DOI: 10.32559/et.2024.2.3

Réka Csepeli[1]

Abandoning the Obsession of Infinite Growth to Ensure a Sustainable Future in Europe

The issue of the contradiction between sustainability and unlimited economic growth has long been a concern for environmentalists and some economists. However, the approach that interprets and uses the theses laid out in the Club of Rome's Limits to Growth work as a starting point and examines ecological and economic aspects in terms of the necessary paradigm shift is by no means universally accepted.

The best example of this is the European approach that interprets strengthening competitiveness through re-industrialisation and technology-saving solutions. The European Green Deal,[2] launched in 2019 as the EU's growth strategy, carries this contradiction in itself. This package of policy measures, intended to launch the green transition process, aims to lay the foundation for achieving the climate neutrality target set for 2050. This article explores the inherent contradictions between these two paradigms, examining the tensions between economic growth, resource consumption and environmental sustainability. By analysing economic theories, environmental challenges and alternative models, this paper argues that the pursuit of unrestrained economic growth is incompatible with the long-term health of the planet. The article concludes by suggesting pathways toward reconciling economic development with ecological preservation through the adoption of sustainable economic models and systems of environmental governance.

Keywords: competitiveness, European Green Deal, infinite growth, GDP, societal well-being, degrowth, post-growth, sobriety

Introduction

Short term profits versus sustainability. GDP versus well-being. An economic logic based on the principle of unlimited growth within a finite planetary system. Seen from this angle, we must note that the European Green Deal suffers from a lack of coherence and confidence.

---

1 Associate Researcher, EUSTRAT, Ludovika University of Public Service, Eötvös József Research Centre and Researcher and teacher in ecology at Sorbonne University, Paris III.

2 European Commission 2019.

The concept of unlimited economic growth is deeply ingrained in modern capitalist economies, often seen as a hallmark of prosperity and development. However, this notion stands in sharp contrast to the imperative of protecting the environment, especially in the context of global ecological degradation. The strategy that prioritises so-called "green growth" is itself a very controversial approach.[3] The principle of competitiveness and the projection of our environment are fundamentally at odds due to their differing priorities. Competitiveness prioritises economic growth, market efficiency and cost minimisation, often emphasising short-term gains in global markets. In contrast, environmental protection focuses on sustainability, decarbonisation and long-term environmental resilience, which may require costly transitions and restructuring of industries.

The recent *Draghi report*[4] on the future of European competitiveness has sounded the alarm: the EU's economic health is deteriorating, and immediate intervention is needed in order to prevent its "slow agony".

For the exact same reasons, the ongoing Hungarian EU Presidency urges a *competitiveness deal*.[5]

It is therefore more than obvious that competitiveness is identified as the cornerstone for the European Union's survival. Certainly it is. But not at all costs.

Because there is another basic condition for our survival: our environment.

But seen from another angle, we could say that this is an excellent opportunity, and probably our last one, to rethink our concept of economic growth and its limits. Because ultimately beyond political and economic considerations, there is one cause that takes precedence over all others: that of preserving decent living conditions on this planet.

And this is all the more so since the recent *COP 29 agreement,*[6] signed last November in Baku, clearly shows that we are drifting away from the objectives set by the *COP 21 Paris Agreement*[7] and the possibility of limiting the consequences of global warming.

Given the growing resistance to the Green Deal, the fate of Europe's green transition is partly at stake also from a democratic point of view. Yet if there is no longer any democratic support for the Green Deal, it can potentially come to an end – as *Pascal Canfin*, a centrist French MEP[8] recently recalled.

Given this inextricable situation, what could be our options? Should we rethink the Green Deal? Or shouldn't it be more coherent or even the best opportunity to propose a real paradigm shift, such as it was introduced then by the Brundtland report, *Our Common Future* on sustainable development almost forty years ago?[9]

---

3 Bourg et al. 2020.
4 European Commission 2024a.
5 Council of the European Union 2024.
6 United Nations 2024.
7 United Nations 2015.
8 Pascal Canfin served as Chair of the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety during the last term (following his initiative, the European Parliament declared in December 2019 a "*climate state of emergency*" (Simon 2019; Malingre 2024).
9 World Commission on Environment and Development 1987.

