
Sustainable
Development

Agenda

1. The Emergence of the Concept of Sustainable Development
2. Regimes, instruments and legal approaches
3. Current Data, Trends and Future Projections
4. Growth vs. degrowth
5. Postcolonial and Systems Critiques of Sustainable Development
6. Reimagining the SDGs: A Human Flourishing Approach



Sustainable Development

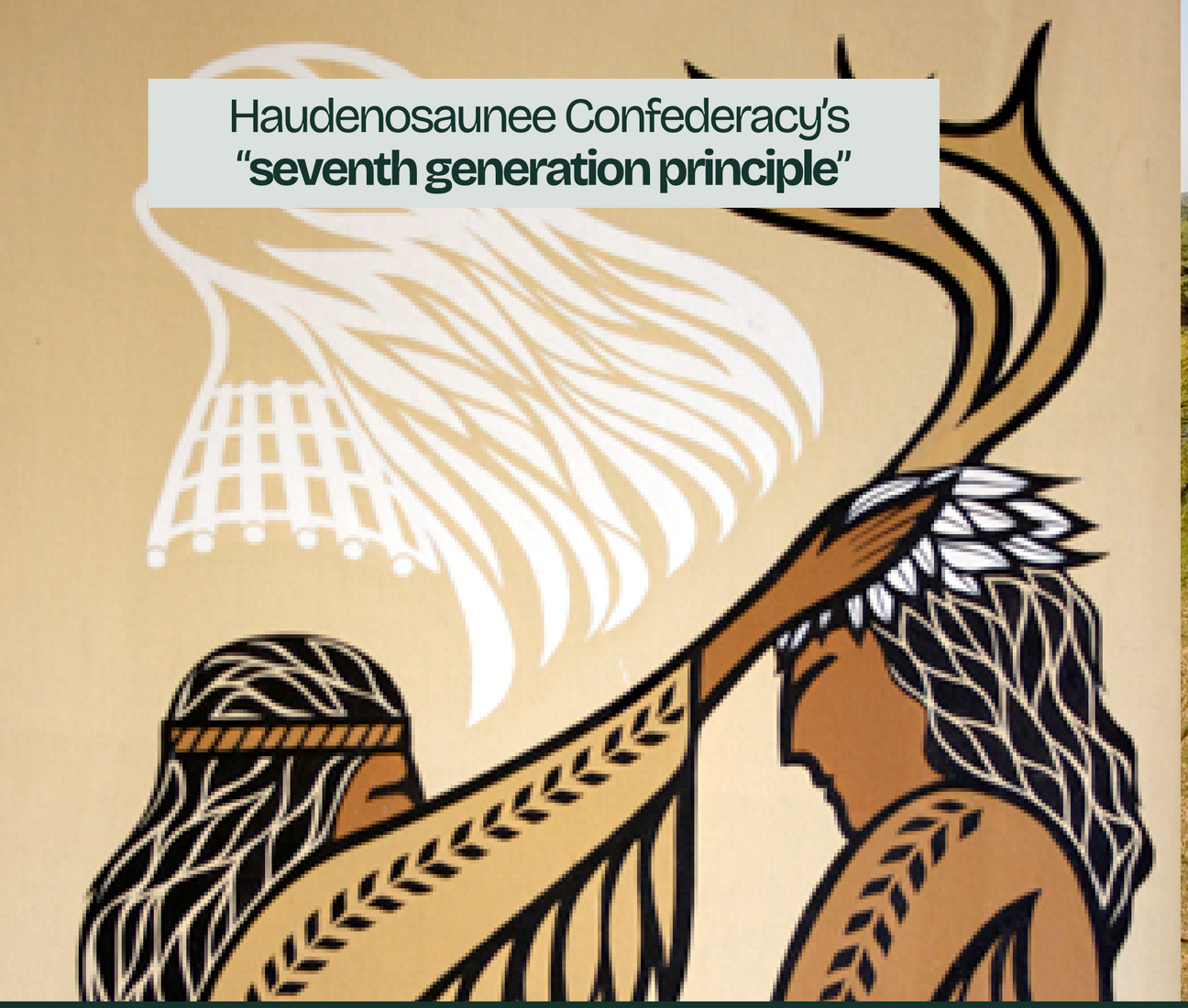


Brundtland Report in 1987:

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Three Interconnected Pillars

- economic growth
- social equity
- environmental protection



Haudenosaunee Confederacy's
"**seventh generation principle**"



Ancient **Sri Lankan irrigation systems**
for long-term agriculture resilience

Sustainability predates modern development and rests on different ontological assumptions

Sustainable Development Enters Global Policy



Sustainable development became operationalized through global institutions rather than structural transformation.

