There is growing consensus among many policymakers, institutions and movements that gross domestic product (GDP) is not fit for purpose as the pre-eminent economic metric. Alternatives are urgently needed to facilitate the transition to a new economic model that supports a radically more equal, kinder, greener and feminist world in the present, while offering redress for historical damage and inequalities. However, despite growing experimentation, most efforts are insufficiently bold and remain mostly on paper, with only a few notable but relatively small-scale and still-developing exceptions. To dismantle GDP, different social movements will need to coalesce around key metrics that prioritize far greater equality, and align with feminist and decolonial values while challenging the systems of power and narratives that are holding GDP in its dominant place. Only in this way are alternatives likely to deliver the economic transformation needed to put people and planet first.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our economies are broken. Inequality is rife; climate change and ecological destruction continue on a dangerous and untenable path; the undervaluing of the care economy pushes women deeper into time and income poverty; hunger and food insecurity are on the rise; and violent conflict is increasing. These crises are driven by an extractive, profit-driven and neocolonial economic system that delivers ever-greater profits and capital for the owners of wealth, while systematically exploiting workers and people living in poverty, particularly people in marginalized communities. It is also a system built on exploiting and neglecting nature and carers, making them invisible and ignoring their role in sustaining our economies.

A core feature of this economic system is its focus on gross domestic product (GDP) as the primary indicator of economic and social progress. GDP is the signifier for a pervasive narrative that unlimited, unquestioned GDP growth is the key to achieving other political goals, such as greater equality, wellbeing and an end to poverty. Through such myths, GDP has moved from being an instrument and indicator of some limited value to being a goal in itself. GDP growth can take place in a manner that is inclusive and that tackles inequality, but as a metric, GDP on its own has no way of examining what is being produced, how it is being produced, and who it benefits.

Moving beyond GDP is both a call to abandon a dysfunctional economic indicator as a guiding metric for policy and a broader invitation to think about living in an economy that focuses on social prosperity – and on a liveable planet – rather than pursuing GDP growth for its own sake. This requires metrics that can serve as a compass to tell us where to go, how we are progressing, and how well different policies will serve us in getting there. Importantly, it requires centring Indigenous knowledge systems and values, and the voices, solutions, and perspectives of feminist and decolonial thinkers from the Global South.

Movements and thinkers from the Global South have been calling for radical alternatives for years, and there is increasing public support in high-income countries to move beyond GDP. Polling carried out by the Women’s Budget Group found that almost 7 out of 10 people say that wellbeing should be used to measure the success of economic policy.

WHAT’S WRONG WITH GDP?

GDP was created in the Global North in the 1930s as a measure of economic growth and activity, yet it has become the yardstick against which all economic progress is measured. Its limited focus reflects the narrow-minded, Eurocentric and outdated framing that shaped its creation. It is high time for a reboot that reflects the reality and the needs of society today.

While GDP per capita has been steadily rising globally, so has inequality. Between 1995 and 2021, the richest 1% captured 38% of all new wealth created in the world, and the poorest 50% just 2% of all new wealth created. This incredibly unequal and unfair distribution, and its negative effect on wellbeing, is not reflected in GDP and is often presented as an ‘inevitable’ stage of GDP growth.

The suggestion that the world can grow its way out of inequality is environmentally disastrous. Even just to lift the majority of humanity above the levels of extreme poverty, with inequality at its current level, would involve our global economy being many times the size it is today – something that would destroy our planet. But planetary boundaries are not taken into account: the global economy is overshooting six of nine boundaries identified by the Stockholm Resilience Centre.
almost entirely driven by high-income countries where GDP growth has rapidly increased resource use to four times sustainable per capita levels.

At the same time, inequality drives the climate crisis: the world’s richest 1% have a per-capita carbon footprint 30 times higher than the level compatible with the 1.5°C Paris Agreement goal.7 The poorest 50% have a far smaller footprint, while suffering the worst of the consequences of climate change.

Nevertheless, GDP ignores harm to the environment, such as the impacts of economic activity on climate change, land and biodiversity. After centuries of causing harm through colonialism, the excess emissions of high-income industrialized countries are continuing those harms, while vulnerable countries and communities bear the brunt of climate change.

GDP measures the value added of goods and services produced and traded in the marketplace, but it ignores crucial areas of our economies. It largely ignores unpaid care, and some elements of informal work,8,9 which is done disproportionately by women, especially those living in poverty and from groups that experience discrimination based on race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality and caste.

Women and men do 16.4 billion hours of unpaid care work a day.10 Around 76% of this is undertaken by women,11 with 606 million women of working age performing unpaid care on a full-time basis.12 The invisibility of care work in the formal economy has led to it acting as a hidden subsidy to the market economy. Of the total number of hours worked weekly around the world, 45% are in unpaid care work,13 with its contributions excluded from GDP calculations. From a gender perspective, this means that 65% of women’s working hours overall are unpaid and do not contribute towards GDP.

Care activities and ecosystems only become valuable (and counted in GDP) when they are resources that can be owned, controlled and sold; for example, both extractive and reparatory environmental activities are counted as positive contributions to GDP, but maintenance and preservation beyond the market economy do not count.

GDP also does not accurately capture whether what is being produced is done so legally or illegally, nor where growth takes place, as in the case of illicit financial flows to tax havens. In 2020, the Tax Justice Network calculated that the Netherlands and Luxembourg were responsible for more than US$36bn and US$27bn respectively of tax losses for countries around the world.14

GDP is anti-feminist and colonial because it sustains a framework of value creation and productivity that only counts what can be monetized. Market relations are given precedence over family and social relations, individualism over solidarity and interdependence, rational choice over wellbeing. Women are rendered to the ‘private’ sphere and their work is invisible. At the same time, GDP has helped erase Indigenous and alternative conceptions of what can and should be valued.
What's wrong with GDP?

**As a measure of the economy, there's a lot GDP misses**

- **What GDP captures**
  - Formal & informal economy
  - Contribution of unpaid care
  - Contribution of environment and ecological systems

- **What GDP misses**
  - Formal & informal economy
  - Contribution of unpaid care work
  - Contribution of environment and ecological systems

**And for the part of the economy GDP captures, it tells us nothing about quality**

**GDP only focuses on size, which means it doesn't look at how it harms or benefits people & the planet**

- Distribution and inequality
- Environmental impact
- Impact of economic activity on wellbeing & social prosperity

Decisions about the economy should be guided by a metric that looks at the whole picture and measures what matters.

Illustration by Alex Bush
WHO PAYS THE PRICE FOR OUR FIXATION ON GDP?

Economic policies based on the neoliberal,15 patriarchal16 logic of GDP growth have disproportionately harmed women, girls and non-binary people, especially those who experience intersecting inequalities, while benefiting the richest. Austerity measures, trade liberalization and the lack of universal care policy coverage are just three examples of GDP-growth focused policies that have had devastating consequences for women and marginalized groups.

The current neoliberal and neocolonial17 model is rooted in the colonial practices of resource extraction, export-oriented production systems, and the imposition of Western economic logic, which has destroyed ecosystems, undermined indigenous knowledge systems, and displaced communities across the world. This has directly increased food and water insecurity, poverty and vulnerability to climate change.

For example, in Gambia and Ghana, which have a rich history of producing rice, yams and other staple foods, colonial era concentration on cash crops such as groundnuts and cocoa led to famine, chronic food shortages, malnourishment, and dependency on European colonizers for imports.18

REIMAGINING A METRIC THAT MATTERS AND WORKS FOR ALL

Many alternatives to GDP have been designed, but there is limited progress towards dislodging it as the dominant metric, in part due to its ‘single indicator appeal’. Perhaps more significantly, governments and the private sector elites have a vested interest in GDP, as they benefit from an economy that is focused on its unquestioned growth.

Although many of the existing beyond GDP efforts are welcome signs of progress, they barely challenge the current focus on GDP, and do not have the scale, quality and ambition to forge a radical alternative. Very few GDP alternative frameworks are explicitly feminist or decolonial.

A feminist, decolonial approach and mindset to GDP alternatives would put much more emphasis on the importance of community, social relationships and the environment.19 This is vital to reverse the erasure of non-Western knowledge systems through the imposition of Western, patriarchal and neoliberal GDP logic.

Winning public and political acceptance for a metric, without it being another neocolonial imposition, depends on the inclusivity of the process through which it is developed. Indicators reflecting Indigenous knowledge and perspectives need to be centred in the design, implementation and review of the measure. These need to be rooted in a recognition and acceptance of – and commitment to repair – the damages caused by colonialism and economic imperialism.

Decolonial beyond GDP alternatives would factor in ‘wellbeing elsewhere’ – i.e. the positive or negative contribution of a country’s decisions, policies and resource use on equality, social
prosperity and sustainability in other countries. For example, a metric could include indicators that look at cumulative national carbon emissions to give a sense of a country’s responsibility for historical emissions (in its own territories and elsewhere), along with losses and damages incurred globally. This information could be key for supporting calls for climate reparations.

GDP alternatives need to capture evidence from the entire economy, both paid and unpaid. Importantly, they need to measure unpaid care (which is disproportionately carried out by women), its distribution (within and between households, the state, the market and public sector), and how it is impacted by macroeconomic policies.

Whatever the measure that takes us beyond GDP, the distribution of national income would need to supersede any focus on simple averages, including at the household level. Inequality, and reducing the gap between the richest people and those living in poverty, should be hardwired into how we measure progress in our societies. The Palma ratio, for example, is an important indicator to highlight levels of inequality, by showing the differences between the highest and lowest income brackets.

Beyond GDP frameworks need to ensure that they support transformative work that radically shifts our economic model towards one that puts human and environmental prosperity first. This does not mean that growth is irrelevant; in fact, for most countries, there is an urgent need to grow the incomes of the majority of people and the revenues of governments to facilitate human and environmental prosperity. The key point is that narrowly defined growth is not an end in itself and should never be a government’s primary objective or end goal.

WHAT IS HOLDING BACK PROGRESS?

A significant factor that holds GDP in place as the dominant global metric is its entrenchment in national, regional and global institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Commission (EC), as well as formal frameworks such as the System of National Accounts. GDP is seen as a measure of a country’s economic power, with important consequences for: borrowing capacity; access to international markets and foreign aid; voting rights in multilateral institutions; leverage in trade negotiations; and the measurement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

As a result of its entrenchment, the objective of GDP growth is deeply engrained in narratives and culture around the globe that perpetuate the view that the monetized/market economy is what matters, and so the only activities that count are those that produce monetary value or can be priced. This is also an outdated reflection of what mattered or was valued by the original designers of GDP.

Additionally, many rich elites and corporations have reasons to prefer keeping GDP as the primary guiding metric for economic policy. Were it to be displaced by measures that take into account social prosperity, inequality and the environment, the resulting shift away from policies that prioritize growth at all costs, and towards a more just and sustainable economy, would limit their power and their profits.

Many organizations, experts and activists that have been at the forefront of the beyond GDP movement self-critically claim that the reason there has not been large-scale progress is the lack of a common language and shared ground on methodology. As previously noted, GDP also has a ‘single indicator appeal’. Most multidimensional frameworks of wellbeing tend to have too many indicators, instead of a clear, smaller set of key indicators, which makes it difficult to get an overall picture.
Although many of the existing beyond GDP efforts are welcome signs of progress, they insufficiently challenge the current focus on GDP and fall short in integrating both a feminist and decolonial perspective. They do not measure up to what we need in terms of scale, quality and ambition to forge a radical alternative.

Why is GDP still the dominant guiding metric?

Dislodging GDP from its dominant position would require transforming narratives in academic curriculums, political debate and popular media, challenging the perception that GDP growth is universally positive. Cross-discipline, cross-movement and cross-institutional consensus will be important to shape what radical alternatives look like, with feminist and decolonial critiques at the centre. This could include the identification of possible ‘cornerstone’ social prosperity indicators that are embedded in feminist and decolonial principles.

To ensure the alternatives reflect the priorities and values that are currently missing, a redesign process would need to meaningfully engage women, Indigenous people and those in positions of vulnerability. Likewise, efforts must be driven by globally diverse organizations and institutions,
centring voices from the Global South, and with active public participation in the beyond GDP agendas to ensure broad inclusion throughout the policy cycle.