In the discourse surrounding global development, the tension between economic growth and environmental protection has become increasingly pronounced. On the one hand, economic growth is considered essential for improving human well-being, reducing poverty and advancing technological innovation. On the other hand, the world's ecosystems are facing unprecedented degradation, driven largely by the very growth mechanisms that are central to modern economies. From climate change and biodiversity loss to resource depletion and pollution, the environmental consequences of unchecked growth are becoming ever more apparent. This paper explores the contradictions between the pursuit of unlimited economic growth and the need to protect the environment, drawing on economic theories, environmental science and case studies to highlight the challenges and propose solutions for reconciling these competing imperatives.

Obviously, we have all recognised for a long time these contradictions. Meanwhile the problem is that we are literally intoxicated by the ideology, even the obsession of growth,[10] and we try to keep it as the very foundation of all our system, which is struggling to maintain prosperity we have known in the past. So we invent, again and again, new, appealing adjectives, such as *inclusive, regenerative* or *green*… and we keep our "good old" growth alive, at a time when everything is calling for sobriety.

For French economist Timothée Parrique (2022), a specialist in degrowth, these ambitions are decoys that divert us from what the real objective should be: to reinvent an economic system based on quality of life, rather than quantitative objectives. According to him, the idea of green growth is based on false hopes, and as such, it provokes dangerous delusions.[11] Mainly because they only take greenhouse gases into account, and ignore other environmental pressures, such as the extraction of materials, the use of water and soil, air and water pollution, ocean acidification, the loss of biodiversity, etc. We should never forget that decarbonising is not enough!

Aware of the seriousness of the situation of our planet, and especially of our living conditions on it, a large number of economists and other thinkers recommend organising a "general slowdown" and reaching "an economic cruising speed compatible with the rhythm of the biosphere, i.e. a global consumption of less than 1 planet".[12]

A real break in our economic logic is therefore necessary. But the Green Deal does not bring about this break. At the same time, it cannot meet the competitiveness challenges set out in the Draghi report. One key area of conflict is in carbon-intensive industries. Competitiveness encourages minimising operational costs to outpace global rivals, but the Green Deal's stringent carbon reduction targets necessitate investment in cleaner technologies, higher operational costs and potential regulatory burdens. This shift risks making European industries less competitive globally, especially against nations with less rigorous environmental standards, such as China, the United States, or the Mercosur countries, with which the EU is signing a free trade agreement that has been under discussion for over twenty years.[13]

---

10 Laurent 2021a.

11 Parrique 2022: 54.

12 Bourg et al. 2020.

13 European Commission 2024b.

The groundbreaking *Limits to Growth* report, published in 1972 by the Club of Rome, exposed clearly the consequences of exponential population and economic growth within a finite planetary system. It warned of potential ecological and societal collapse if growth trends continued unchecked.

The ideology of unlimited economic growth and its limits

More than 50 years after the publication of the also called *Meadows report,* the global obsession with economic growth persists, often overshadowing the warnings of ecological and societal collapse. Despite evidence of resource depletion, climate change and environmental degradation, GDP growth remains the primary metric of national success.[14] This fixation overlooks sustainable alternatives and perpetuates inequality, overconsumption and ecological strain. The inertia of political and corporate systems, combined with short-term economic priorities, fuels this unsustainable trajectory. As climate crises intensify, the unresolved tension between growth and sustainability underscores the urgent need to rethink progress and prioritise planetary health.

Economic growth has been a cornerstone of capitalist ideology since the Industrial Revolution. Growth, in this context, is typically defined as an increase in the production of goods and services, measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The belief that growth leads to greater wealth, improved living standards and increased technological advancement has been central to the policies of governments and international organisations alike. The assumption underlying this ideology is that economic growth is a linear and unending process – an infinite expansion of consumption, production and innovation that will continually enhance human welfare.

However, while economic growth has indeed brought about significant improvements in living standards, it has also led to substantial environmental harm. As the global economy has expanded, so too has the consumption of natural resources, the release of greenhouse gases and the exploitation of ecosystems. The problem, according to environmental economists like Tim Jackson (2009), is that the economic model of infinite growth is fundamentally at odds with the finite nature of the planet's resources. The "iron cage of consumerism" makes us prisoners of the system, while making us believe that we are free and happy; and also that this could last forever.[15] As global GDP continues to rise, so too does the demand for energy, raw materials and land, leading to increasing pressure on ecosystems and biodiversity.