1972
The Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm

- Environment becomes an international political issue
- Human–nature separation still dominant
- Creation of UNEP

1987
Burndtland Report , WCED

- Introduces sustainable development definition
- Frames sustainability as compatibility between growth and conservation

1992
Rio Earth Summit

- The Rio Declaration set core principles
- Agenda 21 offered a detailed action plan
- Three major conventions emerged: UNFCCC, CBD, UNCCD

2015
Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

- 17 integrated and universal goals
- Which apply to all countries
- Emphasis on indicators, benchmarks, and quantification

Why Law Matters for Sustainable Development

> After sustainable development emerged as a global concept, the key challenge became implementation. Sustainable development is not only a policy goal or ethical ideal — it is also a legal and governance project.



Governance Architecture

UN system
(norm-setting & coordination)

Key actors:
UNEP – environmental governance, climate, biodiversity
UNDP – development policy, capacity building, SDG implementation

→ Strong normative role, weak enforcement

MEAs
(issue-specific regimes)

UNFCCC / Paris Agreement – climate change
Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) – biodiversity
Basel Convention – hazardous waste

→ Legally binding, but narrow scope and weak compliance

Financial & corporate actors

World Bank, IMF, regional development banks
Multinational corporations
Financial markets, rating agencies

→ High economic influence, largely voluntary and growth-oriented

Fragmented governance: norms, law and finance operate in parallel → accountability gaps



Hard law
(binding, enforceable)

- International treaties (e.g. Paris Agreement, CBD)
- State obligations under international law
- Compliance mechanisms (often weak)

→ Strong legal force, limited scope

Soft law
(non-binding, normative)

- UN Declarations
- Agenda 2030 & SDGs
- Guidelines and action plans

→ Broad participation, weak enforcement

Hybrid instruments
(between law and governance)

- ESG standards
- Corporate due diligence
- Sustainability reporting

→ Economic influence, largely voluntary

Legal Regimes

Key takeaway:

Sustainable development relies predominantly on **soft law** and **hybrid governance** rather than binding legal obligations.

Instruments for Sustainable Development



Market-based instruments

(economic incentives)

- Carbon pricing (taxes, emissions trading)
- Subsidies for renewables
- Payments for ecosystem services

→ Efficiency-oriented, but distributionally contested

Policy & regulatory instruments

(state-led governance)

- Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA)
- Environmental standards & permits
- National sustainability strategies

→ Procedural safeguards, limited transformative power

Corporate & financial instruments

(private governance)

- ESG reporting standards
- Green bonds & sustainable finance
- Corporate sustainability reporting

→ High influence, largely voluntary

Can market-based and voluntary instruments deliver structural sustainability, or do they merely optimize the status quo?

Human rights–based approach to sustainable development

From economic growth to human well-being and dignity

- Sustainable development grounded in human dignity and rights
- Individuals and communities as rights-holders, not beneficiaries

Key limitation:
Strong normative appeal, but weak enforcement and persistent tensions between economic, social, and environmental rights.