There is an opportunity for governments and institutions to invest in testing, piloting and scaling alternatives, working with cities, regions and countries to build alternative frameworks and supporting statistical infrastructure, drawing on the growing body of learning. This could include providing political and financial incentives for adopting alternatives as economic policy drivers, disentangling GDP from sustainable development indicator sets such as the SDGs, and creating an intergovernmental body to consolidate knowledge and drive convergence on methodologies and terminology.
1 GDP AND OUR BROKEN ECONOMIES

Our economies are profoundly broken:

- **Inequality.** Eighty-one billionaires hold more wealth than 50% of the world’s people. More than 700 million people are currently living in extreme poverty, 383 million of whom are women and girls. In 2019–22, women captured only 21% of all projected employment gains, with many of those jobs becoming ever more exploitative and precarious.

- **Climate change.** The world is heading for 2.7°C of warming this century under current plans. That is a death sentence for climate-vulnerable countries like Vanuatu and Bangladesh. The estimated economic costs of loss and damage by 2030 are US$290–580bn. The non-economic losses are profound and far-reaching, encompassing loss of life, cultural identity, Indigenous and local knowledge, human health, biodiversity and territory.

- **The care crisis.** Chronic underinvestment in care services and infrastructure and the perceived lack of value placed on care globally are pushing women in particular – who already do three-quarters of this work – deeper into time and income poverty. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has estimated that by 2030, 2.3 billion people, mostly children and elderly people, will be in need of care.

- **Ecological destruction.** In 2022, Earth Overshoot Day – which marks the date when humanity has used all the biological resources that Earth regenerates during the entire year – was 28 July. Six out of nine planetary boundaries – indicating the space for humanity to develop safely and sustainably – have been crossed, including climate change, biodiversity loss, biogeochemical cycles, land use, chemical pollution and freshwater use.

- **Conflict.** Violent conflict is increasing, contributing to the more than 82 million people currently forcibly displaced from their homes – the highest figure recorded by the United Nations (UN) since the Second World War.

- **Hunger.** As many as 828 million people were hungry in 2021, with nearly 1 in 3 women experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity globally, and these numbers are likely to grow as a result of rising food prices.

- **Denial of access to quality healthcare and education.** About 1 billion people are facing catastrophic or impoverishing health spending, with people living in poorer households more likely to suffer from financial hardship and exposure to health risks. COVID-19 has further exposed inequalities between and within countries: four times more people have died in poorer nations than in rich ones, and women and racial and ethnic minority communities have been disproportionately affected. Approximately a quarter of a billion children, adolescents and youth are not in school.

1.1 THE DOMINANT ECONOMIC MODEL AND THE SINGULAR PURSUIT OF GDP GROWTH

These are not standalone crises. They are driven by an extractive, patriarchal and neocolonial economic system that is at breaking point. The current economic model delivers ever-greater
profits and capital for the owners of wealth while exacerbating inequality and poor conditions for the majority, particularly those living in poverty. It systematically makes nature and care work invisible, simultaneously exploiting them and failing to recognize the role they play in sustaining our economies.36

This dominant economic model (see Figure 1) effectively creates an artificial boundary and power asymmetry between the monetized or formal economy and the maintenance economy – consisting of care activities and ecological processes – on which human life depends and which sustains the formal economy.37 The former is considered ‘productive’ and sits inside the primary focus of economic thought and policymaking; the latter is considered unproductive, valueless and seen to lie outside of this focus. The maintenance economy’s entire raison d’être is to serve the monetized economy in this framework. Those at the top of this power asymmetry are the rich, mostly male, elite predominantly in the Global North. Those at the bottom are disproportionately women, Indigenous, and racialized communities, especially those at the intersection of different inequalities.

Figure 1: The dominant economic model

![Diagram of the dominant economic model](https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2017.1383920)

This means that the real costs related to the relentless production and consumption in the market economy are externalized, falling on people and nature seen as outside the market economy38 – often women already experiencing intersecting inequalities, and a planet that is on the brink of climate catastrophe and mass extinction.

A core feature of this economic system is its focus on growth of GDP as the primary indicator of economic and social progress (see Box 1). Designed to measure the market value of all goods and services produced in the monetized economy, GDP does not capture activities in the maintenance
It largely ignores unpaid care, along with some elements of informal work, environmental harms and the value of peace and clean air. It also underestimates the true value of health and education and incorrectly treats investments in human capital (i.e. the delivery of high-quality public services rather than building of infrastructure) as an expense rather than a critical investment.

**Box 1: What is GDP?**

Gross domestic product, or GDP, is the most common measurement of economic activity and its growth. It was developed in the Global North in 1934 by economist Simon Kuznets, to measure the monetary market value of all final goods and services produced and sold in a specific time period and place, often a year and a country, respectively. From the outset, Kuznets said that GDP had nothing to do with measuring wellbeing. Nonetheless, GDP became the yardstick for governments to measure success and has been used to promote growth-oriented productivity at all costs.

The more the government talks ad nauseam about “inclusive growth” and “financial inclusion”, the more it excludes the contributions of women to the economy and society. According to patriarchal economic models, production for sustenance is counted as “non-production”. The transformation of value into disvalue, labor into non-labor and knowledge into non-knowledge is achieved by the most powerful number that rules our lives: the patriarchal construct of GDP, gross domestic product, which commentators have started to call the “gross domestic problem”.

GDP fails to distinguish between types of economic activity in terms of what is being produced or consumed and whether it is harming or benefiting people and the planet. It does not measure wealth inequality, human wellbeing, climate breakdown, unpaid labor, social cohesion, the erosion of natural resources, the social value of healthcare and more. Nonetheless, GDP is the guiding compass in dominant public political and economic narratives.

GDP growth can take place in a manner that tackles inequality (see Box 2), especially when it is driven by investments in key public services like health, water, childcare and education for all, equitable access to job opportunities, income gains for the poorest populations or universal cash transfers that can help lift millions out of poverty. However, as a metric, GDP does not lend itself to examining how and what is being produced and who it benefits. Too often, policies based on the neoliberal logic of GDP growth at all costs have concentrated the benefits of growth in the hands of a few, while disproportionately harming women, girls and non-binary people, and pushing our planet to the brink. For some countries, GDP growth – especially when it has been accompanied by reductions in income inequality through public investments in healthcare and education and targeted support to the most disadvantaged groups, as in the case of much of East Asia – has lifted millions out of poverty.

However, for many people, GDP growth has not been reflected in job security, access to public services, or a sustainable route out of poverty. ‘Despite a doubling of [GDP] since 1990, in low- and lower-middle-income countries, over half of workers still live in poverty’. Between 2000 and 2018, global GDP growth nearly tripled, and GDP per capita more than doubled, while the share of undernourished people reduced by just 28%, from 14.8% to 10.8%. For most of humanity there has never been a permanent exit from poverty and insecurity. Instead, at best, there has been a temporary and deeply vulnerable reprieve. This highlights the importance of factors other than GDP growth in shaping wellbeing, such as reductions in income inequality, universal healthcare and education, strong corporate regulation and workers’ organizations, among others.

**Box 2: Not all GDP growth is bad when it takes place in a manner that tackles inequality**

The Earth4All collective has calculated that low-income countries need to grow their economies by 5% each year until GDP per capita is at US$15,000 to secure wellbeing for the
most vulnerable. Rapid and continuous growth in Vietnam has contributed to lifting around 40 million people out of poverty between 1993 and 2014. Dedicated investment by the Vietnamese government in the health sector has made a tremendous difference. Life expectancy increased from 65.2 years in 1989 to 73.6 years in 2019. However, Vietnam has also seen increasing inequality. Oxfam research in 2017 pointed out that Vietnam’s 210 super rich earned more than enough in one year to lift 3.2 million people out of poverty. In 2014, the government committed to making it a priority to address inequality through a broader package of people-centred policies.

It is crucial that the proceeds of any economic growth end up in the right sectors while globally staying within planetary boundaries. They also need to be distributed in a way that reduces inequality. This requires that the share of economic growth benefiting the poorest people, both in the Global South and North, is considerably bigger than it is today. The larger the share of any increment of growth captured by people living in poverty, the faster the rate of poverty reduction, and equally the lower the amount of growth required to deliver wellbeing.

This stands in stark contrast with the winners of the current GDP focused system. Over the past decade, the world’s richest 1% of people captured 54% of new global wealth generated. Between 2009 and 2018, French CAC40 corporations saw their shareholder payouts increase by 70%, and their chief executive officer (CEO) salaries rise by 60%. In parallel, the average salary of these corporations’ workers grew by just 20%. In 2019, the average CEO-to-worker pay ratio for S&P 500 companies was 246-to-1. While 828 million people face hunger, the world’s main food traders made record profits, and food and agribusiness billionaires increased their collective wealth by US$382bn between 2020 and 2022.

**GDP GROWTH DEPENDENCIES**

Our current economy is infused with “GDP growth dependencies”. For instance, numerous UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets are linked to GDP. So too are governmental fiscal sustainability targets, with tax revenues – and the perceived ability of governments to invest in public services and more – dependent on levels of GDP growth. Other things that also depend on GDP growth include the stability and rise of stock markets, in which pension funds (for example) are heavily invested.

GDP is the signifier for a pervasive narrative and resulting faith that unlimited, unquestioned and unequal economic growth is the key to achieving other political goals, such as much greater equality, social justice and poverty reduction. Through this myth, GDP has moved from being an instrument and indicator of some limited value to being a goal and an institution in itself. Moving beyond GDP is thus both a call to move beyond a dysfunctional economic indicator and a broader invitation to think about an economy that focuses on social prosperity and a liveable planet rather than pursuing growth for its own sake.

1.2 **WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN, AND WHY NOW**

A transformative agenda on moving beyond GDP would be reflected in economic policies that dramatically reduce inequality, are feminist, decolonial, racially just, and promote equality and
wellbeing of people and nature. This means radically redefining the aim of economies from being GDP growth at all costs to being collective economic, social and ecological prosperity – that is, ‘the satisfaction of the basic needs of present and future generations, within the planet’s ecological boundaries, while respecting democratic and social values like dignity, solidarity and justice’. This requires a radical alternative set of key metrics that can serve as a compass to tell us how we are progressing towards collective economic, social and ecological prosperity, and how well different policies will serve us in getting there.

A shift to a ‘beyond GDP’ era is long overdue. Many movements and thinkers from the Global South have been calling for radical alternatives for many years. Many regional and global institutions are now involved in so-called ‘beyond growth’ or beyond GDP initiatives. These efforts are aimed at measuring progress on indicators of social prosperity and sustainability (see Box 3), and at moving towards ‘wellbeing frameworks’ that, to varying degrees, can inform policymaking and budgeting (see section 4).

These efforts are indeed commendable, but largely fall short of comprehensively integrating a feminist and decolonial perspective. In order to do so, centring the voices, solutions and perspectives of feminist and decolonial thinkers from the Global South is paramount.

Southern feminist and climate coalitions, economists and activists including Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), the Nawi Collective, the Pan African Climate Justice Alliance, African Women’s Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) and others have pointed out that it is possible to choose an economy that serves people and planet directly, and that we do not have to stay trapped in a system that is focused on GDP growth no matter the costs – and the perpetual cycle of worsening economic, social and ecological crises and inequality that comes with it.

**Box 3: Just and sustainable pathways into funding social prosperity directly, rather than via GDP growth**

Instead of pursuing GDP growth alone – which, for example, rewards the production of environmentally destructive products such as private jets and fast fashion – before being able to raise taxes to invest in public welfare and green energy solutions, post-growth academics, feminists, climate economists and activists point out that there are more just and sustainable ways to achieving social prosperity.

Options include:
- putting higher taxes on extreme wealth, income and high-emission goods;
- prioritising public investment in universal social protection, universal access to high-quality healthcare and education;
- supporting dignified work, universal basic incomes and/or job guarantees.