Today, these statements may seem quite obvious to us. However, neither our individual actions nor political decisions follow the logic of the necessary paradigm shift.

14 Laurent 2021a: 5.
15 Jackson 2009: 95.

The obsolescence of GDP as metric of economic well-being

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has been a dominant metric for measuring economic success and national prosperity for over eighty years. GDP was initially formalised by economist Simon Kuznets in the 1930s during the Great Depression, at the request of the U.S. Government. Kuznets created a system to measure national income, providing a snapshot of economic performance. His work was further refined during World War II to aid in resource allocation and planning. In 1944, the Bretton Woods Conference cemented GDP as a key metric for assessing economic output worldwide, replacing earlier measures like Gross National Product (GNP). Over time, GDP became the dominant measure of economic success, influencing policy decisions, economic strategies and global development goals. However, as the global economy and societal priorities have evolved, the limitations of GDP as a comprehensive measure of progress have become increasingly apparent. In recent years, economists, policymakers and researchers have highlighted numerous shortcomings of GDP, particularly its inability to account for environmental degradation, social inequality and overall human well-being.

But how can we continue to believe that an almost hundred years old metric could still remain a cornerstone in a completely different environmental and geopolitical world? We have to move beyond GDP as the primary indicator of economic success, arguing that it has become obsolete in addressing the complexities and values of the 21st century.

One of the fundamental issues with GDP is its narrow focus on market transactions as indicators of value. GDP measures the monetary value of all finished goods and services produced within a country's borders, yet it excludes critical aspects of economic and social health.[16] For instance, GDP ignores the value of unpaid labour, such as caregiving and volunteer work, which are essential for social cohesion and well-being. Moreover, GDP fails to distinguish between economic activities that enhance quality of life and those that detract from it. Activities that harm environmental and social stability, such as deforestation or excessive fossil fuel extraction, still contribute to GDP growth, despite their detrimental long-term impacts.

Additionally, GDP does not account for income distribution within a population. GDP per capita is often used to imply an average prosperity level, but it conceals disparities in wealth and income distribution that affect societal welfare. Rising GDP can coexist with growing inequality, where wealth accumulates in the hands of a few while the majority experiences stagnant or declining living standards. This disconnection has fuelled social unrest and hindered sustainable development, suggesting that GDP is not a suitable proxy for general prosperity or economic inclusivity.

Furthermore, GDP does not differentiate between the desirable and the harmful. We see all the absurdity of an economy that seeks to make everything grow indiscriminately. French economist, Eloi Laurent wrote a book entitled *Et si la santé guidait le monde?* [And What If Health Guided the World?], explaining that the goal of a health system should be *health,* not drug sales.[17] The same goes for the economy: the goal should be *well-being,* not the sale of goods and services.

---

16 Pottier 2021.

17 Laurent 2021b: 23.

Environmental sustainability further underscores the limitations of GDP as an indicator. The pursuit of GDP growth has often driven unsustainable resource exploitation, contributing to climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. Since GDP does not deduct environmental costs or depletion of natural capital, it paints an incomplete picture of progress, where short-term economic gains mask long-term environmental degradation. As climate change escalates and resource scarcity becomes a pressing concern, ignoring these externalities in national accounting appears increasingly short-sighted and counterproductive.

In other words, GDP is an indicator of monetary activity, which measures only a small part of a much larger social and environmental economy. A rising GDP is perfectly compatible with a social recession (unemployment, poverty, inequality or insecurity) and an environmental crisis.