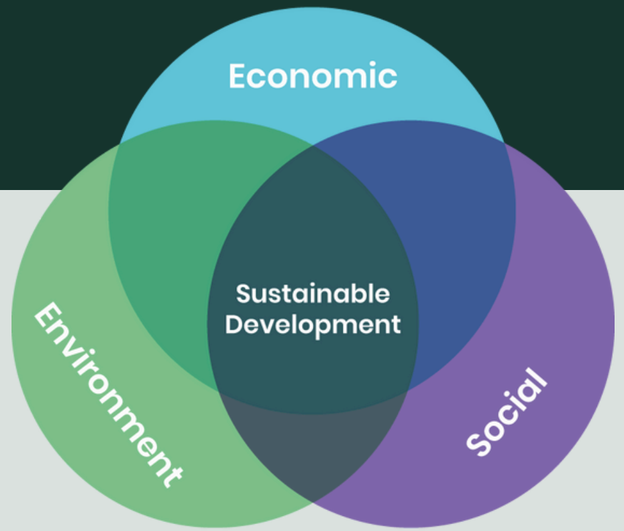








Measuring Sustainable Development



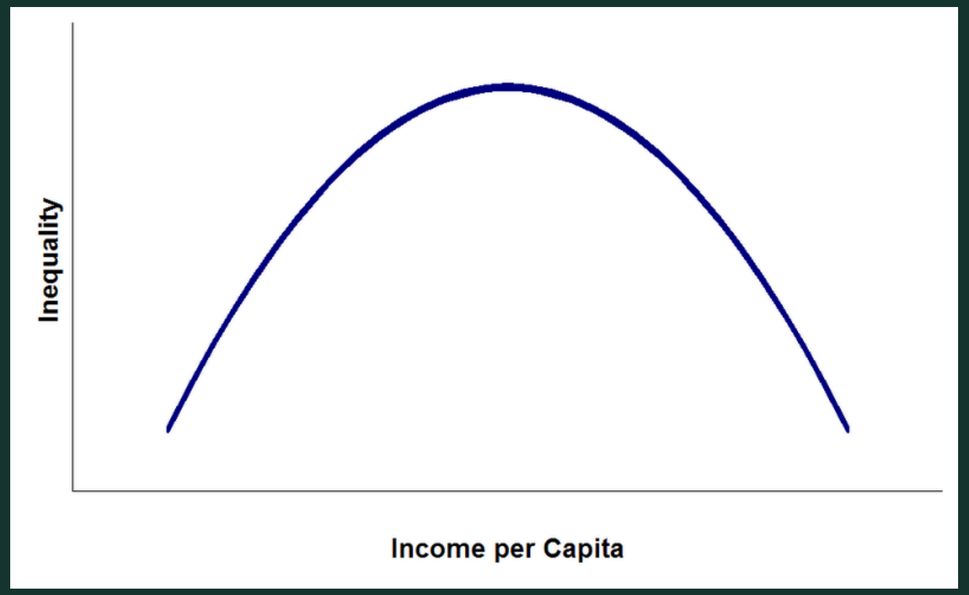
SDG Ranking

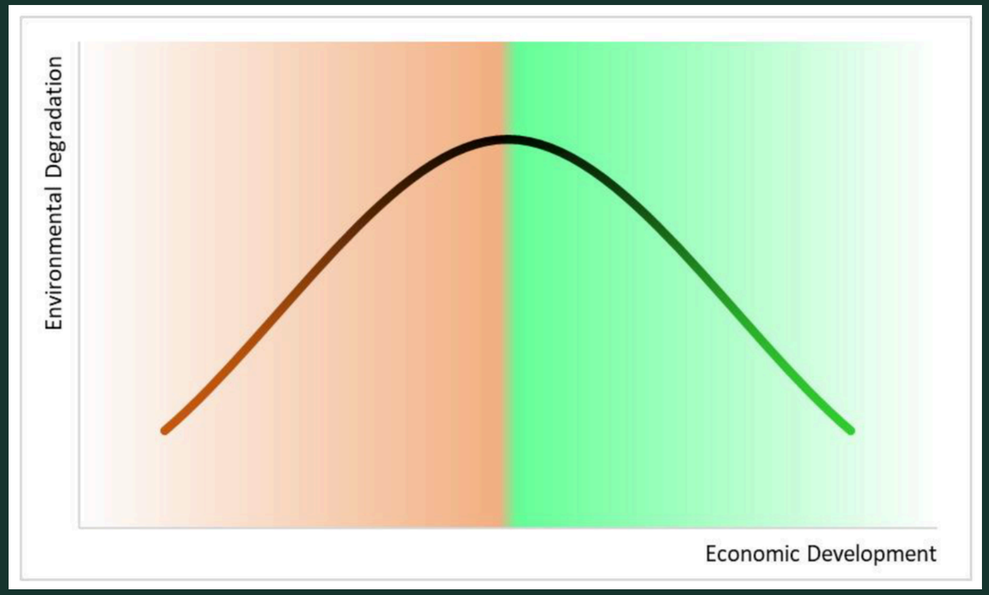
Rank	Country	Score
1	Finland	87.02
2	Sweden	85.74
3	Denmark	85.26
4	Germany	83.67
5	France	83.14
6	Austria	83.01
7	Norway	82.72
8	Croatia	82.39
9	Poland	82.08
10	Czechia	81.94

