in *The Divide*:

‘Every time I walk into a store and see items labeled fair trade, I’m always struck by what their presence implies: that the rest of the “normal” products are unfair. We shouldn’t have to choose between fair and unfair products. When we buy the things we need to sustain and enjoy our lives, we should be able to be confident that we are not colluding in the exploitation of other human beings.’¹⁷⁹

One way of ensuring fairness is the introduction, worldwide, of a minimum wage for each country, which could be 50 per cent of the median income in that nation and guaranteed to be above the poverty line. There is evidence that increasing the pay of people working in, say, sweatshops has little or no impact on the price of exported goods.

And finally, the Global South deserves far more financial support than it currently receives for tackling the local consequences of the climate crisis. Having contributed little or nothing historically, they are set to be the hardest hit.

2.13. Proposal 8: Resilient democracy

Earlier, we spoke of democracy driving the economy rather than the other way around. But a resilient democracy, one capable of responding adequately to the social-ecological crisis in hard times, is about much more than that.

Developing a carbon credit system for all consumer products and services. Introducing a ban on advertising of products with the biggest footprint. Putting the climate crisis at the heart of the school curriculum. Making it easier to bring empty properties

*back into use and reintroducing public services to rural areas. Making it mandatory for all companies to report their annual emissions and pollution. Designing a new national food solidarity plan to give low-income households access to sustainable food. Taxing ultra-processed food with high CO₂ emissions. Banning flights if a journey can be done by train in less than four hours.*¹⁸⁰

These are just a few of the 149 proposals put forward in 2020 by the French Citizens Convention for Climate. A citizens' assembly is made up of people that are broadly representative of society in terms of gender, socio-economic background, age and other parameters. First, a random selection of citizens is invited, and this is then followed by a lottery among those who wish to participate. Next, the group is briefed by a range of experts and others representing different perspectives while the members can also summon specialists themselves if they wish. The assembly then deliberates – on the express instruction that they think about the public interest instead of their own. Many of those taking part have said that it is an honour to participate and that they will give it their best. While debating issues, participants listen to each other and are given the space to change their minds. At the end of the process, proposals will be formulated, and if necessary revised, so most of the members can get behind them. The French panel frequently adopted proposals with a majority of around 90 per cent. Furthermore, a majority of people in France had heard of the proposals and of those six out of ten supported the proposals and believed them to be effective – even a majority of *Rassemblement national* voters thought so.¹⁸¹ Citizens' assemblies have mushroomed in recent years and the concept is still evolving, but one thing is certain: people are capable of collectively formulating adequate proposals on challenging social issues. A citizens' assembly in Ireland, for instance, discussed the right to abortion – a political 'hot potato' – which was eventually legalised through a referendum in 2018.

At present, citizens' assemblies still lack a legal framework and are only sporadically commissioned by governments. They are also often unsuccessful in the implementation phase, with governments, like the one in France, failing to act on the panel's recommendations. But they are obviously not the only way to strengthen the democratic system. It is naïve to think that politicians will simply relinquish their power. The history of democracy tells us that changes for the benefit of underrepresented and often oppressed groups are always hard-fought. The welfare state did not come about as a result of a spontaneous initiative by enlightened politicians, nor did civil rights for people of colour in the United States. They were the outcome of prolonged and sustained democratic action by well-organised groups that gradually built a countervailing force. The various means of action at people's disposal – demonstrations, marches, sit-ins, strikes and protests – are still crucial tactics for expressing discontent and forcing important changes. Think of Gandhi's Salt March against colonial oppression in 1930, the Pride parades that followed the Stonewall Riots in 1969 and the recent Black Lives Matter protests. The right of peaceful assembly is a fundamental human right and authorities have a legal obligation to facilitate protest. It is extremely worrying therefore that the rights to strike and demonstrate are under attack and increasingly framed as public order offences.¹⁸² We are seeing full-blown criminalisation of peaceful climate activism in multiple European countries. In Germany, France, Great Britain and the Netherlands, the police and judiciary are using measures that would normally be reserved for terrorist groups and that are clearly disproportionate.¹⁸³ The British Public Order Bill that was adopted in 2023 is a serious violation of the right to protest and places peaceful protestors at risk of custodial sentences.¹⁸⁴ Volker Türk, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, described it as 'deeply troubling legislation'.¹⁸⁵ In fact, this dangerous trend undermines the workings of democracy. Whether or not

you agree with Extinction Rebellion blocking motorways in the Netherlands for weeks at a time, it did put the topic of subsidies on fossil fuels on the social and political agenda. It turns out that a majority of the population – some 70 per cent – are now aware of them and agree that they ought to be stopped.¹⁸⁶

When citizens' pleas to their elected representatives fall on deaf ears, the democratic state offers them legitimate means for legal action. This is now happening in more and more countries via so-called climate litigation. These cases hold governments to account and force them to shoulder their responsibility for the wellbeing of this and future generations. While it is important that climate action can be advanced via this route, it also reflects a painful failure on the part of politicians to protect their people from climate disaster.