Questioning GDP as an adequate measure of societal well-being

In February 2008, the President of the French Republic, Nicolas Sarkozy, unsatisfied with the present state of statistical information about the economy and the society, asked the Nobel prized Professor Joseph E. Stiglitz to create a Commission, called the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress.[18]

In its report, the Commission states: "Indeed, for a long time there have been concerns about the adequacy of current measures of economic performance, in particular those solely based on GDP. Besides, there are even broader concerns about the relevance of these figures as measures of societal well-being. To focus specifically on the enhancement of inanimate objects of convenience (for example in the GNP or GDP which have been the focus of a myriad of economic studies of progress), could be ultimately justified – to the extent it could be – only through what these objects do to the human lives they can directly or indirectly influence. Moreover, it has long been clear that GDP is an inadequate metric to gauge well-being over time particularly in its economic, environmental, and social dimensions, some aspects of which are often referred to as sustainability."[19]

The Commission's Report claims that "the time is ripe for our measurement system to shift emphasis from measuring economic production to measuring people's well-being. And measures of well-being should be put in a context of sustainability. Despite deficiencies in our measures of production, we know much more about them than about well-being."

However, this is not to completely reject GDP as an indicator, explaining that it continues to "provide answers to many important questions such as monitoring economic activity".[20] This is therefore about "changing emphasis".

In line with the explicit Stiglitz–Sen–Fitoussi Commission report, the OECD launched the "Better Life" initiative in February 2011.[21] However, the subjective dimen-

[18] Stiglitz et al. 2009.
[19] Stiglitz et al. 2009: 8.
[20] Stiglitz et al. 2009: 12
[21] OECD 2011.

sions of quality of life make this indicator somewhat dependent on the political and social context of each country.

In these cases, it is more of an adjustment than a radical and total challenge to GDP.

Proposal of alternative indicators

In response to these criticisms, several alternative metrics have been proposed, including the *Genuine Progress Indicator* (GPI), *Human Development Index* (HDI) and the *Happiness Index*. These indicators seek to measure economic and social well-being more holistically, accounting for factors such as income distribution, environmental health, education and subjective measures of happiness. Many of these metrics have demonstrated strong correlations with positive societal outcomes, indicating that they may be more effective than GDP in promoting sustainable and equitable development.

Despite the availability of alternative indicators, challenges remain in shifting global focus away from GDP. The simplicity, historical precedent and widespread adoption of GDP make it a deeply ingrained standard. However, the need for a more nuanced approach to economic measurement is becoming urgent. The Covid–19 pandemic has underscored the fragility of systems built around GDP growth, revealing vulnerabilities in public health infrastructure, income security and social resilience. These developments have intensified calls for an economic paradigm that prioritises resilience, equity and environmental sustainability over sheer output.

In conclusion, while GDP has served as a convenient and influential measure of economic performance, it no longer aligns with the priorities and challenges facing contemporary societies. Its limitations in capturing social equity, environmental health and overall well-being render it insufficient for guiding policies aimed at sustainable and inclusive growth. Transitioning to more comprehensive indicators can help reshape our economic priorities, promoting an economic model that values human and environmental capital alongside traditional market productivity. Embracing a post-GDP framework represents an essential step toward achieving a more balanced and future-oriented understanding of economic success, one that addresses the complexities of human needs and ecological boundaries in the 21st century.

The ecological limits to growth

The concept of ecological limits is grounded in the recognition that the Earth's natural systems are finite. Natural resources such as fossil fuels, fresh water, arable land and mineral deposits are not limitless; they can be depleted or degraded beyond the point of recovery. Similarly, the Earth's capacity to absorb pollutants and waste, including carbon emissions, is also finite. As economic activity intensifies, these limits are increasingly tested, leading to environmental crises.

The foundational work of the Club of Rome's "Limits to Growth" (1972) highlighted the risks of pursuing unlimited growth in a world with finite resources. The report used computer modelling to project future scenarios based on various patterns of resource use and environmental degradation. The findings were stark: if current trends of population growth, industrialisation, pollution and resource depletion continued, the world would face significant ecological and economic collapse by the mid-21st century. While some critics of the report have questioned its models, the underlying concern – namely, that the Earth's ecosystems cannot sustain endless growth – remains relevant today.

A core element of this contradiction is the environmental impact of resource extraction. The quest for growth often leads to the exploitation of non-renewable resources such as fossil fuels and minerals, as well as the overexploitation of renewable resources like forests and fisheries. The increasing carbon emissions associated with fossil fuel use have led to climate change, which threatens to destabilise ecosystems and human societies alike. Similarly, agricultural expansion to meet the needs of growing populations has led to widespread deforestation and the loss of biodiversity, which undermines the resilience of ecosystems.