Taking actions such as this would take away incentives to work in wasteful industries and support people getting meaningful jobs. Governments would ensure that the private sector focuses on producing for social prosperity rather than growth and accumulation. This would include, for instance, stimulating investments in just transitions away from carbon-intensive sectors to greener ones, and incentivizing the circular regenerative economy. Such an economy could still grow, but in sustainable areas that improve wellbeing. This shift would require substantial changes – beyond how we currently measure the success of our
There is a big risk in the context of looming recession and heavy debt burdens that the sole focus on promoting GDP growth is continued, or even deepened. Lockdown measures during the COVID-19 pandemic and soaring food and energy costs, worsened by the war in Ukraine, have contributed to poverty and rising extreme inequality globally over the past few years. In this context, many countries have needed to borrow to afford food and energy for their citizens and are facing increasing difficulty in paying off their debts. In 2021, on average, low income countries were forced to spend 27.5% of their budgets on debt repayment – 4 times more than on health and 12 times more than on social protection.72

Even in Bhutan, where the concept of gross national happiness (GNH) has guided developments for decades – with GDP its subordinate – there is pressure to redirect the focus away from GNH to GDP following the COVID-19 pandemic.73

Moreover, as the System of National Accounts (SNA) that provide the statistical underpinning to GDP (see Box 5) is being revised between now and 2025, pursuing a radical beyond GDP agenda is even more urgent.74 “Moving beyond GDP” in line with feminist and decolonial principles is a key recommendation within this agenda, as emphasized by this report.

1.3 AIMS OF THIS PAPER

This discussion paper offers a summary of key feminist and decolonial critiques of GDP. It illustrates how macroeconomic policies based on the neoliberal patriarchal logic of GDP growth have disproportionately harmed communities in the Global South and women, girls and non-binary people, Indigenous and racialized people, experiencing intersecting inequalities. It reviews current beyond GDP initiatives from a feminist and decolonial perspective, and outlines core dimensions to consider when designing alternatives. It ends by discussing who and what is currently holding back progress, and provides suggestions from a systems change perspective of ways to dislodge GDP from its dominant position in the public and political mindset and landscape.
2 WHAT’S WRONG WITH GDP?

2.1 GDP DOES NOT MEASURE SOCIAL PROSPERITY OR INEQUALITY

GDP ‘was never meant to quantify wellbeing, sustainability or to take inequality into account’. It does not concern itself with the kinds of outputs or inequalities that are growing and whether or not they ‘destroy wellbeing rather than create it’.

GDP growth takes no account of distribution. Countries’ GDP, if reduced to human scale, is only done so as an average per capita, completely obscuring inequality. Equatorial Guinea has one of the highest figures for GDP per capita on the African continent, at one point even higher than that of Spain. Despite this, primary school enrolment rates remain lower and infant mortality remains higher than the sub-Saharan African average, including countries like Burundi with far fewer resources. This is largely as a result of widening inequalities and the capture of GDP by wealthy elites, something that does not feature in GDP accounts.

Inequality and its negative effects on wellbeing are not measured in GDP accounts. Additionally, governments have failed to invest sufficiently directly into non-monetary factors (e.g. inequality-reducing policies, meaningful jobs, health, social relationships) that are key drivers of people’s happiness and wellbeing.

GDP does not tell us about how growth impacts social prosperity (wellbeing, health, solidarity, social cohesion and agency) and ecological wellbeing, and while growth up to a certain level (US$15,000) is correlated with some improvements in quality of life, growth beyond that threshold does not automatically drive improvements in health, wellbeing, happiness or life satisfaction. The United States and Luxembourg, despite having GDP per capita more than triple the size of Costa Rica’s, rank significantly lower on achieving long, happy and sustainable lives as measured by the Happy Planet Index, while Costa Rica tops the list.

In addition to inventing GDP, the Nobel prize-winning economist Simon Kuznets also invented the Kuznets curve – the theory that inequality is seen as an inevitable stage within GDP growth-oriented capitalist economies and that economies will naturally get more equal when they become richer. This idea – that equality is somehow a luxury only possible once growth is achieved – and that will inevitably happen some time in the future – is still widely held. This is despite the empirical evidence of wealthier nations becoming more unequal and nations like Japan or Korea managing to grow rapidly while actually reducing inequality.

While GDP per capita has been steadily rising globally, so has inequality. Since 1995, the richest 1% of people in the world have amassed 20 times more wealth than the poorest 50%. This incredibly inequal and unfair distribution is not reflected in GDP. The rise in extreme inequality is no coincidence. ‘Back in the 1950s, when countries pivoted economies to maximizing GDP, they knew it would mean making the laborer produce more than he is allowed to consume,’ as Pakistan’s then chief economist Mahbub ul Haq graphically put it.

Since 1965, the United Kingdom’s (UK) GDP has almost tripled. But shocking gaps in life expectancy remain: people living in the most deprived areas of England live on average 8 and a half years less than people living in the richest areas. This shows that GDP doesn’t tell us enough about what growth means for the most marginalised or how the gains are distributed.
Studies have shown how GDP growth does not necessarily correspond with advancements in gender equality, directly challenging the harmful instrumentalist narrative deployed by several international financial institutions (IFIs) that seek to promote gender equality and women’s rights in the interest of growth. Growth that has come from favouring traditionally ‘male’ employment, such as that found in many oil economies of Arab states, has driven gendered inequalities in income and formal labor force participation while reinforcing the ‘male breadwinner’ bias. Export-led and labor-intensive GDP growth has often depended on maintaining gender wage gaps while relying on women’s unpaid labor to compensate for low public expenditure.

### 2.2 GDP DOES NOT MEASURE THE WHOLE ECONOMY

GDP measures the value added of goods and services produced and traded in the marketplace. However, it ignores crucial areas of our economies (see Section 1.1 for more on the dominant economic model).

#### UNPAID CARE

GDP largely ignores unpaid care, along with some elements of informal work, both of which are done disproportionately by women, especially those living in poverty and from groups that experience discrimination based on race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality and caste. While being theoretically included in GDP calculations, the accurate measurement of the informal economy remains a challenge, and not all informal work is officially included.

By not including care work in calculations of the economy, economists are making an entire sector invisible in the main statistics. Women and men do 16.4 billion hours of unpaid care work a day. Around 76% of this is undertaken by women, with 606 million women of working age performing unpaid care on a full-time basis. Women in rural communities and low-income countries spend up to 14 hours a day on care work. Of the total number of hours worked weekly around the world, almost half (45%) are in unpaid care work, and these contributions are excluded from GDP calculations. From a gender perspective, this means that 65% of hours worked by women are unpaid and are not counted as contributing towards GDP.

By ignoring caregivers’ contributions to the economy, GDP also ignores their needs, particularly of those who are pushed deeper into time and income poverty because of the heavy and unequal nature of care work. The invisibility of care work in the formal economy has led to it acting as a hidden subsidy to the market economy and women being seen as ‘shock absorbers’ when austerity measures are enacted. Privatization of public services increases GDP growth in part precisely because it externalizes its costs outside of the boundaries of what GDP counts – that is, onto women’s unpaid labor.

#### ENVIRONMENTAL HARM

GDP ignores harm to the environment, such as the impacts of economic activity on climate change, land and biodiversity. Instead, extractive activities and reparatory activities due to environmental harm (e.g., cleaning up beaches after oil spills) are counted as positive contributions to the economy under GDP. However, leaving the environment alone to rewild, or maintaining and
preserving it outside of the marketplace do not count within GDP. Care activities and ecosystem only become valuable and are counted in GDP when they are resources that can be owned, controlled and sold.

**ILICIT FINANCIAL FLOWS AND TAX HAVENS**

GDP also does not accurately take into account whether what is being produced is done so legally or illegally, or where growth takes place. For example, illicit financial flows to tax havens (including through tax avoidance and evasion) may lead to incorrect designation of where production takes place and GDP is reported. As of 2023, Switzerland has one of the highest levels of GDP per capita in the world, along with Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Singapore. However, the GDP reported in these tax havens does not accurately reflect economic activities in these countries. In fact, tax havens cause significant losses to other countries. In 2020, the Tax Justice Network calculated that the Netherlands and Luxembourg were among the countries most responsible for tax losses of other countries (more than US$36bn and US$27bn respectively).

**2.3 GDP DOES NOT TAKE PLANETARY BOUNDARIES INTO ACCOUNT**

In 1972, the Club of Rome published its landmark report *The Limits to Growth*, and its message was simple: ‘Either civilization or growth must end, and soon’. Continuing with the unquestioned pursuit of GDP growth without taking into account the limits of our planet’s resources would have us face catastrophic consequences. More recent research on limits to growth published by KPMG concluded that societal priorities need to shift away from growth and industrial outputs towards prioritising health and education services, among other things.

As mentioned in Section 1, the global economy is overshooting six of nine planetary boundaries, almost entirely driven by high-income countries where GDP growth – led by relentless consumption and production – has rapidly increased resource use to four times the sustainable per capita levels. In 2021, research conducted by Oxfam and the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) revealed that ‘the richest 1% (around 63 million people) alone were responsible for 15% of cumulative emissions and that they were emitting 35 times the level of CO2e compatible with the 1.5°C by 2030 goal of the Paris Agreement.’

After centuries of causing harm through colonialism, industrialized countries in the Global North, responsible for an estimated 92% of excess historical carbon emissions, are continuing those harms as vulnerable countries and communities in the Global South bear the brunt of climate change. There is growing consensus that countries in the Global North, and particularly people from high-income households in those countries, need to reduce their resource use in line with planetary boundaries, while countries in the Global South need to increase resource use to continue to grow incomes for people living below or near the poverty line. Degrowth scholars note that ‘no country currently meets the basic needs of its residents sustainably. Affluent economies use more than their fair share of resources, whereas lower-income countries are likely to need to use more.’ Thus a more equal sharing of energy and material resources by countries in the Global North can create space for countries in the Global South to grow their populations’ wellbeing within planetary boundaries.
2.4 GDP IS AN ANTI-FEMINIST AND NEOCOLONIAL MEASURE

NEOCOLONIAL

GDP has helped erase alternative and Indigenous conceptions of what can and should be valued.112 Devised in the 1930s in the United States by Simon Kuznets against the backdrop of the Great Depression to measure and boost the total economic output of the country as a means to recovery, it further evolved and gained popularity as a wartime metric to justify paying for the war. The concept of GDP reflected Eurocentric values at the time and a Western model of progress, which equated development or wellbeing for all with production of material goods, productivity and growth at all costs.113 The Western neoliberal logic and values system of GDP continues to be imposed on countries in the Global South today through loan conditions, trade and investment agreements, and the eligibility conditions for powerful economic groups like the G7 and OECD. Indigenous values of care, reciprocity, solidarity and respect for the environment have been ignored wholesale and displaced from dominant economic thinking.

In addition, GDP growth and the capitalist system in which it is based is neocolonial in nature. Despite the formal end of colonization, the global GDP growth-oriented economic model remains highly reliant on the extraction, exploitation and appropriation of human and ecological resources from the Global South to the benefit of the Global North, and from peripheral areas to so-called ‘core areas’ within countries in the Global North and South.114 One calculation of ‘net appropriation from the Global South through unequal exchange includes 10.1 billion tons of embodied raw materials and 379 billion hours of embodied labor per year’.115 As such, GDP is both embedded in colonial history and part of today’s neocolonial116 power dynamics.

The modern-day capitalist system and its fixation with growth also has its roots in the slavery of Black people, which in the 18th century helped propel the growth of European economies.117

Without the expansion of plantations in Africa, the Caribbean and South America, and the exploitation and suffering of Black slaves, the modern world as we know it would not exist. Profits from slave trading and from goods such as sugar, tobacco and cotton harvested by Black slaves fuelled industries in Western countries and helped them to transform their economies. In the 18th century, slavery was a significant engine of economic growth in Europe. For example, by 1770, around a tenth of GDP in the Netherlands was based on the transatlantic slave trade.117

ANTI-FEMINIST

GDP is anti-feminist because it sustains a framework of value creation and productivity based on the Western neoclassical economic theory centred on the ‘rational’ economic man – one who is self-interested and autonomous, making decisions largely based on his own utility rather than collective interest, and whose work only takes place in the marketplace.118 Market relations are given precedence over family and social relations, individualism over solidarity and interdependence, rational choice over wellbeing. Women are rendered to the ‘private’ sphere and their work is rendered invisible [see Figure 2].119
Figure 2: What’s wrong with GDP?