At present, future generations have no voice in our democracy and yet we make decisions that affect them. Inspired by the aforementioned seven generation stewardship principle, Wales appointed a Future Generations Commissioner in 2015 who advises on policy decisions on behalf of those who come after us.¹⁸⁷ On her advice, Wales decided to abandon most new road building projects, because continued investment in cars would not bring long-term social and ecological benefits. As part of this world-leading policy, Wales will instead be targeting a better public transport system, which will benefit everybody, including those without a car.¹⁸⁸

Another challenge facing our democracy and the necessary transition is increasing polarisation and the aggression that sometimes accompanies it. This is exactly what happened following the introduction of a new mobility scheme in Brussels in 2023, a scheme that targets a safe and secure city, including quiet neighbourhoods connected by intermodal structural axes and aimed at effective public transport,

smoother traffic flows and fewer cars. Road signs were pulled out of the ground during protests and cyclists were subjected to an online hate campaign in which personal data was leaked. But it was inspiring to see that amid the turmoil people came forward to let both parties talk on Car Free Sunday: a dialogue that took place, symbolically, on a bridge. What really lies at the root of the problem is the fact that people want to be heard.¹⁸⁹

All this underlines the importance of continuing to explore how, in these polarised times, politicians and citizens can establish a lasting dialogue on an equal footing with those who have other views. It goes to the very heart of our democracy. Several new initiatives, from citizens' assemblies to the discussion on the bridge in Brussels, show us how it can be done.

2.14. Towards an EU Wellbeing Economy

In this part, we presented our vision of a wellbeing economy and formulated eight proposals, eight big building blocks for a social-ecological transformation of our economy and society. Although some member states can be and are frontrunners in certain domains, it is clear that the European Union is the appropriate governance level at which all the proposed fundamental changes must be introduced and realised. The European Union has already done important work in several fields. Alongside the achievements under the Green Deal, advances have been made in social policy, including the Minimum Wage Directive, which protects workers' incomes, and the European Platform for Combatting Homelessness. These steps show how the European Pillar of Social Rights can be made reality.

But all these steps in the right direction are insufficient for a future-proof Europe that is resilient in times of polycrisis.

As argued at the start of this essay, the ecological crisis is first and foremost a crisis of our imagination. We have to first imagine another European economy, one that is rooted in a different paradigm, before we can actually build it. The Green Deal was a great step forward but it remains locked within a growth-addicted economy with its core principle of competition in a single market. And its accomplishments in the social domain are small compared to the 20th-century achievement of the welfare state. So, it is about imagining a wellbeing economy built on a beyond-growth perspective, with solidarity, sufficiency, cooperation and care for more-than-human-worlds as its guiding principles, as well as a stronger role for public services and civil self-organisation (commons).

This is a key lesson of complex systems theory: the biggest levers for system change are situated at grounding paradigm and leading principles level. We therefore need a new treaty – the Vienna Treaty as we called it in the prelude – to replace the Lisbon Treaty that rooted the European Union in neoliberal principles. This sounds bold, and at present the odds are stacked against it. To motivate citizens, we need an inspiring and aspiring vision for the future, a collective compass and proposals that remedy the current lack of policy coherence and integration. A clear example is Europe's food and agricultural system, which is the opposite of sustainable and resilient. Small-scale farmers are not making a decent living, the agricultural sector's greenhouse gas emissions remain too high and there is no integration with biodiversity policies. And last but not least, the CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) budget has not been brought into line with the Green Deal by the Von der Leyen Commission.

For this bold approach the future, a quick look at our common history can be illuminating. In the 20th century, European nation-states gradually developed welfare states. These

provided, alongside the already existing civil and political rights, socio-economic rights: a broad array of support systems that secured social, health and employment rights. The goal of these welfare states was to provide accessible, high-quality public services such as healthcare and public transport in addition to forms of support and income guarantees when, for example, someone falls ill, loses their job or retires. It was prompted by the progressive notion that people can only be free if they are liberated from the fear of misery. The welfare state was the outcome of a clear social contract, with governments, employers and unions committing themselves to work together for the benefit of all. Now, in the third decade of the 21st century, welfare states have been eroded and have become vulnerable, at a time when forms of support and security for all are crucial, when society is in urgent need of a social-ecological transformation. Just when we need a new social contract, a social-ecological contract for the wellbeing of people and the planet, the old one is under great pressure, for two important reasons.

First is the dominance, since the 1990s, of neoliberal policies, which brought with it austerity, cuts in social benefits and the privatisation or neglect of public services. Second is the legacy that European welfare models have been built and are still relying on the wealth created by an extractive, growth-addicted economy. This has led, as explained, to transgressing planetary boundaries, (neo-)colonial practices and jeopardising stable living conditions.

A liveable future, and the prospect of a good life for all, calls for different welfare models. This presents the European Union with a unique opportunity to play a leading role in developing a new social-ecological contract. This European agreement should reorientate national welfare systems, based on the compass of sustainable welfare, towards eco-welfare states that thrive in a European wellbeing economy.