The social impact or the unequal distribution of growth's costs

Another significant contradiction between economic growth and environmental protection lies in the unequal distribution of the costs of growth. While some regions of the world have benefited immensely from economic expansion, others – particularly in the Global South – have borne the brunt of environmental degradation. For example, low-income countries often bear the environmental costs of industrial production, resource extraction and waste disposal, despite having contributed little to the global emissions that cause climate change.

Moreover, economic growth often exacerbates social inequality. The benefits of growth tend to be unevenly distributed, with wealth concentrated in the hands of a few while vast portions of the population remain in poverty. This inequality is both a cause and a consequence of environmental harm: poorer communities are more likely to suffer from pollution, deforestation and climate change, while wealthier countries and corporations often externalise the environmental costs of their growth. The result is a global system in which the most vulnerable are the least responsible for ecological degradation, yet bear the greatest burdens.

The EU Green Deal's search for solutions and its internal contradictions

The European Union Green Deal is an ambitious roadmap to transform Europe into a climate-neutral continent by 2050, fostering sustainability while driving economic growth.

Central to the Green Deal is the goal to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels. This includes a transition to renewable energy, energy efficiency improvements and promoting circular economies. Key initiatives include the "Fit for 55" package, aiming to align EU policies with climate targets, and the

Just Transition Mechanism, ensuring support for regions and sectors most affected by the transition.

The Deal also focuses on biodiversity restoration, sustainable agriculture through the Farm to Fork strategy, and reducing waste and pollution. It promotes green innovation and infrastructure investment, creating opportunities for jobs and economic resilience.

Funding comes from the EU budget, public–private partnerships, and the European Green Deal Investment Plan, targeting €1 trillion over a decade. By aligning environmental, economic and social priorities, the Green Deal positions the EU as a global leader in sustainable development, demonstrating that economic growth can coexist with environmental stewardship.

Furthermore, the emphasis of the Green Deal on reducing emissions and promoting circular economies can challenge industries reliant on traditional supply chains and high resource consumption. According to its objectives, policies like carbon pricing and emissions trading schemes can impose added financial pressure, deterring investment or leading businesses to relocate production outside the EU – a phenomenon known as "carbon leakage".

To reconcile these principles, the EU must pursue innovation-driven competitiveness. Subsidies for green technologies, investment in renewable energy, and fostering a green industrial base could transform sustainability into a competitive advantage, aligning short-term economic interests with long-term environmental goals.

This was the EU's initial project. The Green Deal programs promised to tackle climate change while advancing social justice through state-led decarbonisation efforts, while maintaining the competitiveness of the European economy, notably through the massive development of innovation. Meanwhile, it must be stated that today, the Green Deal seems to be getting overlooked. Here we attempt a brief explanation of this situation.

The easiest explanation is that implementing the Green Deal faces significant challenges despite its ambitious goals. Financial constraints are a primary hurdle, with the estimated €1 trillion investment requiring substantial contributions from Member States, private investors and the EU budget. Political divisions within the bloc complicate consensus on key measures, as Member States differ in economic capacities and reliance on fossil fuels. Transitioning industries face resistance due to fears of job losses, especially in coal-dependent regions. Additionally, ensuring a just transition while maintaining global competitiveness demands careful policy design. External pressures, such as reliance on energy imports and global supply chain disruptions, add complexity.

At the same time, several economists explain this critical situation by the intrinsic contradictions of the Green Deal, advocating compatibility between sustainability and economic growth.

The internal contradictions of the Green Deal are becoming more and more pronounced, as it is regularly attacked on all sides. At the beginning of 2024, as the European Commission prepared a new 2040 CO_2 emissions reduction target,[22] its Green Deal was undergoing a major test: farmers, industrialists, public opinion and even governments were questioning it and calling for a "regulatory pause". And this situation has continued ever since.

22 European Commission 2024c.

STUDY

Furthermore, lately, the EU's Green Deal seems to be relegated to a second place, put in parentheses in some way in the political agenda. Moreover: for several political parties, such as Germany's AFD[23] and the French National Rally,[24] questioning the Green Deal becomes one of the pillars of their strategy. Let me mention, however, that this political trend is by no means driven by the above-mentioned contradictions in relation to environmental protection. However, the analysis of such policies is not closely related to the subject at hand.