As a measure of the economy, there’s a lot GDP misses.

And for the part of the economy GDP captures, it tells us nothing about quality.

GDP only focuses on size, which means it doesn’t look at how it harms or benefits people & the planet.

Decisions about the economy should be guided by a metric that looks at the whole picture and measures what matters.

Illustration by Alex Bush
3 WHO PAY THE PRICE FOR OUR FIXATION ON GDP?

3.1 WOMEN AND MARGINALIZED GROUPS

In failing to measure what really matters, a focus on GDP steers policymakers towards priorities that fuel inequality, gender injustice, disease, and climate breakdown. GDP does not only impact what gets recognized and measured, but, critically, affects policies influencing what gets invested in and who benefits and loses.

"Since the environment counted for nothing, there could be no value in measures ensuring its preservation... If women’s unpaid carers were included in the labour force – it is likely that more forms of social security would be extended to them, greater investments in care services, access to vocational training programmes etc. Foreign aid programmes would not just target them as mothers... but producers and workers."


For decades, macroeconomic policies based on the neoliberal patriarchal logic of GDP growth have disproportionately harmed women, girls and non-binary people, especially those who experience intersecting inequalities, while benefiting the richest. Four such examples of policies based on the neoliberal logic of GDP-focused growth that have devastating consequences for women and marginalized groups are:

- austerity measures;
- privatization;
- trade liberalization; and
- the lack of universal care policy coverage.

AUSTERITY

Austerity measures aim to lower debt as a proportion of GDP and promote sustained growth. They typically include deep cuts to spending on public services (such as social security, health and education and criminal justice), public sector employment, alongside increases in privatization and regressive taxes such as Value Added Tax (VAT) on those least able to pay. Austerity has a long history as an idea consistently used by elites to hold down wages and undermine labor. 120

Austerity measures have been sponsored by the IMF and World Bank and became widespread throughout the 1980s and 1990s, imposed on countries in the Global South through loan conditions in structural adjustment programmes. The newest wave of austerity following the Covid-19 pandemic, driven by IMF and many governments around the world, is expected to affect 85% of the world’s population by 2023. 121 The adverse impacts of austerity on the health and wellbeing of the
most marginalized groups – who are also the ones upholding the maintenance economy (see Section 1.1) – are well documented.122

Women, especially those who experience intersecting inequalities based on race, ethnicity, caste, age and disability, face a triple burden when it comes to austerity policies. They are more likely to:

• **lose out when governments cut welfare provision.** This is because women disproportionately rely on public services as a result of prevailing gender roles and being more likely to live in poverty and be subjected to gender-based violence. For example, 10 years of austerity in England from 2010 to 2020 have been accompanied by a fall in life expectancy among women in the most deprived areas.123 The vast majority (86%) of the impacts of those austerity measures fell on women,124 while men – particularly those living in the richest 10% of households – benefited from tax changes during the same period;125

• **step in to fill the care gap with unpaid labor.** This increases their time and income poverty and comes at a great cost to their health, economic security and wellbeing. In a study conducted in Kenya, the Philippines, Canada, the UK and the US at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 43% of women surveyed said they were feeling more anxious, overworked, isolated or physically ill as a direct result of taking on care work [see Box 4] due to school closures and overstretched care systems.126 Following wage freezes and cuts to public sector employment in Ecuador to meet IMF conditionality as part of a loan programme signed in 2019, 7 in 10 women were living in time poverty, and 4 in 10 women involved in informal work undertook unpaid care as their primary activity according to a 2021 study;127

• **work in the public sector, and thus be affected by cuts to jobs and pay.** Women make up 70% of the world’s health and social care workforce, and nearly 90% of its nurses.128 ‘IMF austerity cuts in just 15 countries between 2016 and 2021 have blocked the recruitment of over 3 million nurses, teachers and other essential public sector workers,’ despite there being shortages.129 As a result of austerity measures in the mid-2010s, employment levels for educated women in Egypt fell, as public sector employment comprised a higher share of their total employment than men’s; once displaced from that sector, they found little demand and poor working conditions in the private sector.130 The loss of government jobs, pushing women to consider other, often precarious forms of work, was also noted in Ethiopia, Uganda and Côte d’Ivoire.131

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**Box 4: Defining care**

Care work, which can be unpaid or paid, includes: ‘direct care of people, such as looking after a child or taking care of adults who are sick or frail; indirect care or domestic work, such as cooking and doing laundry; and supervisory care, such as looking after a child while performing other domestic work’.132 Care work makes all other work possible; it is crucial to our economies and integral to a thriving society. Feminists have also used the concept of ‘social reproduction’ to draw attention, in addition to unpaid care, to biological reproduction and reproduction of culture and ideology, which remain unaccounted for in GDP.133

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**PRIVATIZATION**

Austerity measures often go hand in hand with privatization. In our current economies, the privatization of public services, often initially in the form of public–private partnerships (PPPs), is promoted by IFIs like the World Bank in part using the justification that public ownership crowds out private investment and increasing private ownership of these services leads to greater efficiency and growth.134, 135 There is significant and growing evidence of how PPPs have devastating consequences for people living in poverty while driving up profits for private companies and increasing the wealth of the elite.136 DAWN’s research has highlighted how PPPs not only limit access to services to those who can afford to pay for them, but result in widespread reductions in public spending, increased delays, harmful practices and erosion of women’s rights.137 Their case
study on India reveals how the implementation of Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY) or the National Health Insurance Scheme – one of the largest PPPs in the Global South – has led to a rise in unethical and illegal practices such as forced hysterectomies, unnecessary C-sections and out-of-pocket payments, which disproportionately affect women, particularly those living in poverty and from Scheduled Tribes and Castes.

Oxfam’s recent research shows how, funded by development finance institutions (DFI) and the World Bank, for-profit hospitals in the Global South are blocking patients from getting care, or bankrupting them, with some even imprisoning patients who cannot afford their bills.138

For that reason, movements and organizations that advocate for governments to move beyond GDP generally also advocate for the need for transformation within the private sector to put purpose before profit.139 Among these movements and organizations, feminist and decolonial thinkers emphasize the importance of investing in universal access to public services, steering towards more collective or communal forms of ownership.140 More immediately and specifically, they call for public services to be kept public, given that they are so intrinsic to fulfilling human rights.141

TRADE LIBERALIZATION

Trade liberalization – the removal of tariffs, import quotas and subsidies to domestic producers and trade regulations – is a core element of neoliberal economics driven by the rationale that it enables countries to specialize in production according to their ‘comparative advantage’, supposedly resulting in higher GDP growth for all.142 Feminist analysis has shown that, despite increasing employment opportunities for women in export-oriented sectors in some contexts, these policies have led to labor deregulation and a proliferation of low-waged, precarious and exploitative work, particularly for women.143 This has increased power inequalities both between countries in the Global South and Global North, and gendered power inequalities within countries.

It has led to a ‘race to the bottom’144 in the Global South, with domestic industries seeking to compete more effectively in the global market by minimizing the costs of production. In India’s textile and garment industry, this has led to the intensification of unorganized and home-based work for women.145 Though increasing GDP and foreign exchange reserves, this has trapped women in low-skilled, low-productivity work. Women’s home-based work is subsidizing employers and has enabled their profits, not only through lower wages (as compared to the formal/organized sector) but also savings from overheads such as electricity and social security, and facilities such as toilets and water.146

THE LACK OF UNIVERSAL CARE POLICY COVERAGE

Across the world, large deficits exist in care policy coverage as a result of IMF-led austerity policies, as well as domestic policy choices driven by the neoliberal rationale of only counting that which falls within the market.

Care policies are ‘public policies that assign resources to care in the form of money (including income, transfers and subsidies), services and time’.147 They include:

- care services (e.g. public healthcare services and early childhood education);
- care infrastructure (e.g. piped water and electricity);
- social protection benefits related to care (e.g. public pensions, cash transfers for carers);
care supporting workplaces (e.g. paid sick leave, flexible working, equal paid parental leave); and

• labor regulations (e.g. minimum wage and protections for migrant care workers).\textsuperscript{148}

The lack of universal care policy coverage, in part, rests on the assumption that households, particularly women and girls, will provide care services for free.

Only 44% of countries meet the ILO’s minimum standard on maternity leave, leaving 649 million women without adequate maternity protection.\textsuperscript{148} In the United States, which tops the world in terms of GDP, and which spent US$801bn on its military in 2021,\textsuperscript{150} there is no federal paid leave policy, and only 14 US states and territories have passed paid maternity or family leave laws.\textsuperscript{151}

In parts of the world, large deficits in care infrastructure continue to persist. In South Asia, 55% of the population lives without access to improved sanitation.\textsuperscript{152} In sub-Saharan Africa, 63% live without access to electricity.\textsuperscript{153} According to the Africa Care Economy Index, all countries on the continent fare extremely poorly across all 10 metrics, including parental leave, publicly financed and delivered care, domestic worker protection, care grants and COVID-19 care measures.\textsuperscript{154}

This disadvantages people needing and providing care, especially those living in low- and middle-income countries, rural areas and households living in poverty, Indigenous people, and those in informal employment.

While government policy agendas continue to deprioritize care or seek private sector-led solutions that fail to provide for the most marginalized groups and communities, they concentrate wealth in the hands of a few. This was clearly seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which governments offered bailouts to big corporations and polluting industries, while largely ignoring the needs of unpaid carers and paid domestic workers already trapped in income and time poverty without access to social security. Less than 5% of the measures introduced addressed the need of carers.\textsuperscript{155}

### 3.2 THE ENVIRONMENT AND INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

The colonial practices of resource extraction, export-oriented production systems, and the imposition of Western neoliberal economic logic across countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, in which GDP is rooted, has destroyed ecosystems, undermined Indigenous knowledge systems and displaced communities across the world. This has directly increased food and water insecurity, poverty, and the vulnerability of specific communities to climate change.\textsuperscript{156} African scholars have noted how monocropping to facilitate the industrialization and GDP growth of European colonial powers ‘decreased the diversity of crops necessary for a balanced and nutritional diet in our own communities and has displaced Africans from their lands by giving millions of hectares of land to private enterprises’.\textsuperscript{157} For example, in The Gambia and Ghana, which have a rich history of producing rice, yams and other staple foods, a concentration on cash crops such as groundnuts and cocoa during the colonial era led to famine, chronic food shortages, malnourishment, widening inequality and dependency on European colonizers for imports.\textsuperscript{158}

Moreover, the constructs of ‘productivity’ and ‘growth in production at all costs’ led to the imposition of a new value system under colonialism. Walter Rodney, Guyanese historian, political activist and academic in his seminal book ‘How Europe Underdeveloped Africa’ notes:
Moreover, since men entered the money sector more easily and in greater numbers than women, women’s work became greatly inferior to that of men within the new value system of colonialism: men’s work was “modern” and women’s was “traditional” and “backward.” Therefore, the deterioration in the status of African women was bound up with the consequent loss of the right to set indigenous standards of what work had merit and what did not.\footnote{159}

The same dynamics are seen in other regions. In the Indian sub-continent, under British rule, the Indus River system was completely redesigned with a vast canal irrigation system to make the basin more ‘productive’ for cash crops up to 100 miles from the river source year round – with catastrophic consequences for the displaced agropastoralists, drainage patterns and biodiversity.\footnote{160} Many scholars from the Global South note that it is not a coincidence how countries being hardest hit by climate catastrophes are also those where ‘colonization decimated natural resources, altered infrastructures and compromised traditional ways of living that respect the environment’.\footnote{161} Scholars from the Indian sub-continent have cited how British colonial-era engineering, which governments continue to use today, and the erasure of Indigenous knowledge systems have played a key role in the regular flooding of the Indus River, and left local populations vulnerable to hazards, with the recent floods and its impacts in the region serving as the most devastating example.\footnote{162}

However, extractivism is not only harmful between countries, but also within. In January 2023, a Dutch Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry into natural gas extraction in the Dutch province of Groningen concluded that gas extraction was so lucrative for the Dutch state and big corporations such as Shell and ExxonMobil that hardly any consideration had been paid to the risks to local populations.\footnote{163}
4 ‘BEYOND GDP’ INITIATIVES

An increasing number of governments and institutions have acknowledged the shortcomings of GDP and are looking at alternatives (see Figure 3). Within the UN, SDG target 17.19 commits members to ‘By 2030, build on existing initiatives to develop measurements of progress on sustainable development that complement gross domestic product, and support statistical capacity-building in developing countries’.