SDI Ranking

	Rank	Country	SDI	Life Expectancy (years)	Expected Years of Schooling	Mean Years of Schooling	Income (GNI per capita constant 2017$ PPP)	CO2 emissions per capita (tonnes)	Material Footprint per capita (tonnes)
	1	Costa Rica	0.833	77.3	16.1	8.8	20,248	2.38	10.56
	2	Uruguay	0.832	78.0	17.4	9.1	22,207	3.09	10.67
	3	Sri Lanka	0.832	76.6	13.6	11.2	11,899	2.16	4.10
	4	Dominican Republic	0.815	74.2	13.6	9.2	18,653	1.75	8.30
	5	Barbados	0.813	77.7	16.5	9.9	14,810	5.48	4.72
	6	Ecuador	0.809	77.9	14.9	9.0	10,693	2.40	6.97
	7	Albania	0.808	76.8	14.5	10.1	15,293	2.86	9.90
	8	Peru	0.803	73.4	14.8	10.0	11,916	2.42	7.52
	9	Colombia	0.801	73.7	14.4	8.9	15,014	2.03	8.48
	10	Cuba	0.797	78.2	14.5	10.5	7,953	3.22	6.74

Trends

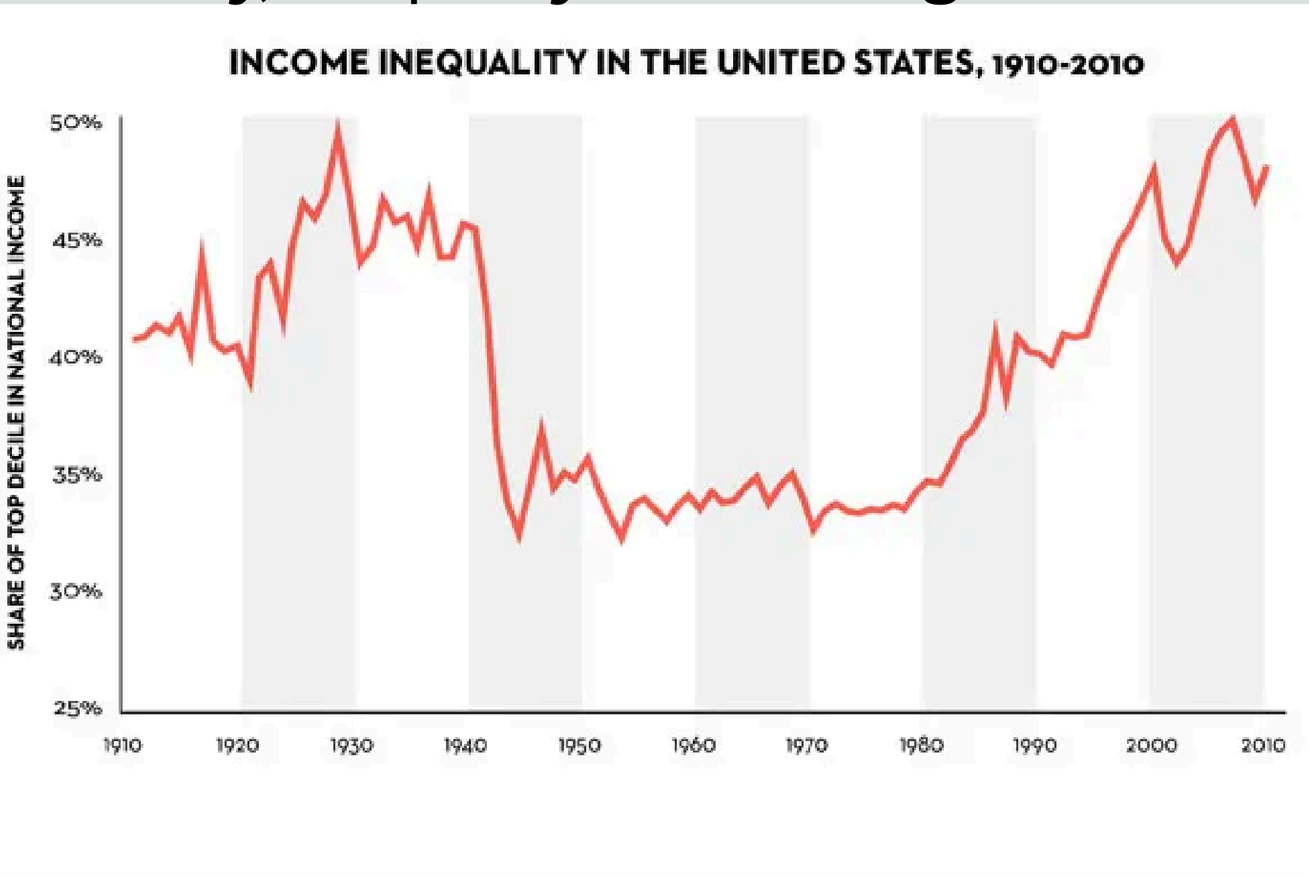




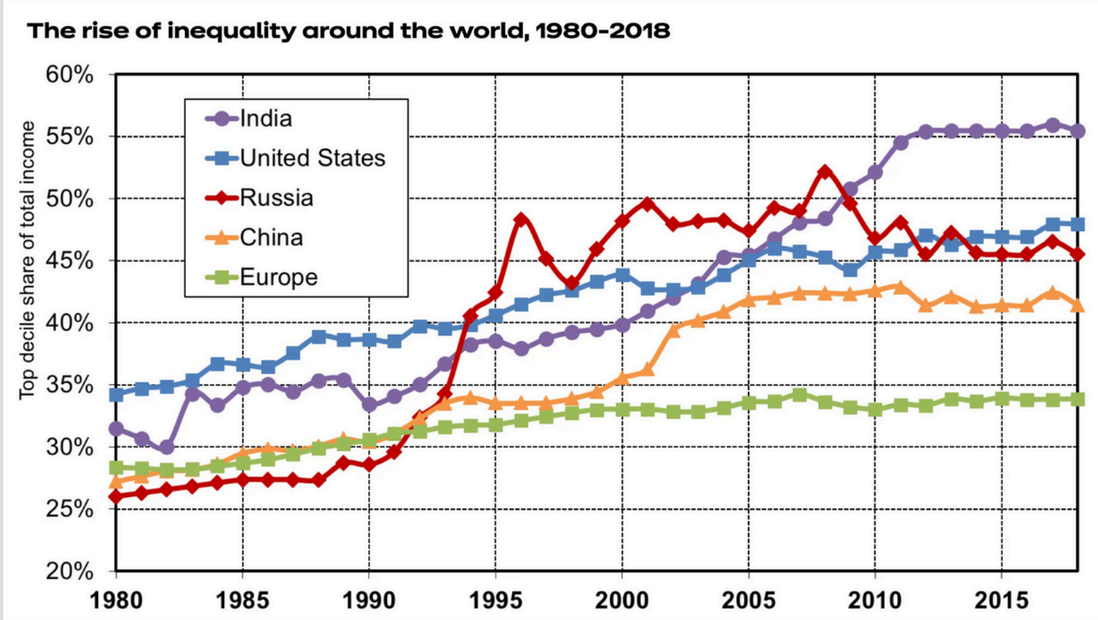
Kuznets Curve & Environmental Kuznets Curve