To sum it up in a few words, we could say that the Green Deal either goes too far (from the point of view of competitiveness ambitions), or not far enough (from the point of view of degrowth advocates).

From the first point of view, it goes too far, slowing down the performance of European industries. While from the other point of view, it does not sufficiently call into question the necessary break that Western societies absolutely must make with consumerism and productivism.

In short, he disappoints both opposing parties.

Alternative models of economic development

Given the contradictions between economic growth and environmental sustainability, alternative models of economic development have gained increasing attention.

Degrowth

One such model is the concept of *degrowth,* which calls for a deliberate reduction in economic activity in the pursuit of ecological sustainability, social equity and well-being.

Degrowth is, first of all, a reduction in production and consumption to lighten our environmental footprint. It would be planned democratically, in a spirit of social justice, and with concern for well-being. It is a kind of great macroeconomic regime to allow countries in environmental excess (mainly rich countries) to return below a sustainable threshold.[25]

Degrowth proponents argue that the obsession with GDP growth has led to a focus on quantity rather than quality of life, and that human flourishing is better achieved through a reorientation of priorities toward sustainability, social justice and community well-being.[26] Rather than seeking perpetual growth, degrowth advocates call for a redefinition of prosperity that emphasises environmental stewardship, reduced consumption and the redistribution of resources.[27]

23 Mennerat 2025.
24 Bourgery-Gonse 2025.
25 Parrique 2022.
26 Kallis 2011.
27 Latouche 2024; Parrique 2022.

Degrowth – the planned and democratic reduction of production and consumption as a solution to the social-ecological crises – is slowly making its way to the sphere of policy-making.

We often distinguish two projects attached to the concept of degrowth: the transition to a smaller and slower economy – *degrowth* strictly speaking; and the maintenance of this steady state over the long term – *aftergrowth*.

Because of its negative connotation, degrowth is often seen by many as a too radical option.

Post-growth

The more visionary *post-growth project* is to imagine a system that could make us prosper without growth. That is to say, to find a stationary economy, in harmony with nature, which guarantees our well-being whilst respecting planetary limits; where decisions are made together and wealth is equitably shared.

A profound ideological revolution underlies such projects: individualism would be traded for sharing and solidarity, predation for togetherness, the obsession with work and performance for well-being and hedonism.

Post-growth is a stance on economic growth concerning the limits-to-growth dilemma. It acknowledges that economic growth can generate beneficial effects up to a point, but beyond that point[28] it is necessary to look for other indicators and techniques to increase human well-being.

Steady-state economics

A third model is *steady-state economics,* which proposes a stable, non-growing economy that operates within the planet's ecological limits. Unlike the growth-driven capitalist model, a steady-state economy seeks to balance production and consumption with the regenerative capacity of natural systems. Advocates of steady-state economics, such as Herman Edward Daly (1996), argue that continued economic expansion is not only environmentally unsustainable but also unnecessary for human well-being. Instead, a steady-state economy would prioritise quality of life, equitable distribution and environmental protection.

Sobriety

Sobriety does not contradict hedonism.[29] The major diseases of developed countries – such as burnout, obesity, suicides, depression, loneliness – reveal a lack of meaning and a lack

[28] Wilkinson–Pickett 2010.

[29] Rabhi 2013: 8

of time. Sociologist Hartmut Rosa,[30] as well as South Korean born philosopher Byung-Chul Han[31] tell us that capitalism and the pursuit of growth create a vicious cycle of acceleration that ends up tearing us apart from the things that really matter to us.

The fundamental problem is that our obsession with economic growth makes us forget that the first ecological measure consists of consuming less.[32]

We need an "alternative hedonism":[33] one which would be centred on being, rather than having. "Less goods, more connections" was one of the first slogans of the degrowth movement.[34]

Another model could be the *circular economy,* which seeks to decouple economic activity from resource consumption and environmental impact. In a circular economy, products and materials are designed for reuse, recycling and regeneration, reducing the need for new raw materials and minimising waste. The transition to a circular economy would require significant changes in production processes, business models and consumption patterns. However, proponents argue that it is possible to achieve economic development while reducing environmental harm by focusing on efficiency, innovation and sustainability.