Figure 3: The history of GDP alternatives
4.1 CURRENT EFFORTS

Hundreds of alternatives to GDP have been designed. Some current high-profile efforts related to frameworks and metrics include:

- the Sustainable Development Goals
- the European Union’s EU Beyond GDP Initiative;
- the OECD’s Better Life Index, which aims to involve citizens in debates on wellbeing that might inform policy;
- Doughnut Economics;
- the UN High-level Advisory Board on Economic and Social Affairs suggestions for different ways to measure the development performance of countries beyond GDP;
- ongoing efforts in Latin America, including those in Colombia and Paraguay, to identify the most policy-relevant metrics for achieving the SDGs, improving wellbeing, and leaving no one behind;
- ongoing efforts in Asia, including the Philippines’ Quality of Life Index on moving beyond GDP to measuring wellbeing and sustainability;
- Thailand’s Wellbeing Index;
- Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness Index;
- the Gender Inequality Index;
- the United Nations Development Programme’s Human Development Index (HDI);
- the Women Peace and Security Index (WPSI);
- Maryland became the first US state to formally adopt, calculate and update the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) in 2010 ‘to reveal the trade-offs between costs and benefits of economic growth’;
- New Zealand’s Living Standards Framework;
- a bill was introduced to the US Congress in July 2021, which, if enacted, would have required the Department of Commerce to publish a US GPI, and to use both the indicator and GDP for budgetary reporting and economic forecasting;
- the Wellbeing Economy Governments (WEGo) partnership – a collaboration between New Zealand, Wales, Scotland, Finland, Iceland and Canada to consider new metrics and how to integrate them into policy.

WHY ARE CURRENT BEYOND GDP INITIATIVES NOT ENOUGH?

Many organizations, experts and activists that have been at the forefront of the beyond GDP movement self-critically claim that the reason there has not been large-scale progress is the lack of a common language and shared ground on methodology. GDP also has ‘single indicator appeal’. Most multidimensional frameworks of wellbeing have too many indicators, instead of a clear, smaller set of key indicators, which makes it difficult to get an overall picture. Another and perhaps more critical reason for this lack of progress is the political and economic vested interests of leaders in governments and the private sector who gain from an economy that is focused on unquestioned growth measured through GDP.
4.2 CURRENT ALTERNATIVES ARE INSUFFICIENTLY FEMINIST AND ANTI-COLONIAL

Many of the existing beyond GDP efforts are welcome signs of progress. However, there is a significant risk that, if we do not critically assess and inform beyond GDP initiatives using a feminist and decolonial lens, they will insufficiently challenge the growth-oriented neoliberal, patriarchal, capitalist economic system that has resulted in the exploitation of people and planet. \(^{187}\)

In reality, very few of the GDP alternative frameworks can be said to be explicitly feminist or decolonial in terms of their conceptual foundation. Several have been developed by multilateral or Northern organizations and institutes and have largely failed to sufficiently include voices from the Global South or Indigenous communities. This might explain why many of the approaches share similar types of indicators, generally focused on relatively easy to 'quantify' objective indicators and largely exclude subjective indicators, which are important in accounting for ‘the real currency of life, life itself’, as Vandana Shiva puts it. \(^{188}\) Take the issue of addressing intersectional power inequalities, which are much more difficult to measure. Even the Gender Inequality Index – which could be expected to integrate qualitative measures that are central to understanding gender relations, such as issues of power, agency and vulnerability – fails to do so. \(^{189}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 5: The System of National Accounts</th>
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<td>GDP has been praised for its simplicity and comparability between different countries and over time. It is understood, calculated and institutionalized as a key indicator within the System of National Accounts (SNA). The SNA is an international handbook providing methodological guidelines for determining what falls in and out of the production boundary and how it can be calculated. The SNA is being revised and is due to be updated by 2025. This offers a window of opportunity that comes around only once every 15 years. (^{190}) Crucial adjustments to how GDP is calculated may only be accepted by countries if every country signs up to the same concept. Although there have already been efforts made in the past to improve the SNA and make it more inclusive of activities that are particularly relevant for countries in the Global South (such as informal sector work and certain forms of unpaid work such as water collection), evidence suggests that SNA reforms continue to favour higher-income countries and their economies. (^{191}) This lends weight to the argument of academics who support beyond GDP approaches, who advocate for a more comprehensive revision of the SNA – by including views from economic, social and natural scientists to forge an interdisciplinary perspective on accounting and evaluation. (^{192}) There are reports that those working on the SNA revision are making progress towards including indicators related to social prosperity, sustainability and equity, but are struggling with how to incorporate ‘non-market phenomena such as unpaid household work/care or environmental damages’ (^{193}) and ‘challenges surrounding the valuation of non-market outputs in a manner consistent with SNA valuation principles.’ It is hardly to be expected that such a revision will fundamentally shake up the powers and interests behind GDP, however.</td>
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UNPAID CARE

Many of the frameworks have responded to the feminist critique about GDP’s failure to value unpaid care work. For instance:

- the Genuine Progress Indicator developed in the US includes the value of unpaid household and volunteer work;\textsuperscript{194}
- Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness Index includes unpaid care as an important component of the country’s measure;\textsuperscript{195}
- the OECD’s Better Life Index includes an indicator on time use.\textsuperscript{196}

In efforts to revise the SNA, which has GDP as its key indicator, work is ongoing to include valuing unpaid care, but those working on it doubt whether this will succeed in line with SNA valuation principles (see Box 5).\textsuperscript{197}

The frameworks that do succeed in measuring unpaid care generally do not anchor it within an overall system oriented towards wellbeing and sustainability. Although including unpaid care work in wellbeing frameworks can provide governments with a more comprehensive understanding of their economy and the role that caregiving plays, the benefits are limited if policymakers continue to rely on GDP (and its growth) as the dominant guiding metric for their policies, as this focus ignores the needs of caregivers and those receiving care. A shift away from GDP growth towards prioritising wellbeing and sustainability would more likely result in long-term support for carers, such as paid leave, affordable childcare and investments in public healthcare and education that are crucial to relieving the unequal and heavy workloads of unpaid care workers.

The success by feminist movements of putting unpaid care on the agenda is a great achievement, but this should clearly not lead to governments equating feminist GDP alternatives with simply adding an unpaid care measure to GDP accounting. In Kenya, a researcher noted that conversations about beyond GDP tend to focus on valuing unpaid care work: ‘This equating of GDP alternatives with unpaid care work indicates a conflation or lack of understanding that GDP alternatives is about more than only unpaid care work, but also a host of other important indicators and domains neglected by GDP, such as counting environmental and social externalities for instance, as well as inequalities.’\textsuperscript{198}

DECOLONIAL

Very few of the GDP alternative frameworks and metrics have an explicitly decolonial conceptual foundation.\textsuperscript{199} Clear exceptions are Buen Vivir and Ubuntu, which centre on the principles of decolonization, justice, reciprocity and solidarity. For example, Buen Vivir is an Indigenous philosophical moral concept from Latin America emerging out of Indigenous movements in the 2000s, tracing back to Andean Quechua women and men. It seeks balance, harmony and reciprocity between all living things and ‘Mother Earth’, and the recognition of Indigenous knowledge and practices.\textsuperscript{200}

Ubuntu is a principle of African origins that underlines the interconnectedness and interdependence of all beings, and the importance of relationships and care whereby ‘the wellbeing of one is closely linked or even presupposes the social prosperity of the other’.\textsuperscript{201} It focuses on collective wellbeing over individual wellbeing, and rejects the competitive, market-oriented logic of economic maximization that lies at the heart of GDP.\textsuperscript{202}

However, while these moral concepts have been recognized as important principles and garnered public support – and, in the case of Buen Vivir, been enshrined in the Ecuadorian and Bolivian constitutions – in practice they insufficiently challenge the dominant economic paradigm, and have
not led to alternative metrics. In addition, feminist critiques of Ubuntu have shown that ‘the concept has been used to enforce patriarchy and gender binary social constructions, including around care’, with notions of sacrifice, care and maintaining relationships being imposed on women more than men.

New Zealand (or Aotearoa in Māori language) provides an inspiring example. Its wellbeing framework is accompanied by the He Ara Waiora, a framework that helps the Treasury to understand waiora, often translated as a Māori perspective on wellbeing. He Ara Waiora gives an Indigenous and uniquely Aotearoa New Zealand response to questions such as ‘What are the living standards that New Zealanders value?’; ‘Are they the same for everyone?’; ‘How well equipped is the public service to understand what living standards mean to a wide range of New Zealanders?’ and ‘Might we be able to learn and apply lessons from cultures other than the dominant one?’

It is notable that one of the most widely recognized and influential global beyond GDP frameworks, the HDI, while advancing important debates on wellbeing and how it is not necessarily related to GDP growth, does not recognize or address the legacy and ongoing effects of colonialism on economies, societies and the environment. Nevertheless, it continues to be used by policymakers, academics and other stakeholders as an alternative to compare the development of countries around the world.

**CROSS-BORDER IMPACTS**

Most beyond GDP frameworks insufficiently incorporate the influence of one country’s policies on social prosperity and sustainability in other countries, particularly by countries in the Global North.

A crucial area that feminist, decolonial frameworks must address is the impact of policies within a given country on wellbeing and sustainability elsewhere. In most countries that are developing beyond GDP frameworks, there is insufficient attention to the positive or negative contribution of a country’s policies and material and resource use on equality, wellbeing and sustainability in other countries now and in the future.

As a notable exception, the Netherlands was one of the first countries to include ‘wellbeing elsewhere’ in its beyond GDP framework. The current Monitor of Well-being and Sustainable Development Goals emphasizes income flows between the Netherlands and low-income countries (e.g. imports of goods in addition to provision of aid and remittances) and the pressure that the Netherlands puts on the environment or the stocks of raw materials of other countries (e.g. through the import of fossil fuels, biomass and metals). There are some clear shortcomings with the system as it stands. The Monitor assumes that the imports of goods has a positive influence on social prosperity in the country that exported the raw material or product, which may not be valid, or simply based on the same assumptions as policies assuming that all GDP growth is good. In addition, the Monitor’s current indicators seem weak regarding impact elsewhere in the social domain. They do not take on board the impact the Netherlands has on rising inequality globally – for instance, through the behaviour of Dutch private companies and investors, tax policies, or indeed, the hoarding of vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic.
4.3 CURRENT ALTERNATIVES ARE INSUFFICIENTLY TRANSFORMATIVE

Current beyond GDP alternatives insufficiently challenge GDP to transform economies away from its current exploitative, extractive, growth-oriented nature towards a globally just, sustainable and equitable development model that centres the wellbeing of people and the planet.

A recent study outlined the key similarities and differences between some of the leading ‘wellbeing economy’ models and metrics. From the SDGs to Scotland’s National Performance Framework to Doughnut Economics, there is much agreement that what matters is economic security, equity and environmental sustainability (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Shared ingredients for a wellbeing economy

Despite much agreement on these core aspects, in practice most countries and institutions – even those promoting beyond GDP frameworks – strongly hold onto the GDP growth objective. In practice, according to the Beyond-Growth Gradient developed by Verma (2023), GDP alternatives can be categorized into the following groups:

1. those that genuinely move beyond GDP;
2. those that complement GDP;
3. those that exist in tandem with GDP;
4. those that slow down GDP to sustainable levels or to fit within planetary boundaries; and
5. false ‘alternatives’ that are still founded or rooted in GDP metrics.

Only a few belong to the first category.

**STILL USING GDP**

Many indices and approaches that are listed as ‘beyond GDP’ still use GDP as a central measure. For example, the Gender Inequality Index, the Gender Gap Index and the WPSI all aim to measure gender inequalities, but are based on measures that rely on GDP growth (e.g. expenditure on family benefits as a proportion of GDP in the Gender Gap Index). The HDI includes per capita gross national income (GNI) (itself based on GDP) as one of its factors. SDG target 17.19 only aims to complement GDP, with many other goals relying on GDP growth.

**NOT USING BEYOND GDP FOR POLICYMAKING**

The content and the persistence of GDP within indexes is not the only issue preventing effective change through beyond GDP frameworks. Many countries claiming to use beyond GDP frameworks at best only use them for reflection purposes rather than to strongly inform policymaking from the outset.

About 50% of OECD countries and a number of other countries have developed statistical wellbeing frameworks. However, very few have developed tools, models and policy frameworks even as indicators have become available, for example:

- wellbeing, green and gender budgeting;
- wellbeing cost–benefit analyses; and
- systems and integrated approaches to policymaking.

For example, in 2021, the Irish government developed a Wellbeing Framework. However, GDP indicators still drive public discourse and policymaking, which means that the Wellbeing Framework may not become more than a rhetorical device to show how Ireland is taking social prosperity and sustainability seriously. As the OECD writes: ‘There is the risk that newly developed indicators may become “just another report” rather than leading to a substantial change in the setting and framing of policy.’

**POSITIVE EXCEPTIONS**

Some countries show that this does not need to be the case and have made efforts to incorporate alternative development ideas into the highest levels of national law and policy.
The Scottish government describes the transition towards a ‘wellbeing economy’ as a ‘top priority’.\textsuperscript{217} It is legally required to consult on the outcomes of its national wellbeing framework (called the National Performance Framework, NPF) every five years.\textsuperscript{218} This is now complemented by a new Wellbeing Economy Monitor, which focuses on how the economy and economic policy contribute towards Scotland’s national outcomes. However, while Scotland’s trajectory is positive, questions remain over the extent to which the national outcomes and the pursuit of a social prosperity economy are prioritized within policy and spending choices.\textsuperscript{219} In addition, Scotland’s National Strategy for Economic Transformation\textsuperscript{220} and national outcomes do not sufficiently recognize the importance of care.\textsuperscript{221}

Bhutan’s GNH Index is enshrined in the nation’s constitution, which states that ‘the State shall strive to promote those conditions that will enable the pursuit of Gross National Happiness’.\textsuperscript{222} Further laws and regulations have supported this. For instance, using the GNH, environmental protection became a priority, leading to Bhutan limiting tourism and banning log exports. As a result, Bhutan became the world’s first carbon-negative country.\textsuperscript{223} However there is a mixed picture in terms of how this has centred and impacted gender equality.\textsuperscript{224}

Buen Vivir was incorporated into the constitutions of Ecuador in 2008 and Bolivia in 2009 in terms of orienting development, as a result of social movements,\textsuperscript{225} but national and international pressures have limited the extent to which policies have been developed in its spirit.\textsuperscript{226}
Perspectives from feminist and decolonial thinkers and movements provide important insights into what beyond GDP frameworks should focus on to truly challenge our existing dominant, oppressive and extractive systems, and promote equality and decolonization. Activists have proposed a ‘new paradigm that forges active links between climate change, racialized and gendered labor exploitation, trade rules and economic structures that reproduce inequalities both within and among nations’.227

Many have called for a new framework that recognizes and addresses the ways in which women’s labor, resources of the Global South, and Indigenous people subsidize the global economy:

‘The reality is that today’s economy would not be possible if these three global subsidies were not operating, even if their relevance is not recognised in orthodox economic spaces. The monetised dimension is subsidised by the non-monetised dimension provided by women’s labor, the wealthy countries are subsidised by stealing (historically and presently) the resources of Global South countries, and the majority of the world is living out of the vital subsidy provided by Indigenous peoples. This is why, in order to promote justice in global dynamics, the three main global subsidies need to be at the forefront of the way we formulate the solutions.’228

Alternatives to GDP can also draw much from feminist economic and climate justice agendas developed by feminist movements in the Global South in particular. In their report, “A Feminist Agenda for People and Planet”, the Feminist Economic Justice for People & Planet Action Nexus highlights six principles for global economic justice:

- an economy that shifts from the disproportionate emphasis on being a ‘productive economy’ into a feminist decolonial green new economy;
- an economy that puts the primacy of human rights and wellbeing of the planet over the primacy of growth and GDP;
- an economy that promotes an equitable and just global trade order;
- an economy that redistributes wealth and resources;
- an economy that promotes debt justice and a new structure of sovereign debt; and
- a global economic governance architecture that is democratic.229

Inspired by existing feminist and decolonial analysis, critique and recommendations, the core elements of what a beyond GDP metric could consider are listed in Table 1 and further explained in this section. It would be important to consider available data that is timely and comparable, while being aspirational to push for the collection of data on these critical dimensions.
### Table 1: Core issues to consider when designing beyond GDP alternatives that are just, feminist, decolonial and environmental

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why is GDP a problem?</th>
<th>What do alternatives need to capture?</th>
<th>What does this mean from a just, feminist, decolonial and environmental perspective?</th>
<th>Existing/proposed indicators, frameworks and examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Only covers part of the economy | Entire economy | Just: All production
Feminist: Production and reproduction (households as well as markets)
Decolonial: Formal and informal
Environmental: Benefits from environmental goods and services respecting planetary boundaries | Time-use: The amount of time people spend doing various activities, such as paid work, household and family care, personal care, voluntary work, social life, travel and leisure activities e.g. Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness index and OECD’s Better Life Index231 |
| Does not show who benefits from growth | How economic activity is benefiting all | Just: Economic wealth inequality
Feminist: Intersectional inequality
Decolonial: Changes in inequality between countries in the Global North and South and between racialized groups
Environmental: Equal access to natural resources | Ecological services: Contribution of ecosystems to economic activity and human well-being e.g. Gross Inclusive Income: Expands definition of economy to include unpaid household production and additional ecosystem services, which lie outside the SNA’s production boundaries |
<p>|                         |           | Palma ratio: Measures concentration of income at the top in, and between, countries |
|                         |           | Multi-dimensional and intersectional approaches: e.g. Multi-dimensional inequality framework Measures inequalities in capabilities across different dimensions (e.g. health, relationships, knowledge) e.g. Gender Equality Index Incorporates an intersectional approach to examine how disability, age, level of education, country of birth and family type can intersect with gender |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ignores how growth happens, its</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>quality or conditions, contribution to/detraction from social prosperity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quality/net impacts of economic activity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just: Decent work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist: Dignified work and freedom from harassment, time and income poverty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decolonial: Global trade rules, net financial (including tax) and resource flows</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental: Environmental quality and resource stock, biodiversity, ecological degradation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Per capita carbon footprint</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumulative carbon emissions, as captured in the Environmental Performance Index[^235] and Happy Planet Index[^236]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time poverty: Insufficient time for rest and leisure after taking into account the time spent on paid and unpaid work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Median wage multiplied by employment rate, as proposed as an indicator by the UN High Level Advisory Board on Economic and Social Affairs[^237]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wellbeing elsewhere, as captured in the Netherlands’ Monitor of Wellbeing[^238]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loss and damage elsewhere</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Does not capture social prosperity</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Social prosperity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just: Freedom from hunger, poverty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist: Safety, voice, time, freedom from violence, sexual and reproductive health and rights</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decolonial: Reciprocity, justice and solidarity</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Cost and affordability of nutritious diet:</strong> The share of population that can afford a healthy diet[^239]</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Subjective wellbeing:</strong> How people evaluate their life as a whole, as captured in the OECD Better Life Index[^240]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Violence against women:</strong> The percentage of women and girls who have been subjected to physical, sexual, or psychological violence by a current or former intimate partner, as captured in SDG Target 5.2.1[^241]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Life expectancy</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community relationships, as captured in Bhutan’s Grass National Happiness Index[^242] and the OECD Better Life Index[^243]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.1 COUNTERING NEOCOLONIAL IMPOSITION OF GDP AND DOMINANT ECONOMIC POLICYMAKING

Considering the erasure of non-Western knowledge systems that has resulted from the imposition of the Western neoliberal logic of GDP, and the disproportionate harm caused to communities in the Global South due to its associated economic policies and practices, radical beyond GDP alternatives need to ensure respect for context-specific cultural values, Indigenous knowledge and practices that prioritize human and natural wellbeing.

A decolonial approach and mindset in GDP alternatives would put much more emphasis on the importance of community, social relationships and the environment, which have been disregarded by the focus on GDP growth.244,245 Buen Vivir and Ubuntu are examples of Indigenous moral concepts that centre on the principles of decolonization, justice, reciprocity and solidarity that we can learn from (see Section 4.2).

A key indicator could be measures of community relationships and social networks, such as a sense of belonging, or levels of social support as found in the Gross National Happiness Index246.

The extent to which beyond GDP frameworks and indicators win public and political acceptance depends on the inclusivity of the process through which they are developed. Indicators reflecting local knowledge and perspectives need to be meaningfully included and placed front and centre in the design, implementation and analysis of beyond GDP frameworks. These need to be rooted in a recognition and acceptance of – and commitment to repair – the damages caused by colonialism and economic imperialism.

At the heart of neocolonialism, is the ability to determine what gets counted and valued, and what gets excluded from GDP-centric economics. Often left out of this counting and overall conceptualization, is indigenous knowledge, practices and values that have sustained ecosystems for centuries.

WELLBEING ELSEWHERE

Decolonial beyond GDP alternatives would factor in ‘wellbeing elsewhere’ – that is, the positive or negative impacts of a country’s decisions, policies and resource use on equality, social prosperity and sustainability in other countries in the past, present and future. This is important for supporting the calls from countries in the Global South for climate reparations from the Global North to address the social and ecological harms from historical carbon emissions and extractive practices. This would include, for instance, indicators looking at cumulative historic national carbon emissions that give a sense of a country’s responsibility for historical emissions (in its own territories and elsewhere), and the impact on loss and damages incurred globally. It would also look at the land-use footprint and (for example) positive and negative contributions to addressing inequality worldwide, such as tax haven practices and aid budgets.

One example is the annual Spillover Index, which measures some of the effects of countries on other countries’ ability to achieve the SDGs. It shows how high-income countries in particular generate negative socioeconomic and environmental spillovers, including through unsustainable trade, consumption and supply chains.

CHANGING EMISSIONS AND EXTRACTION PATTERNS

High-income countries have a responsibility (in line with SDG 12 on ensuring sustainable production and consumption patterns) to reduce their material and resource use. A more equal sharing of energy and material resources by the Global North can create space for countries of the Global South to grow their social prosperity within planetary boundaries. Governments, particularly in the Global North, need to use beyond GDP metrics that capture the environmental impacts of their economic activity such as per-capita CO2 emissions. Importantly, they also need to consider the per capita CO2 emissions of the top 10% of the population, which have increased significantly in the past few decades.

5.2 RECOGNIZING AND VALUING WOMEN’S UNPAID CARE

Beyond GDP alternatives need to capture evidence from the entire economy, both paid and unpaid (see Figure 1 in Section 1.1). Importantly, they need to capture unpaid care (see Box 6), which is disproportionately carried out by women, its distribution (within and between households, the state, market and public sector), and how it is impacted by macroeconomic policies so that these policies can be re-shaped to redress the disproportionate responsibility borne by women.

Box 6: How Bhutan and Hawaii capture care in beyond GDP indicators

Bhutan, for instance, measures ‘time use’ as one of the nine pillars of its Gross National Happiness (GNH) Index. This pillar uses two indicators – work hours and sleep – to measure how people in a given household spend their time within 24 hours. Since this indicator can be disaggregated by gender, it can shed light on the amount of work, paid and unpaid, that women in a household do.
Hawaii uses the Genuine Progress Indicator, which factors in the value of unpaid care work by monetizing the costs and benefits of care and adjusting GDP accordingly. However, feminist economists have indicated how assigning a monetary value to care and simply adjusting GDP does not challenge the neoliberal and anti-feminist notion of GDP growth and the harmful policies that stem from it.

### TIME USE AND DISAGGREGATED DATA

Over the past few decades, feminist economists have significantly invested in measures of unpaid work and advocated for their use in economic policymaking. They have shown how time-use data on how individuals allocate their time between unpaid work, paid work, leisure and self-care ‘gives visibility to all forms of work (remunerated and non-remunerated) and personal activities; provides full visibility of the care economy, particularly unpaid care work, how such work is shared among different socio-economic groups and overtime; throws light on the nature of poverty and human well-being’. This also allows the expansion of the definition of ‘poverty’ to include time, and challenges the monetary fixation of GDP.

As recommended by the UN’s High-level Advisory Board on Economic and Social Affairs, GDP alternatives should make care work and gendered inequalities visible for policy influencing and monitoring by disaggregating data on time use to enable an intersectional analysis by (among other things):
- gender;
- age;
- income;
- religion/caste/ethnicity and/or race;
- disability;
- migration status; and
- location (e.g. urban/rural).

The UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) has proposed including time-use estimates in a new beyond GDP measure of Gross Inclusive Income, which adjusts GDP to include unpaid household production and additional ecosystem services to better capture economic activity and economic welfare.

### 5.3 VALUING SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL PROSPERITY AND REDUCING INEQUALITIES

#### SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL PROSPERITY

GDP does not consider what is being produced, whether it is harming or advancing social prosperity, or who benefits or loses out. Beyond GDP frameworks should include indicators that
capture the multidimensionality of social and ecological prosperity: ecological diversity and resilience, time use, living standards, psychological wellbeing, safety and community relationships. Four key indicators that can offer insights into the multidimensionality of social and ecological prosperity are:

- nutritious diets [e.g. share of the population that can afford a healthy diet] proposed as an indicator by the UN High Level Advisory Board on Economic and Social Affairs
- time and income poverty [e.g. share of the population that is both time and income poor] a measure proposed by the Levy Economic Institute of Bard College
- ecological wellbeing [e.g. the presence/abundance of ecosystem types as captured by the UN System of Environmental Economic Accounting]
- violence against women and girls [e.g. share of women and girls subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner in the previous 12 months as captured in SDG Target 5.2].

Alternatives to GDP should centre the voices of women, Indigenous communities and those facing intersectional forms of discrimination, take into account the ways in which they value social prosperity, and reflect the different development priorities across countries and regions. They should also include subjective wellbeing indicators, trusting people themselves to make assessments of their own wellbeing, rather than relying entirely on state and academic experts.

Why not get countries to measure the number of girls who bicycle to school? What clearer yardstick could convey so much about progress in women's education, green transport, health and poverty alleviation in a single number? Better yet – it's the kind of data point that you don't need an economics degree to grasp.


INEQUALITY

Whatever the measure that takes us beyond GDP, the distribution of national income would need to supersede any focus on simple averages, including at the household level. Inequality, and reducing the gap between rich and poor, should be hardwired into how we measure progress in our societies. The Palma ratio, for example, is an important indicator to highlight levels of inequality, by showing the differences between the highest and lowest income brackets.

The new World Wealth and Income Database, known as the World Inequality Database which is based on income tax records, represents an important advancement in inequality statistics that can further our understanding of the scale of wealth and income inequalities. The ultimate aim of the database is to produce Distributional National Accounts (DINA) to provide annual estimates of the distribution of income and wealth.

Beyond GDP frameworks need to ensure a radical reduction in inequality as a key priority and include indicators that capture the concentration of income, wealth, assets, information and power but also 'inequalities in the quality of education, health, housing, employment and social security'. The Multi-Dimensional Inequality Framework moves beyond an exclusive focus on income to offer a systematic multidimensional approach to assessing inequality in the quality of individuals’ lives across important dimensions such as health, relationships, ability to influence, financial security and dignified work. As with time use, indicators on inequality should be disaggregated by gender, age, race, income, location, ethnicity and other social categories to enable an intersectional analysis. The Gender Equality Index incorporates an intersectional approach grounded in a structural analysis to examine how disability, age, level of education, country of birth and family type can intersect with gender.
GUIDING PUBLIC POLICIES AND INVESTMENT

To address the harm done by austerity policies and promote wellbeing, beyond GDP frameworks should measure what matters in order to prioritize public policies and investments that boost care-supporting public services, and infrastructure that reduces inequalities and advances social prosperity, including:

• access to safe water, sanitation and domestic energy systems;
• universal healthcare and education;
• labor policies that ensure dignified work; and
• universal social protection.268

For these policies and investments to be transformative, they would have to recognize the state’s overall and primary responsibility for public service provision, be founded on social dialogue and representation, and address unequal power dynamics and social norms that undervalue care and consider it to be a woman’s responsibility.269

Recent studies have shown how such investments can lead to reductions in poverty270 and gender inequality, and improvements in education and health outcomes.271 Feminist movements and networks have long pointed out how neglecting to do so is a failure of states to comply with binding international human rights obligations, conventions and standards, and to ensure the equal and equitable rights of men, women and non-binary people (including freedom from discrimination, right to work and rights at work, right to education, right to health, right to social security and right to participation).272 They have, however, cautioned against applying a neoliberal and Eurocentric interpretation of human rights focusing on individual rather than collective rights, and political freedom at the expense of economic rights, highlighting how narratives of rights can mask the agendas of powerful vested interests.273

Additionally, if investments in care work can ensure dignified work, they can contribute to the ‘creation of green jobs that are zero- or low-carbon emitting and preserve or enhance the wellbeing of both current and future generations by regenerating the natural resources and ecosystems upon which they rely’.274

Such investment needs to be accompanied by progressive taxation, including on higher incomes and wealth, public and private divestment from the fossil fuel economy, and efforts to address illicit financial flows (including from tax evasion), to raise revenues for comprehensive care systems.275 There is also a need to raise revenues through ‘shifting stimulus packages away from corporate bailouts, military expenditures, and physical infrastructure mega-projects’.276

5.4 WAYS TO BREAK AWAY FROM GDP TO TRANSFORM ECONOMIC MODELS

Beyond GDP frameworks need to ensure that they support transformative work towards an economic system that truly puts human and environmental prosperity first. This requires a radical overhaul and delinking from the neoliberal and exploitative constructs of GDP growth at all costs. There is widespread agreement on ‘beyond GDP’ and efforts to ‘complement GDP’. Another area of
thinking where there is less consensus is that it is not possible to get beyond GDP in any meaningful way, while GDP stays in place given how GDP often continues to reign supreme even when thrown in the mix with other indicators and measures. Should GDP be part of the mix going forward? Will it be possible to rein in the dominance of GDP over economic decision-making without replacing it?

For instance, an alternative metric, such as Gross Inclusive Income, could capture the size of economic activity – as GDP does – whilst being a more accurate reflection of the entire economy (bringing in household production and ecosystem services). In doing so it could still offer the important insights that GDP does, as well as being correlated with higher incomes and other measures of wellbeing. This paper encourages further debate and consideration of radical options that can open the way for economic transformation at the scale and speed needed.

Replacing or complementing GDP would both require fundamental democratic deliberation. Governments everywhere could stimulate inclusive debate and research how a holistic transition towards an economy that works for people and planet can be realized in ways that are just. For example, the European Parliament organized a conference for more than 2,000 participants in May 2023 to debate how to move beyond GDP and how to fund basic services in post-growth societies.

To be able to play their transformational role, beyond GDP alternatives need to become entrenched in policymaking, including agenda-setting, policy formulation, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. While many government ministries already have sectoral wellbeing targets, institutionalizing an overarching framework takes this a step further. The latter supports policy coherence and strategic alignment of outcomes between and across ministries, helping to make policy trade-offs and spill-overs within and between countries more explicit. As an example, New Zealand launched its first wellbeing budget, using social and environmental indicators in its wellbeing framework to guide investment and policy decisions.
6 WHAT IS HOLDING BACK PROGRESS?

It is not entirely surprising that progress in the shift away from GDP as the key global metric for measuring economic and social progress is slow. The reliance on GDP growth works in favour of those who typically absorb the lion’s share of the profits and have captured the majority of economic wealth – primarily the richest 1% and powerful multinational corporations.

For them, there are several incentives to keep the focus on GDP. Beyond being easy to measure and compare across countries, GDP keeps the political and economic focus exclusively on growth. For elites in all countries uninterested in a more equitable distribution of income or the prevention of environmental damage, this is hugely beneficial (see Section 1.1).

For that reason, movements and organizations that advocate for governments to move beyond GDP generally also advocate for the need for transformation within the private sector to put purpose before profit.

PROFIT AND LOBBYING BY POWERFUL CORPORATIONS AND RICH ELITES

Most rich elites prefer to keep the system as it is, because were GDP to be replaced with a set of metrics that capture social and ecological wellbeing and inequality, this would limit the power of those who profit from a model based on profit over purpose and growth at all costs.

For example, were governments to guide their decisions based on metrics that include environmental impacts, there would likely be stricter environmental regulations around production, which would eat into the profits of major corporations whose business models are often dependent on environmental destruction.

Likewise, if governments shaped policy around metrics that incorporated inequality, approaches such as increased minimum wages or higher corporate taxes could be implemented, which would again reduce profits for shareholders in big business.

It is therefore no wonder that powerful corporate stakeholders use the political power that generally comes with economic power to influence the economic policies of their respective countries. This has been particularly visible in the area of taxation (see Box 7).

Box 7: Lobbying for lax tax rules

Many governments, international financial institutions and corporate elites have long misled the world with the fiction of “trickle-down economics” – the idea that low tax and high gains for a few people would lead to growth that would ultimately benefit us all. In many countries, corporate elites and their lobby representatives have played on the fear of politicians that low tax rates were essential to keep businesses and thus employment in the country. In 2017, Oxfam calculated that from 2009 to 2015, the 50 largest US companies spent US$2.5bn in federal lobbying – almost $50m for every member of Congress.
Wealthy individuals also benefit from existing tax rules. Oxfam’s most recent Commitment to Reducing Inequality (CRI) Index found that 143 out of 161 countries have frozen tax rates on their richest citizens over recent years, while 11 countries even lowered them. There is no doubt that many regressive tax policies ‘to advance economic growth’ have benefited the wealthy and corporations at the expense of the general population and marginalized groups in particular.

DOMINANCE OF NEOLIBERAL AND PATRIARCHAL NARRATIVES

The objective of GDP growth, and the associated prevalence of the metric, is deeply entrenched in narratives, mindsets and cultures around the world. Pervasive narratives about the economy are popularized through education institutions, the corporate elites, governments and the media, meaning they are consumed and internalized by the world’s population on a daily basis. These narratives suggest that the market economy is all that matters, and so the only activities that count are those that produce monetary value. These narratives both reflect and serve to reinforce patriarchy, racism and classism as intersecting systems of oppression, further strengthened by neoliberal ideology. As a result, the billions of hours of unpaid care and domestic work, done primarily by women – not to mention ecological systems – are not considered (see Figure 1). Research has shown how these beliefs are deeply entrenched within statistical departments of international organizations such as the UN, World Bank and IMF, which have significant influence in shaping the methodologies underpinning GDP.

These narratives intersect with and reinforce patriarchal beliefs that see women and non-binary people as subordinate to men. Following the same logic, their labor is considered to be less valuable than men’s. Likewise, racialized, ethno-centric and classist narratives that some women and non-binary people – e.g. those living in poverty, from minority ethnic or religious groups, or from migrant backgrounds – are perceived as even less worthy of rights and dignity, their labor more expendable, and their social prosperity less valuable.

ENTRENCHMENT IN FORMAL INSTITUTIONS

Another significant factor that holds GDP in place as the dominant global metric is its entrenchment in formal frameworks such as the SNA (see Box 5). GDP is seen as a measure of a country’s economic power, and used to compare the relative economic strength of different countries. It is also deeply embedded within national, regional and global institutions such as the World Bank and IMF, OECD and European Commission (see Figure 5). The institutionalization of the metric has important consequences for countries with lower GDP. For instance:

- **Definitions.** GDP, GDP per capita and GDP growth rates are used to rank countries and describe their economic status (e.g. ‘lower-income’, ‘middle-income’, ‘developed’, ‘developing’, ‘emerging’, etc.).
• **Borrowing capacity and access to international markets.** A country with a higher GDP per capita is often assigned a better credit rating, as it is generally considered to be more financially stable and thus able to borrow larger sums of money, and seen as a more attractive market for foreign investors and businesses.

• **IMF, World Bank and other institutions’ voting rights.** The quota share, and subsequently the voting power a country has in the IMF is (partially) determined by its GDP. It also plays a role in World Bank shares and voting, although these are weighted heavily towards country financial contributions. In other international organizations, countries with higher GDP also tend to have more influence.

• **Distribution of foreign aid.** Countries with higher GDP are either less likely to receive aid, or even expected to provide it. For example, GDP is used by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to determine a country’s eligibility for foreign aid.

• **International trade negotiations.** As they can offer access to ‘larger markets’, countries with higher GDP typically have more leverage in international trade negotiations.

• **Measurement of government spending.** Government spending on services such as health and education is calculated in relation to GDP. Thus, when GDP is not rising, governments can justify freezing or reducing spending on public services.

• **Economic infrastructure.** GDP is embedded in national institutions such as central banks, finance ministries and other government agencies that use GDP as a main indicator to make decisions and track progress.

• **SDGs.** Some of the indicators tracking progress towards the SDGs for 2030 are defined in relation to GDP. Policies aimed at improving social prosperity and sustainability are often evaluated against their impact on GDP growth.

As the above list makes clear, the focus on GDP as a measure of economic activity serves the interests of high-income countries. With higher levels of GDP, high-income countries are able to borrow money at lower interest rates, giving them a huge advantage; they are also able to maintain their higher level of influence in international institutions, and can shape policies that benefit their own interests through their GDP-related voting rights. In addition, as GDP is used as a benchmark for national economic policies and stability, it can be used to justify the maintenance of the status quo and the continuation of existing exploitative trade and investment policies that disproportionately benefit countries in the Global North and perpetuate neocolonial relationships.

Although there have been important revisions to the GDP methodology over the past 25 years, this has consolidated the relative strength of the Global North. These reforms have implications for the supremacy of GDP, for the wider political economy of international development and for the kinds of policies governments can now use to increase their GDP, including financialization and real estate investments that generate rapid GDP growth without any real structural transformation.
Figure 5: Why is GDP still the dominant guiding metric?
7 KEY PATHWAYS TOWARDS FEMINIST AND DECOLONIAL ALTERNATIVES

As a fixture of the economic system, it would require concerted efforts across the different levers of system change (see Figure 6) to dislodge GDP from its dominant position in the public and political landscape. The networks of institutions and interests holding GDP in place will need to be disrupted, opening the way for a diversity of views. Such system-level change does not happen without public pressure sufficient to move the issue from the technical to the political space, to bring beyond GDP alternatives from the small to the large scale, and from being timid to brave.

Figure 6: The six conditions of systems change

7.1 MENTAL MODELS

There is a critical need and opportunity to shift the narratives that uphold GDP as the dominant measure. This means:

• changing narratives in academic curriculums, political debate, popular media and advocacy about what constitutes ‘the economy’, to move away from the model described in Section 1.1 that only values the market;
• challenging the narrative around the universal positivity of GDP growth that is perpetuated by the media, orthodox academia and Global North-dominated financial institutions;

• governments, institutions, media and civil society stimulating research and public debate about how to eliminate current GDP growth dependencies (see Section 1.1), starting with the use of GDP in critical economic and social decisions in which impacts are most challenging, including as a core determinant of loan conditions and country classifications for development cooperation;

• showcasing examples of countries that are successfully replacing GDP and what lessons can be learned.

7.2 RELATIONSHIPS AND CONNECTIONS

There is an opportunity for civil society actors and movements to achieve consensus around feminist and decolonial alternatives to GDP. This means:

• proactively building and promoting cross-discipline, cross-movement and cross-institutional consensus around what radical and real alternatives look like, ensuring that feminist and decolonial critiques and principles are at the centre, not at the margins. This could include the identification of possible 'cornerstone' social prosperity indicators.

7.3 POWER DYNAMICS

It is important that beyond GDP alternatives are developed through a locally led, bottom-up process. This means:

• meaningfully engaging women, Indigenous people and those in positions of vulnerability to ensure that the frameworks adequately reflect their realities, priorities and values. This includes ensuring diversity of representation in the leadership of discussions and implementation;

• ensuring that global beyond GDP efforts are informed and driven by globally diverse organizations and institutions, with voices from the Global South reflected in their conceptual foundations and content;

• active public participation in the beyond GDP agendas of national, regional and global institutions, so that multidisciplinary/cross-government policymakers ensure broad inclusion throughout the policy cycle.

7.4 POLICIES AND PRACTICES

There is an opportunity for governments and institutions to invest in testing, piloting and scaling alternatives, working with cities, regions and countries to build alternative frameworks and supporting statistical infrastructure, drawing on a growing body of learning. This means:
• instituting political and financial incentives for national, regional and local governments to adopt alternatives as key economic policy drivers;

• learning from policies such as those put in place in Wales (see Box 8), and consider appointing Future Generations Commissioners to assess, monitor and support institutions putting (long-term) social prosperity objectives at the heart of policymaking and budgeting;

• disentangling GDP from global and regional sustainable development and equality indicator sets, starting by removing it from SDG indicators, and exploring discussions on new international financial architecture to move away from a GDP growth dependency path;

• as proposed by the Wellbeing Economy Alliance, an intergovernmental panel on wellbeing, inclusion, sustainability and the economy could be created to consolidate knowledge and drive convergence of methodology and terminology;\textsuperscript{292}

• considering how beyond GDP frameworks can capture how structural inequalities shape economic and social outcomes with a strong intersectional lens;

• considering how to ensure that beyond GDP frameworks measure and stimulate an economy in which humans are able to take care of themselves, their communities and the natural world;

• considering how to ensure adequate focus within social prosperity frameworks on global justice and ‘social prosperity elsewhere’, including through trade, investment, taxation and reparations;

• coming together, globally and across communities, to strategize on the critical levers and pathways for dislodging GDP and ensuring the adoption of feminist and decolonial GDP alternatives in the short to medium term.

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**Box 8: Wales’s legal commitment to future generations**

In 2015, Wales adopted the Well-being of Future Generations Act, which places a duty on specified public bodies (including the Welsh Government) to improve the environmental, economic, social and cultural wellbeing of Wales and protect the needs of future generations. The Act sets out in law a common and holistic national vision – the seven wellbeing goals – for national and local government, health boards and other public bodies to work towards.

The Act also sets out how public bodies need to work in order to improve the wellbeing of Wales and achieve the seven wellbeing goals. Under the Act, public bodies need to take account of these five ways of working when making decisions:

- **Involvement:** The importance of involving people with an interest in achieving the wellbeing goals and ensuring that those people reflect the diversity of the area which the body serves;

- **Long Term:** The importance of balancing short-term needs with the need to safeguard the ability to also meet long-term needs;

- **Prevention:** How acting to prevent problems occurring or getting worse may help public bodies meet their objectives;

- **Integration:** Considering how the public body’s wellbeing objectives may impact upon each of the wellbeing goals, on their other objectives, or on the objectives of other public bodies;

- **Collaboration:** Acting in collaboration with any other person (or different parts of the body itself) that could help the body to meet its wellbeing objectives.

Through the Act, Wales became the first country in the world to create an independent office to act as a guardian for future generations. The Future Generations Commissioner for Wales is a unique role that promotes sustainable development, provides advice and encourages public bodies to think longer-term and meet the needs of the present without compromising the needs of the future.
A new transport strategy was produced following what has been described as the first big test for the Act. The Future Generations Commissioner intervened when the Welsh Government planned the building of a new motorway (known as the M4 Relief Road) that would have cut through a nature reserve and created £1.4bn of debt. The Act was a key factor in the scrapping of the motorway. There are now plans to increase public transport, walking, and cycling to 45% by 2045, and a landmark roads review decided all future roads must pass strict environmental criteria before being built.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>TERM</th>
<th>DEFINITION</th>
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| Decolonial   | Something that breaks from colonial and neocolonial structures of dominance and thought, disrupting racial, gender and geopolitical legacies of inequality and domination.                                           | S. Tamale. [2020]. *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism*. Daraja Press. Quebec: Daraja Press.  
| Decolonization | The act of achieving independence from colonialism, both historical and modern, and undoing the harm caused. Part of an ongoing process of shifting decolonial power back to Black people, Indigenous peoples and People of Color, who are calling for agency over their political and economic structures – as well as their culture, society, education, language and voice. | S. Tamale. [2020]. *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism*. Daraja Press. Quebec: Daraja Press.  
| Feminism     | A movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression. Feminism is a belief in social, political and economic equality for all genders, rooted in an understanding of how women and other marginalized genders face structural inequality and oppression due to existing norms, stereotypes and power dynamics. At Oxfam, our understanding of feminism is rooted in 11 principles:  
1. I share power  
2. I challenge my behaviour  
3. I support the feminist movement  
4. Nothing about us without us  
5. Feminism is for everyone  
6. There is no justice without gender justice  
7. I champion diversity  
8. I value safety  
9. I want a supportive environment  
10. I believe in freedom of expression  
| **Intersectionality** | A theory based on the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, who highlighted the particular combination of oppressions faced by Black women in the United States. It draws attention to the ways that people can face multiple and intersecting oppressions based on race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, ability and age (among other social markers) – and that these do not operate individually or in isolation, but are mutually reinforcing, resulting in complex social inequalities. | P. Hill Collins. (2015). ‘Intersectionality’s Definitional Dilemmas’. Annual Review of Sociology, 41, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112142
| **Neocolonialism** | A model in which, despite the end of formal colonial relationships, economic and political systems in countries that were colonized continue to be directed, shaped and influenced by unequal power relationships with the former colonizing countries. This is broadly understood to encompass the ways in which multilateral institutions and transnational corporations maintain colonial dynamics of exploitation and extraction in formerly colonized countries. | K. Nkrumah. (1965). Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons.
| **Neoliberalism** | The dominant economic model since the 1980s, centred around individualism and the expansion of ‘free markets’. In this model, the state exists to maintain institutions that protect those practices. This approach has led to increased rights, mobility and freedoms for corporations, and a corresponding reduction in collective action, state regulation and government intervention in the economy. | D. Harvey. (2007). A Brief History of Neoliberalism. New York: Oxford University Press.

NOTES

1 See Glossary
2 See Glossary
3 See Glossary
11 ibid.
12 ibid.
13 Methodological note (stat 1)
15 See Glossary
16 See Glossary
17 See Glossary
22 ibid.
24 ibid.
34 See Glossary
35 See Glossary
37 ibid.
45 See Glossary
50 ibid.
Both subsistence activities and activities of households as employers of domestic personnel with households being producers for own final use are outside the scope of the informal sector, under the 2008 SNA definitions, though it bears noting that measurement challenges remain even for the parts of the informal economy that which are officially included in GDP.


Methodological note (stat 1).


146 ibid.


Since last year’s edition was published, two more states have passed paid leave laws: Illinois [https://labor.illinois.gov/laws-rules/paidleave.html] and Minnesota [https://www.americanprogress.org/article/fast-facts-about-minnesotas-new-paid-leave-law].


ibid.


211 The alignment with, or incorporation of, GDP is evident in the HDI and other frameworks, including for example, the Gender Inequality Index, Global Gender Gap Report, Social Progress Index, Women Peace and Security Index, World Happiness Report. L. Pheko and R. Verma. (2022). Scoping Research on Alternative Measurements to GDP. Unpublished internal report. Oxfam.

212 ibid.

213 ibid.


See Glossary


Ibid.


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