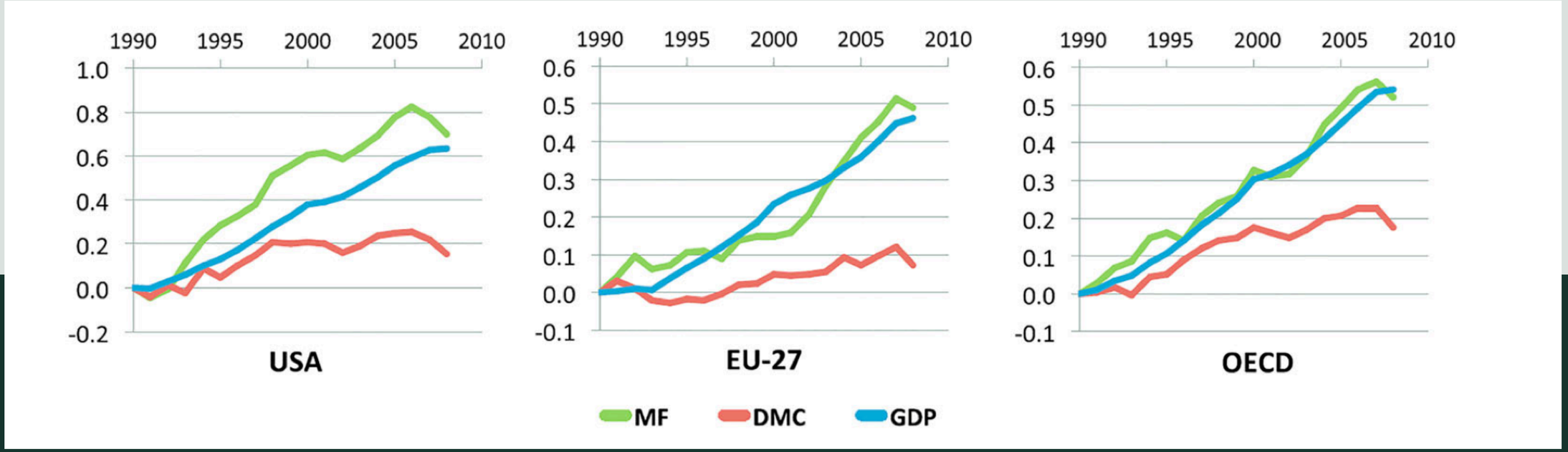
- the idea that as income per capita grows, inequality and environmental degradation rise before reaching a turning point and falling once a country becomes a “developed” country
- if true, this would incentivize governments to have as their goal increasing GDP as a means to reducing inequality and helping the environment, thus making development more sustainable

In reality, inequality is not falling as GDP rises



not just the US → inequality rising globally

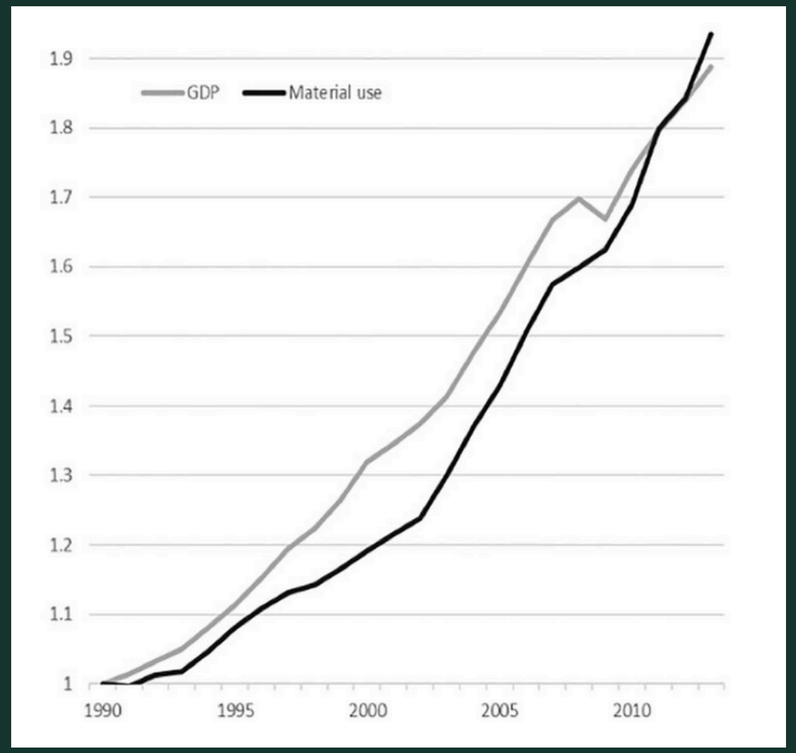




Environmental Kuznets Curve in reality...