Meanwhile, degrowth proponents argue that recycling makes also part of those other false hopes which, we forget, consume energy, and above all, make us waste time.[35]

Conclusions

Our initial question was whether Growth and Sustainability were somehow reconcilable or is it an impossible equation?

Our analysis sought to demonstrate that there is a clear incompatibility between unlimited growth and sustainability, and that we must necessarily adapt our future strategy in both fields.

And this questioning of both sides goes much further than the confrontation of two economic approaches to the world. Being the roadmap of the European Union, these increasingly pronounced voices shake the very foundations of its global strategy. Which clearly means a further weakening of Europe on the international scene. Today, the European Green Deal is being questioned from all sides. The real question is what future can we draw in an already weakened geopolitical and economic situation?

Today the European Union's response to the growing challenges such as climate change, artificial intelligence and geopolitical tensions is the Competitiveness Compass.[36] In light of all that we have stated above, this "answer" seems neither coherent nor adequate.

30 Rosa 2010.
31 Han 2015.
32 Rabhi 2013.
33 Soper 2020.
34 Latouche 2024.
35 Parrique 2022: 84.
36 European Commission 2025.

We must protect the Europe we want. At the time of its creation, the EU's fundamental values were prosperity, democracy, freedom, equity, peace and sustainable environment. The EU exists to ensure that Europeans can benefit from these fundamental rights. Meanwhile the new geo-strategical situation and the exponential degradation of the environment force us to rethink our fundamental strategies. We are facing an existential challenge now, as, eventually, we will be forced to choose between prosperity and environment.

The contradictions between unlimited economic growth and environmental protection are undeniable. The idea that the global economy can continue to expand indefinitely on a finite planet is fundamentally flawed, and the environmental consequences of unchecked growth are becoming increasingly apparent. The pursuit of perpetual growth leads to resource depletion, environmental degradation and exacerbates social inequalities, all of which undermine the long-term sustainability of human societies.

We must be aware individually as well as collectively that to resolve this contradiction, it is crucial to rethink the very foundations of economic development. Living without economic growth requires a total restructuring of the production apparatus, as well as strengthened democratic institutions to ensure the protection of citizens, the public good, common goods and civil liberties. Sustainable economic models, such as post-growth and steady-state economics, offer promising alternatives that prioritise environmental sustainability, social equity and human well-being over unending material expansion.

The transition to these new models will require systemic changes in political, economic and social structures, including the redesign of production and consumption systems, the implementation of progressive environmental policies and the fostering of a cultural shift away from consumerism. While the challenges are significant, the potential benefits of reconciling economic development with ecological protection are vast, offering the possibility of a more just, resilient and sustainable world for future generations.

We have seen that many voices are therefore raised to speak of the obsolescence of GDP as a main indicator nowadays. However, it is clear that neither political strategy nor the mainstream economic decisions go far enough for the moment to provide a coherent response to these major contradictions, yet recognised and highlighted by many. Meanwhile, a radical break with our mainstream economic system seems necessary in order to ensure effective protection of the environment. Or to put it more clearly: from the point of view of coherence, this necessary radical break represents the only real way to ensure this protection in the medium and long terms.

References

Bourg, Dominique – Chapelle, Gauthier – Chapoutot, Johann – Desbrosses, Philippe – Lanata, Xavier R. – Swaton, Sophie (2020): *Retour sur Terre. 35 propositions* [Return to Earth. 35 Propositions]. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

STUDY

Bourgery-Gonse, Théo (2025): L'extrême droite européenne s'unit derrière Jordan Bardella pour torpiller le Green Deal [Europe's Far Right Unites Behind Jordan Bardella to Torpedo the Green Deal]. *Euractiv,* 30 January 2025. Online: www.euractiv.fr/section/institutions/news/lextreme-droite-europeenne-sunit-derriere-jordan-bardella-pour-torpiller-le-green-deal/

Council of the European Union (2024): Budapest Declaration on the New European Competitiveness Deal. *Press Release,* 8 November 2024. Online: www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/11/08/the-budapest-declaration/

Daly, Herman E. (1996): *Beyond Growth. The Economics of Sustainable Development.* Boston: Beacon Press.