The key feature of the European Socio-Ecological Contract is that social and ecological policies go hand in hand. Policies that accelerate the climate and environmental transition should also tackle structural socio-economic inequalities and all forms of discrimination. Conversely, social policies should reinforce ecological goals. Or to put it in terms of policy integration: the Green Deal 2.0 should merge with the Pillar of Social Rights.

To sum up: moving beyond the Green Deal, the EU needs a Wellbeing Deal as ‘a holistic legislative and financial framework based on the premise of systemic change and prioritizing wellbeing over GDP growth.’¹⁹⁰ A European doughnut economy should be built, with the European Pillar of Social Rights as the inner circle, and the planetary boundaries as the outer circle. Unless the basic architecture of the EU’s economic politics and policies, the basic economic governance rules, is changed, the necessary paradigm shift will not happen. Clear examples of this are the current EU fiscal framework (with its focus on the ‘Maastricht norms’ restricting member states’ social-ecological investments) and the policy of the European Central Bank (with higher interest rates making loans for crucial investments for the necessary transformation more expensive). The EU has to provide for massive and long-term investments, financed by a fiscal system that lowers taxes on labour and increases revenues from environmental and wealth taxes.

A grounding principle of the new wellbeing economy, as an alternative to the current extractive economy, is sufficiency. As explained earlier, sufficiency underpins an economy that puts basic needs first. As proposed in this book, the perspective of provisioning systems can be the central lever for implementing the new European Contract. Developing them within the fair and just space of the doughnut will allow us to also tackle overconsumption and poverty,

provide good services for all and deliver sustainable welfare within planetary boundaries.

It is inspiring to see how the concept of provisioning systems is gaining ground in influential circles and institutions. For instance, Global Resources Outlook 2024, the recent report by the UN International Resources Panel, is built on the concept of provisioning systems. Imagine a plan for a future-proof food or mobility system that provides basic services for everyone while respecting planetary boundaries. This would redirect our focus from cars and roads to a multi-level European mobility system that prioritizes public transport systems and smart collective ways of sharing (cars, trucks and bikes), alongside a more local and regional focus on cycling and pedestrian infrastructure.

This brings us to a fundamental question in the transformation: if the European Union really wants to be a fully-fledged political union, how come there are no European public services? To go back in history one last time: nation-states were known and celebrated for the public services they built for their citizens. Think of the national rail system, the postal service and the national health service. They were and are in certain countries still the embodiment of the ‘imagined community’ every nation-state ultimately is. So how about building an EU railway company that connects all the capitals of the member states with fast sustainable transport, such as comfortable night trains? Or instead of social media with toxic algorithms, an EU public social media platform with transparent algorithms? One thing is certain, once we succeed in freeing our imagination – which is currently constrained by old frameworks – we can be as successful as we were in the constitutive early days of the European Union, when it was evident that the desired future looked very different from the past and indeed much better.

2.15. Outro: Back to the imagination

In this section we have set out our vision of a Wellbeing Economy and outlined some of the key measures needed to realise it. As more of these radical changes gain acceptance, we are more likely to see a break in the current trend. Without a blueprint or established path, we will have to approach this transition step by step and, where necessary, make adjustments along the way. The process is all about structural and cultural changes, about the way we relate to the world. The imagination plays a crucial role in this. And so, at the end of this part, we return to the imagination in a second, shorter piece: a description of what society could be like in ten years' time. In what is another open-ended story – different lives are possible in different worlds – we describe the good life of Noah and Victoria, which certainly situates itself more closely within the safe and just space of the doughnut.

It feels like ages since they both worked five days a week, not counting the overtime, spent heaps of money on rent, needed their own car to get to work and possessed products that never lasted very long, like those wretched printers that conked out every couple of years. In the meantime, the European Parliament has introduced the four-day working week. But like many of their friends, Noah and Victoria have chosen to work a little less than that. So now Noah works Monday to Wednesday and Victoria Tuesday to Thursday. They also help out at the local parent cooperative one day a week. It's brought them into contact with lots of new people and gives them cheap childcare for their two toddlers. Noah works as an independent consultant on sustainable construction, Victoria as a mechanic at the Neighbourhood Factory. Friday is a special day: volunteer day. On a voluntary basis, obviously. Noah rolls up their sleeves at the Collective Farm, a half hour away by electric bike. The agroecological farm focuses on growing locally, on healthy soil, a good life for its animals and more biodiversity in and around the

fields. Two hundred families have a share in this cooperative and receive a weekly box of healthy food in exchange for an annual contribution, thus guaranteeing the farmers a regular and fair income. Their weekly stint at the farm also means that Noah sees their parents at least once a week, as part of the coop has been converted into a cohousing project for young and old. Now that a fast tram connects the city with the surrounding villages, the farm is easily accessible.

Victoria loves combining technological and social innovations, so on Fridays she helps at the energy cooperative that provides all local residents with affordable renewable energy. And this schedule leaves enough room for the things money can't buy: in this slow society, Victoria and Noah have oceans of time to look after their family and their surroundings, to meet people and to offer a sympathetic ear to anyone who needs it.

If truth be told, these changes were quite nerve-wrecking. What would it be like to work less, and therefore earn less and, who knows, be complicit in your own uncertain future? Victoria, especially, found this difficult. But now they both know that their lives are richer for it; in fact, they have more freedom and security. One crucial change came four years ago, when they moved into a wonderful and affordable home in the old factory, which was renovated by a housing cooperative. Now they have a secure tenancy for life at a rent that is well below market rate. The site also boasts shared electric cars and cargo bikes, as well as efficient communal washing machines – all items they no longer have to buy themselves. Besides, downsizing makes sense when you can still invite friends over to stay in one of the guest rooms that are free to book. The old factory also features 20 per cent social housing, subsidised by the government, while the members themselves make a solidarity contribution that pays for a few permanent homes available to refugees.

Every time Victoria reviews her budget at the end of the month, she's pleasantly surprised. Living in an energy-efficient home,

paying well below market rent, being a partner in a good and cheap childcare facility, having affordable renewable energy and organic food from the Collective Farm – it makes a huge difference. Thanks to all the green spaces and the local park they can sit outside with others without needing a private garden, although they also enjoy an evening together on their own patio. The hustle and bustle of the city centre combined with the deep inner calm they can find at the House of Silence is what gives their lives the necessary variety.

With the government as a background partner the people themselves are responsible for a lot of these achievements – housing, farming, energy and childcare cooperatives, all with attention to different types of diversity – but the big transformation is just as much the result of an ingenious array of universal public services provided by the state. The combination of a network of safe cycle paths and excellent public transport, supplemented with car sharing in rural areas, never ceases to amaze Noah. Why did they waste two precious hours in traffic every day commuting to work ten years ago? Likewise, state funding for a local primary health centre offers peace of mind and security. It's reassuring to know that everybody in the neighbourhood, regardless of background and income, has direct access to good quality healthcare, with physical and mental health receiving equal billing. How different it was, not that long ago, when Victoria was unable to register with a doctor's practice because none of them were accepting new patients.

On Sundays they love to cycle to the many nature reserves in the province. The new bike Noah bought recently came with a five-year guarantee and a repair guarantee of thirty years, as do all new products. Noah's mother – at the ripe old age of 93 – didn't think it was all that radical actually. The first washing machine she ever bought lasted forty years. So perhaps not every innovation is as bold as it's made out to be. It all depends on where you're coming from.

Of course Noah and Victoria's lives aren't completely carefree. The greenhouse gas emissions of recent decades will continue to destabilise the climate for years to come. Damaged ecosystems are recovering slowly, not everybody they know has an affordable home and agriculture in some parts of the world remains all but impossible. And while there's more global solidarity now than there was ten years ago, for many people in regions with the highest temperatures life is very tough indeed. They hear the stories first-hand from the climate refugees.

Nobody can predict the future. Even the slow society in which Noah and Victoria are raising their children is still trying to work out how to respond to the words of Anna Tsing: the art of living on a damaged planet, and how to restore it.

From the power of the imagination to the power of change

Major societal shifts often bring the bravery of certain individuals to mind. When it comes to civil rights, for instance, there's Rosa Parks who changed the world with what seemed like a very simple act. Her refusal, in 1955, to give up her seat for a white person on a bus in Alabama sparked a huge wave of protests and led to a whole raft of progressive changes.

Stories about the early days of the environmental movement usually feature the American biologist Rachel Carson. Her book *Silent Spring* documents the destructive consequences of the mass use of pesticides – killing even the birds, so in spring no bird song can be heard through the open windows. The book, in which she seems to single-handedly take on the big pesticide producers, is seen by many as the beginning of the global environmental movement.

It is important to see the acts of these courageous women for what they are. No activists, no change. But it would be wrong to assume that they were the actions of lone individuals. In reality, these examples tell a much stronger story about the importance of preparation, cooperation and, indeed, the courage to organise and fight the powers that be.

Rosa Parks was an experienced activist who had been a member of the civil rights movement for many years.

The protest that followed her act of defiance did not just happen. Other black women before her had refused to give up their seat on the bus, and the Women's Political Council had made the necessary preparations to launch a large national campaign in response to the next such refusal – with volunteers distributing tens of thousands of pamphlets across the United States. Church leaders such as Martin Luther King became involved, and gradually a long-term strategy evolved that included a wide range of actions, including a march on the capital, sit-ins, bus boycotts and court cases. Nothing was left to chance: Parks must not come across as too radical, so she deliberately adopted the role of an unassuming heroine. So what we are talking about here is a massive movement, with a great many subdivisions, primed and ready to fight for many, many years.¹⁹¹

Rachel Carson did not do everything on her own either. In the 1950s, she had already written three successful, prize-winning books about the oceans. When she became an activist with her decision, in 1957, to write a book that would bring the destructive consequences of pesticide use to a large audience, she knew she would meet with a lot of resistance. While doing her preliminary research she received support from a great many people. Preparations for the book took a total of four years and during that time she built up a large network of civil servants, members of Congress and editors of newspapers and magazines, and she worked with biologists and health professionals who had the courage to challenge prevailing views when presented with verifiable data. Carson also received full support from her publisher. Anticipating controversy and opposition to the book, together they identified allies in politics and environmental organisations and made sure the manuscript was carefully checked by legal experts. The book was finally published in June 1962 and did indeed inspire an entire movement. But it did not come out of nowhere either. The preceding years had seen high-profile legal challenges

to the use of harmful pesticides. And no less importantly, Carson did not just highlight the negative side of the story but dug deeper and delivered a positive message: if we radically change our relationship with nature, we can still turn the tide.

The great transformation of our society

Major changes do not just happen, as illustrated by the creation of the welfare state in the 20th-century. The realisation of social security for all in the post-war period was possible only because citizens had already self-organised to develop many of the building blocks themselves, including, for example, the mutual aid set up by groups of workers as a precursor to health insurance and pension funds. Various other steps towards the welfare state, such as bringing the 70-hour working week down to 40, were also achieved by the sustained actions of citizens coming together.

In his 1944 book *The Great Transformation*, Karl Polanyi outlines an important framework for understanding these major changes – unsurprisingly, his ideas keep popping up everywhere. Polanyi describes an earlier, far-reaching transformation: the shift from an agricultural to an industrial economy. He shows how industrialisation and unbridled capitalism unravelled English society and caused immense human suffering. According to the sociologist, such blind commodification invariably provokes a backlash, which sees citizens mobilising to set up and demand forms of social security. This countermovement targets the de-commercialisation of parts of society. Polanyi identifies two different versions of it: democratic and authoritarian (or fascist, as he labels it). The former fights for a society in which everybody can enjoy freedom and security, the latter promises a certain kind of security if people are prepared to forfeit their civic freedom. This analysis provides a window

onto our own times: the profound uncertainty triggered by the sharp rise in inequality, climate destabilisation and rapid digitisation means that people are understandably open to promises of social protection. Crucially, the progressives must not only develop and implement a social-ecological transformation but fight the authoritarian variant at the same time.

Likewise, we must not forget that while the welfare state delivered prosperity to much of the rural population, its economy was – and is – based on abuse of the Global South, exploitation of workers and plundering of the natural environment. And while there has never not been an underclass in Belgium, neoliberal policies have now inflated their number to a sizable precariat: people who live a precarious, vulnerable existence in an otherwise incredibly rich country.

The progressive vision for the future – an ecological welfare state or a wellbeing society – must consider the fate of all people on Earth, including that of future generations. Certain peoples have already shown us the way with seven-generation planning, as mentioned earlier. The new countermovement has to be a global movement too, always adapted to and embedded in the specific and diverse realities of different countries and regions.

How radical should we be?

The actions of climate activists evoke sympathy but also a fair amount of resistance. Just think of museum stunts or motorway blockades. They are a particular concern to the elite, who end up calling on the authorities to criminalise these acts. Even though their interventions can be classed as non-violent civil disobedience, climate activists have already been handed prison sentences in countries including the

Netherlands and the UK. If criminal sanctions were always proportional, you might well wonder what penalties await the CEOs of oil companies such as Shell.

Whether or not you are supportive of these kinds of protests, the question is whether they achieve anything. Do they strengthen the climate movement or undermine its clout? To answer that, we turn to what sociologists have dubbed the 'radical flank effect'. How do the actions of a radical wing impact the group as a whole when people are generally drawn to its bigger, more temperate arm? Analysis of the US civil rights movement has shown that moderate black civil rights organisations, such as the one led by Martin Luther King, saw donations increase rather than decrease in response to the actions of radical black activists such as the Black Panthers and helped them force through more progressive legislation. However, leading researchers such as Herbert Haines have pointed out that radical flanks can also have a negative influence. A lot depends on what society deems radical at any one time.

Recent studies confirm that the radical flanks of social movements can increase support for its more mainstream counterparts.¹⁹² Looking at the perception of animal rights and climate coalitions, researchers found that the presence of a radical flank shores up the position of the more measured faction. This is down to the contrast effect: even though the moderates remain unchanged, they appear less radical and therefore attract more support.

In short, the radical flank effect hypothesis posits that if part of a social movement radicalises it will not necessarily weaken the group as a whole; it can boost the moderate majority. Public perception plays a key role here. The actions of the radical flank make the less extreme activists suddenly look more acceptable, casting them as the reasonable alternative. They can also influence a government's attitude.

With the moderates now looking like a more attractive proposition, the authorities can show that while they are not keen on radicalism they are certainly prepared to engage in dialogue with the social movement.

One of the key questions in this debate is what we really mean by radical. What to do when scientific reports consistently show that unless we change our policies we are doomed as a society, and that the proposed political agreements are invariably too little, too late? In that respect, it is useful to look at the origins of the word radical. Coming from the Latin *radix*, or root, it means tackling the root cause of a problem. Is that radical or simply the most efficient and commonsensical approach? UN Secretary General António Guterres pulls no punches: ‘climate activists are sometimes depicted as dangerous radicals. But the truly dangerous radicals are the countries that are increasing the production of fossil fuels.’¹⁹³

The 21st-century coalition

When we look back with gratitude at past actions, the question arises which groups will make the necessary change happen today. What social coalition will bring about, in Polanyi’s words, the great transformation? The sociologist stresses that the social shift he describes was not the outcome of the actions of any one particular group. The welfare state evolved in response to the efforts and demands of a broad coalition, which included not just workers’ and women’s movements, but also farmers who unionised and shopkeepers who opposed unbridled capitalism.

Such a broad coalition is what we need today. As for its makeup, we can look to ecofeminism for inspiration. In its analysis, this political philosophy and movement highlights the connections between various forms of exploitation

and oppression. Back in the 1970s, female activists began to identify the parallels between contemporary society's abuse of the planet and its treatment of people who do not conform to the norm of white masculinity. From a modern-anthropocentric perspective, the natural environment is seen as a reservoir of dead matter, ready to give up its store of raw materials and accept our waste, while women and people of colour are treated as inferior. Ecofeminism sits at the juncture of the destruction of nature and these various forms of social oppression and espouses a different worldview as the basis of the new coalition.

As the American eco-philosopher Val Plumwood wrote in 1993, this new coalition could come about if various emancipatory movements centred on class, gender, nature and diversity joined forces for a large-scale social-ecological struggle. That is not to say that these groupings should merge into one. On the contrary. As bell hooks has written, 'feminism, as liberation struggle, must exist apart from and as part of the larger struggle to eradicate domination in all its forms.'¹⁹⁴

In that sense it is important to look at the way different movements can support each other. In the United States, climate activists and indigenous peoples have teamed up to oppose the construction of new oil pipelines. The Climate Coalition in the UK unites 130 different organisations with a combined supporter base of 20 million, all dedicated to action on the climate and nature crises. Together, they are able to mobilise millions of ordinary people, to become an unstoppable political force.¹⁹⁵ Likewise, in Belgium, the Klimaatoalitie has united more than 100 organisations (including conservation and environmental groups, social justice movements, unions, health insurers, youth and citizens' movements) around the theme of climate justice.

But of course it can and should be stronger, the collaborative fabric that underpins the coalition and that allows it to grow and bring about change.

But how can we persuade the public, many of whom remain resistant to change, to join this new coalition? Sibon Rugwiza Kanobana highlights the importance of stressing that the problem is systemic, not personal:

I always address the systemic nature of racism and how it's embedded in political and economic processes. One of the things I try to explain is that it's not about specific individuals, or that it's not personal. That's the first thing I do. I'll say that it's not about you personally, but that you're part of a particular system in which certain things are taught and encouraged. That's what I want you to see. It's a case of detaching your whiteness from your skin colour and your appearance, from your place of birth and your parentage. The problem is not that you're a white man, but that there are values we attribute to your white manhood. The problem is the social structures that ascribe certain qualities to you that, for some reason, give you the benefit of the doubt but not others. It's not an attack on white people. It's about figuring out how we can build solidarity. How can you see that my problem is your problem too? And that you don't have to save me, but that we must work together

Revolutionary reformism

How can we transform our society? In the prelude we gave a glimpse of what is possible if we make robust changes across a range of areas. This hopeful story draws on the notion of revolutionary reformism, as developed by eco-philosopher

André Gorz.¹⁹⁶ The concept belies the illusion that a sudden revolution will solve everything or the idea that a few reforms will suffice. What we need is strategic intelligence, a strategy of change that focuses on synergy, but without deluding ourselves that we can control everything. Specifically, we need a sequence of sweeping reforms that complement, reinforce and accelerate each other while raising political awareness at the same time. Call it a new virtuous circle, a positive spiral. In some cities we are seeing this happen in the area of mobility. If we invest heavily in cycling infrastructure, upgrade public transport and prioritise vulnerable road users over cars, the mobility system is bound to tip. It is why Copenhagen is much admired and the number of cyclists in Ghent has risen exponentially, as has car sharing. And the greatest synergy takes place when changes across a range of provisioning systems reinforce each other. When energy cooperatives install solar panels on social housing, schools serve hot dinners made with local organic ingredients, governments curb Airbnb (as they have in Berlin and New York) and promote Fairbnb, positive feedback loops are the outcome. On a macro level, the immense reductions in the price of solar and wind technology, in combination with a sufficiency policy, may contribute to an accelerated phase out of fossil fuels.

Relationships are paramount

We mentioned it earlier: good social relations are a consistent predictor of a happy and healthy life. In fact, they are crucial in all areas. This calls for a radical critique: the modern worldview that emerged in the seventeenth century in tandem with capitalism built inequality and forms of exploitation and oppression into almost all relationships. For instance, a practice that was celebrated in westerns not all that long ago – cowboys conquering the ‘Wild West’ – is something entirely different in reality. Amitav Ghosh

summed up colonialism in three key words: genocide, ecocide and terraforming. Entire peoples have been slaughtered and natural ecosystems irreparably damaged, as colonists tried to make the countries they conquered look like their homelands. While this may sound like a description of a bygone era, to this day communities are driven from their land to sate our hunger for soy for cattle feed in Brazil or rubber for our tyres in Cameroon. Every year, a large number of climate activists are murdered in the Global South for calling a halt to this neocolonialism. And in Europe, stories of exploitation are on the rise, whether it is subcontractors on building sites or nightshift workers in the distribution centres of delivery companies that drive the 24-hour economy.

Unfortunately, we do not conclude this essay with a fun bit of news or the reassurance that it is really not that bad. Anyone claiming that the world is not going to hell in a handcart is like the sandman: sprinkling sand into people's eyes to send them to sleep. It is testimony to a prevalent and nefarious habit in today's society: sleepwalking. We may be up and about, but have no idea what is going on, which is a mentality with major consequences.

Only a new worldview, a new relationship with nature, can bring about the radical transformation we need. For this, we will have to abandon anthropocentrism, the belief system that places white men at the top of every hierarchy and views nature as dead matter that can be manipulated at will. In its place, we might adopt a perspective based on an ethics of care, which centres on the inextricable connections between human and more-than-human natures and on affective engagement with the world around us. From a scientific standpoint, the separation between humanity, you as a person, and nature is equally outdated. Each of us is an ecosystem in and of itself. For instance, we have an extraordinarily complex community of micro-

organisms in our gut, the microbiome. Not only can we not live without it, but it also has an effect on our mental health. Meanwhile, research in Finland has found that toddlers who play in playgrounds that are covered in forest soil have better immune systems after barely a month. And when agroecological agriculture improves the quality of the soil, it greatly reduces the presence of harmful moulds. Or more generally, as biologist Leen Gorissen puts it: each organism can only survive long-term if it improves its environment. The same is true for humanity. For centuries, we merely saw nature as non-human, dismissing it as wild and useless, valuable only once reclaimed and managed by people, as if nature depended on us, when in fact nature does just fine in the complete absence of humans.

The importance of such a different relationship also informed Rachel Carson's book. As the environmental movement got underway, she raised questions that have only become more pressing since: 'By acquiescing in an act that can cause such suffering to a living creature, who among us is not diminished as a human being?'¹⁹⁷ And in the final chapter she offers a stark choice:

'We stand now where two roads diverge. But [...] they are not equally fair. The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road – the one less traveled by – offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth.'¹⁹⁸

There is a role for each of us in taking the other fork of the road together. Not that long ago, former schoolgirl Greta Thunberg was completely unknown and there were no

movements such as Extinction Rebellion and Black Lives Matters (although they all stand on the shoulders of those who went before them in the social-ecological struggle). We do not know what we are capable of until we leap into action. And that brings us to the most accurate description of hope in today's context: hope is action. What we do can give us power. And the world we imagine is the one we can travel towards. Or to paraphrase African American artist and activist Toni Cade Bambara: 'We must make just and liberated futures irresistible.'¹⁹⁹

Postface

by Lukas Korpelainen

VISIO - The Finnish Green Think Tank

A Just Green Deal for All

The ecological crisis in its entirety, including climate change, biodiversity loss and all its other facets, is without doubt the greatest challenge of our lifetime. Therefore, it seems natural that addressing the situation would necessarily entail changes to how we structure production of goods, our economy, and the welfare state. For this reason, grand projects like the European Green Deal have begun to address social dimensions to guarantee that the transition is a just one.

However, as societies we lack the language to speak about these matters. Words like just transition, degrowth, post-growth and decoupling are thrown around, but few of us really have a grasp on them. We also lack the vision of what a good life in a society that respects ecological boundaries can look like and how to make it a reality. A common visual representation of an ecological transition is that of windmills replacing coal power plants. This, however, is a very superficial change. The changes we need go much deeper into the workings of society.

We are at a junction where governments around the world are trying to make increasingly stricter (although still

insufficient) agreements to tackle climate change but seem to still be blind to the extent that ecological goals are linked to our economic system and the welfare state. The transition necessitates changes to these structures, and governments are unprepared. We are now laying the foundations for that discussion. From the European perspective, this point in history could prove to be an opportunity for the European Union to be at the forefront - pioneering new societal and economic models just as it has been with climate goals among its Global North peers. The EU was once just a dream and now we might build a vision for the European socio-ecological model. But unlike during the building phase of the European dream, the future rebuilding must be decolonial and take note of global perspectives, as the authors of this book point out.

The modern welfare state, like the one my home country of Finland is known for, is built on economic growth and the expectation of its continuance. Finland's growing elderly population, combined with the overly optimistic pension promises of the past, has created a situation almost akin to a pyramid scheme: the system requires evermore economic growth, produced by the younger working age population, to sustain itself. The same demographic aging is happening globally and is most pronounced in high-income countries. But as this book explains, economic growth, at least on the level of whole economies, is directly linked with overuse of natural resources and excessive pollution, and it must be reoriented. Therefore, reinventing the economic model isn't just a matter of ideological preference but a necessity, since a system reliant on growth will fall apart without it. For this reason, it's quite jarring that recent governments in many countries (including Finland) have resorted to slowly dismantling the welfare state and using austerity measures to make people work more, to sustain economic growth instead of fixing the systemic problems.

I like the phrase 'beyond growth' that the authors have chosen to use since it looks into the future to a time after our current growth-dependent economy instead of simply stopping, moderating or going back in time. Transformative growth, as discussed in the book, is not growth in size but instead growth into something new. In practice this means that while harmful production and practices will have to be decreased or stopped, beneficial things will on the other hand be given more space to grow. Perhaps someday in the future actual green growth and full and total decoupling will become possible, but there's little point in focusing on this right now while we first have to deal with the acute ecological crisis. By the time the crisis has been stabilised, we will already have a different perspective on what growth means from the point of view of wellbeing.

After becoming aware of the scale and immediacy of the dire situation our world is facing, a rational reaction from any reader might be to drop everything else and devote as much time as possible to stopping the crisis from getting worse. But who has the time or economic freedom to do that? At least in Finland, life is strung tight with responsibilities, social pressure and high cost of living and this can be seen in the prevalence of mental health problems. Many jobs also contribute directly to the ecological crisis.

So perhaps in this current society what people really lack is time? And by time, I mean time free from worrying about one's economic or material subsistence. The book discusses the importance of imagination. Better futures must first be imagined for them to be built, and a promise of a positive future is necessary for people to be willing to fight for one. This also requires free time and a chance for minds to come together. But once again, how could this be made possible? Even if I were to quit my job, society around me would continue as before. I wouldn't be able to afford living in the

city with my friends and family, with the price of housing and everything else continuing to rise.

One of the important concepts that this book brings to the table is Universal Basic Services (UBS). As material consumption and production must be brought down to within the planetary boundaries, the authors propose that various forms of UBS could be key in ensuring everyone's needs are met in a just way. At The Finnish Green Think Tank Visio (Ajatuspaja Visio) we have written much about Universal Basic Income (UBI) and given thought to its role in a just transition. UBS and UBI both can be tools to not only guarantee sufficient and flourishing living to all in a post-growth economy, but also provide the time and economic freedom that people need to imagine that future and to work towards it. UBI alone cannot be the solution, as it is dependent on functioning markets for commodities. These markets don't exist for all the basic necessities. While most countries have private healthcare, Finland has embraced healthcare as a Universal Basic Service, to good effect, too!

In which cases basic necessities should be guaranteed through UBS or UBI (these could be collectively called Universal Basic Welfare, by the way) is an interesting question. In the future this will, at least in part, depend on whether the various commodity markets of today can continue in the post-growth economy, or should be decommodified. Additionally, it is a question of who has the power to decide what is produced and how.

The book makes an important point of moving away from the concept of the welfare state towards thinking of a wellbeing society. The English word welfare has drifted from its sibling wellbeing and taken on the meaning of social welfare, pointing towards a means to wellbeing rather than wellbeing itself. But wellbeing is much more than a government social program! Interestingly the Finnish word

for welfare state (hyvinvointivaltio) literally means wellbeing state (and a word for wellbeing society is in common use as well). Words help us communicate what it is that we really need as a society and actualise possible futures.

While we need systemic changes on all levels of society, it is also important to see a positive future that we are glad to pursue on a personal level. In my everyday life I have started to make mental notes of small and seemingly insignificant sights in my surroundings or in the media relating to human activities. When I see people resting, being creative, working towards something important, caring, spending time with friends, dare I say “loitering” – anything that brings wellbeing without an apparent ecological cost – I say to myself “that is buena vida!” I now realise I’ve been slowly reprogramming myself and reminding myself of what really makes life good: meaningful social connections, personal pursuits and low-stress living. While this might sound like self-brainwashing, I’m simply consciously realigning my life goals with my values. I find it very reassuring that even if I had to give up the amount and kind of material consumption I’m used to, I don’t need to give up the building blocks that actually make life good.

Adapting to life within ecological boundaries gives us a chance to reimagine our way of living more broadly and not just settle for the same (but less of it) as before. Transforming the economy based on concepts like sufficiency forces us to have discussions about what constitutes a good life. Car-free urban spaces are not just more ecological, they are healthier and more pleasurable. Protecting biodiversity through rewilding land can create beautiful networks of nature, linking cities and people across nations with projects like the European Green Belt Initiative. Producing and consuming less can liberate time to just connect with others and focus on living the good life.

A socio-ecological renaissance is possible. We're not yet on that path but with radical changes a radically better future that is ecologically sound and socially just (on a global scale) is attainable. We need a lot of bold imagination and to work smart. I thank the authors and hope this book gives inspiration to its readers to find new solutions and live utopia into reality.

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Lara Ferrante

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Dirk Holemans

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Contact the Green European Foundation:

Rue du Fossé 3, L-1536 Luxembourg

Brussels office: Mundo Madou,

Avenue des Arts 7-8, 1210 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 329 00 50 · Email: info@gef.eu · Website: www.gef.eu

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