- Material footprint (MF) strongly correlated to GDP → economic growth tied to resource use
- Domestic material consumption (DMC) ignores effects of Global North countries outsourcing production

Globally, the same holds true: GDP tied to material use →



Green Growth

- Based on the idea of decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation
- emphasis on increasing productivity by harnessing technology as a way of reducing environmental impact
- this is the strategy represented by many Green New Deals and is the strategy being pushed by most governments and international organizations like the UN and World Bank and IMF



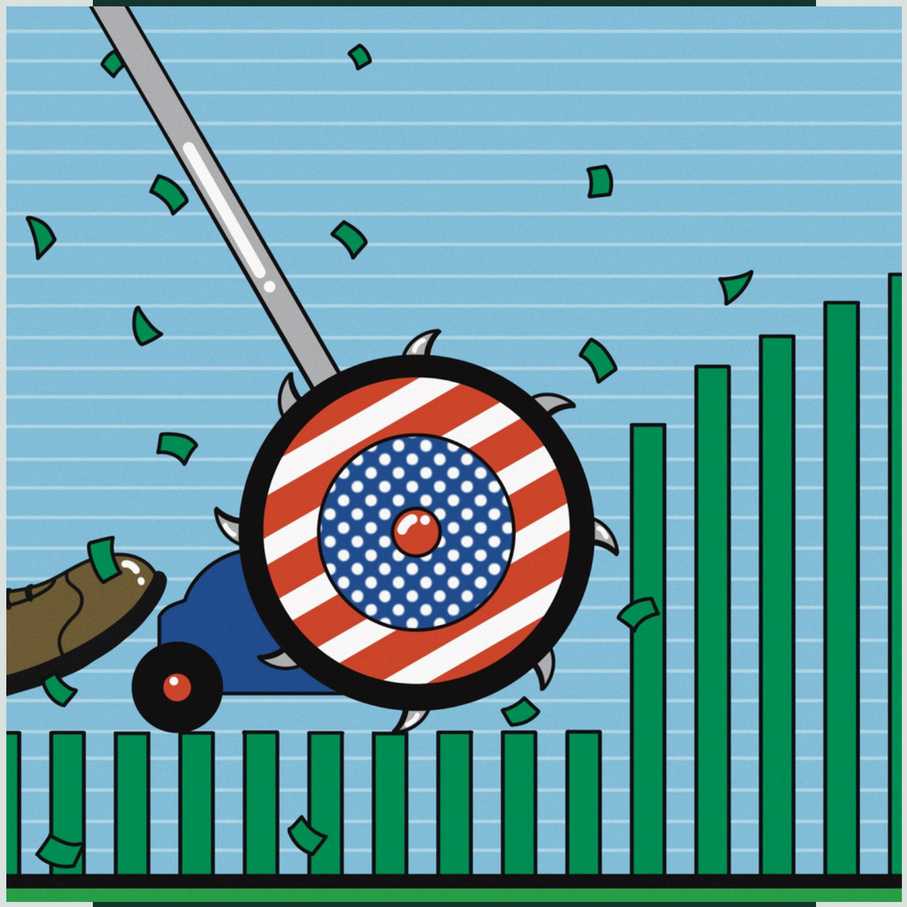
Degrowth Paradigm

Starting point: criticism of the growth paradigm

Same goals as green growth - bring about sustainable development - but completely different means:

- planned reduction of production and consumption
- shift to post-materialist values
- overhaul of the existing capitalist system
- recognizes planetary boundaries

everything is inclusive, democratic, equitable



Critiques / Questions

Growth

- Has it already been shown to not work?
- Is absolute decoupling even possible? Utopian? No evidence of an economy doing it
- Trade-off problem between economic growth and environment
- Is “sustainable development” an oxymoron?
- Is it an escape route for elites?
- Should development even be measured with GDP?
- Global North-South divide (inequality)
- Jevon’s paradox - rebound effect from efficiency improvements

Degrowth

- Is it realistic? Must overcome capitalism (path dependence - entrenched)
- Lack of social and political support
- Without GDP growth, extreme poverty and unemployment may rise
- Still early? Lack of evidence of success - no practical examples and research is normative rather than data-driven
- What about the Global South? Should they pursue degrowth or just developed countries?

Postcolonial and Systems Critiques of Sustainable Development

Critiques target not failure of implementation, but limits of the paradigm itself.

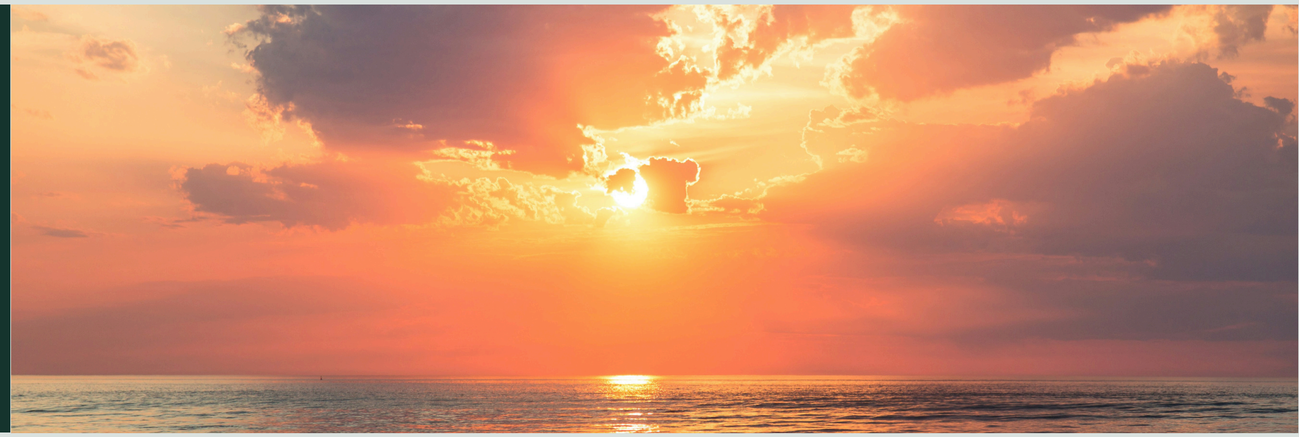
- Eurocentric epistemologies
- Marginalization of Indigenous and non-Western knowledge systems
- Development reduced to measurable outputs
- Universal goals obscure unequal historical responsibility and capacity
- Lacks in addressing historical and ongoing injustices faced by post-colonial societies.
- Limited recognition of Indigenous land rights



What kind of life should development enable, who gets to define it, and how can it be pursued within planetary limits?

Human Flourishing approach

Zwitter et al, 2024



- moves beyond material conditions and **includes non-material dimensions** (e.g. Mental and psychosocial wellbeing, community cohesion, Spiritual and existential meaning)
- **process-oriented development,** rather than goal-oriented
- challenges the SDGs' siloed architecture through **integrated systems thinking**
- **Multi-Level Governance:**
  - Global principles (e.g. dignity, sustainability, justice but
  - Local and meso-level indicator development → **context-sensitive, elevates Indigenous and local epistemologies**
- positions human flourishing as a post-2030 alternative paradigm

Let’s Discuss

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- Kallis, Giorgos & Hickel, Jason (2019): Is Green Growth Possible?, New Political Economy
- https://www.sustainabledevelopmentindex.org/

Proposed Reading:

- Hickel, J. (2019) The contradiction of the sustainable development goals: Growth versus ecology on a finite planet. https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.1947

Conclusion

Sustainable development is contested

- widely accepted and normatively powerful
- increasingly criticized as insufficiently transformative



Succeeded in

- Mainstreaming environmental concerns
- Creating a shared global language
- Institutionalizing long-term thinking

Struggles with

- Structural drivers of inequality and ecological degradation
- Over-reliance on growth and technocratic governance
- Limited incorporation of alternative worldviews