European Commission (2019): *The European Green Deal. Striving to Be the first Climate Neutral Continent.* Online: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en

European Commission (2024a): *The Future of European Competitiveness.* Report by Mario Draghi. Online: https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/draghi-report_en

European Commission (2024b): *Questions and Answers on the EU–Mercosur Partnership Agreement.* Online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_24_6245

European Commission (2024c): *2040 Climate Target. Reducing Net Emissions by 90% by 2040.* Online: https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/climate-strategies-targets/2040-climate-target_en

European Commission (2025): *Strengthening European Competitiveness.* Online: https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness_en

Han, Byung-Chul (2015): *The Burnout Society.* Redwood: Stanford University Press.

Kallis, Giorgos (2011): In Defence of Degrowth. *Ecological Economics,* 70(5), 873–880. Online: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2010.12.007

Jackson, Tim (2009): *Prosperity without Growth. Economics for a Finite Planet.* London: Routledge. Online: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781849774338

Jackson, Tim (2016): *Prosperity without Growth. Foundations for the Economy of Tomorrow.* London: Routledge. Online: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315677453

Meadows, Donella – Meadows, Dennis – Randers, Jørgen – Behrens III, William W. (1972): *The Limits to Growth.* New York: Universe Books.

Latouche, Serge (2024): *Décroissance* [Degrowth]. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France – Que sais-je.

Latour, Bruno (2017): *Où atterrir? Comment s'orienter en politique* [Where to Land? How to Navigate in Politics]. Paris: La Découverte.

Laurent, Eloi (2021a): *Sortir de la croissance* [Get Out of Growth]. Paris: Les liens qui libèrent.

Laurent, Eloi (2021b): *Et si la santé guidait le monde?* [And What If Health Guided the World?] Paris: Les liens qui libèrent.

Malingre, Virginie (2024): Europe's Green Deal Is Attacked on All Sides. *Le Monde,* 29 January 2024. Online: www.lemonde.fr/en/environment/article/2024/01/29/europe-s-green-deal-is-attacked-on-all-sides_6474382_114.html

Mennerat, Pierre (2025): Qui est Alice Weidel? L'AfD et la disruption de l'extrême-droite allemande en 10 phrases clefs [Who Is Alice Weidel? The AfD and the Disruption of the German Far Right in 10 Key Phrases]. *Le Grand Continent,* 22 February 2025. Online: https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2025/02/22/qui-est-alice-weidel-lafd-et-la-disruption-de-lextreme-droite-allemande-en-10-phrases/

OECD (2011): *Better Life Index.* Online: www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/#/11111111111

Parrique, Timothée (2022): *Ralentir ou périr. L'économie de la décroissance* [Slow Down or Perish. The Economics of Degrowth]. Paris: Points.

Pottier, Jean-Marie (2021): Sortir de la croissance, viser le bien-être. Entretien avec Éloi Laurent [Moving Away from Growth and Towards Well-Being. Interview with Éloi Laurent]. *Sciences Humaines,* 1 December 2021. Online: www.scienceshumaines.com/sortir-de-la-croissance-viser-le-bien-etre-entretien-avec-eloi-laurent_fr_44042.html

Rabhi, Pierre (2013): *Vers la sobriété heureuse* [Towards Happy Sobriety]. Actes Sud.

Rosa, Hartmut (2010): *Alienation and Acceleration. Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality.* NSU Press.

Simon, Frédéric (2019): European Parliament Declares Climate Emergency. *Euractiv,* 28 November 2019. Online: www.euractiv.com/section/climate-environment/news/european-parliament-declares-climate-emergency/

Soper, Kate (2020): *Post-Growth Living. For an Alternative Hedonism.* London – New York: Verso.

Stiglitz, Joseph E. – Sen, Amartya Kumar – Fitoussi, Jean-Paul (2009): *Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress.* Online: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/8131721/8131772/Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi-Commission-report.pdf

United Nations (2015): The Paris Agreement. Online: https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement

United Nations (2024): *Outcomes of the Baku Climate Change Conference – Advance Unedited Versions (AUVs).* Online: https://unfccc.int/cop29/auvs

Wilkinson, Richard – Pickett, Kate (2010): *The Spirit Level. Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better.* London: Penguin.

World Commission on Environment and Development (1987): *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future.* Online: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf