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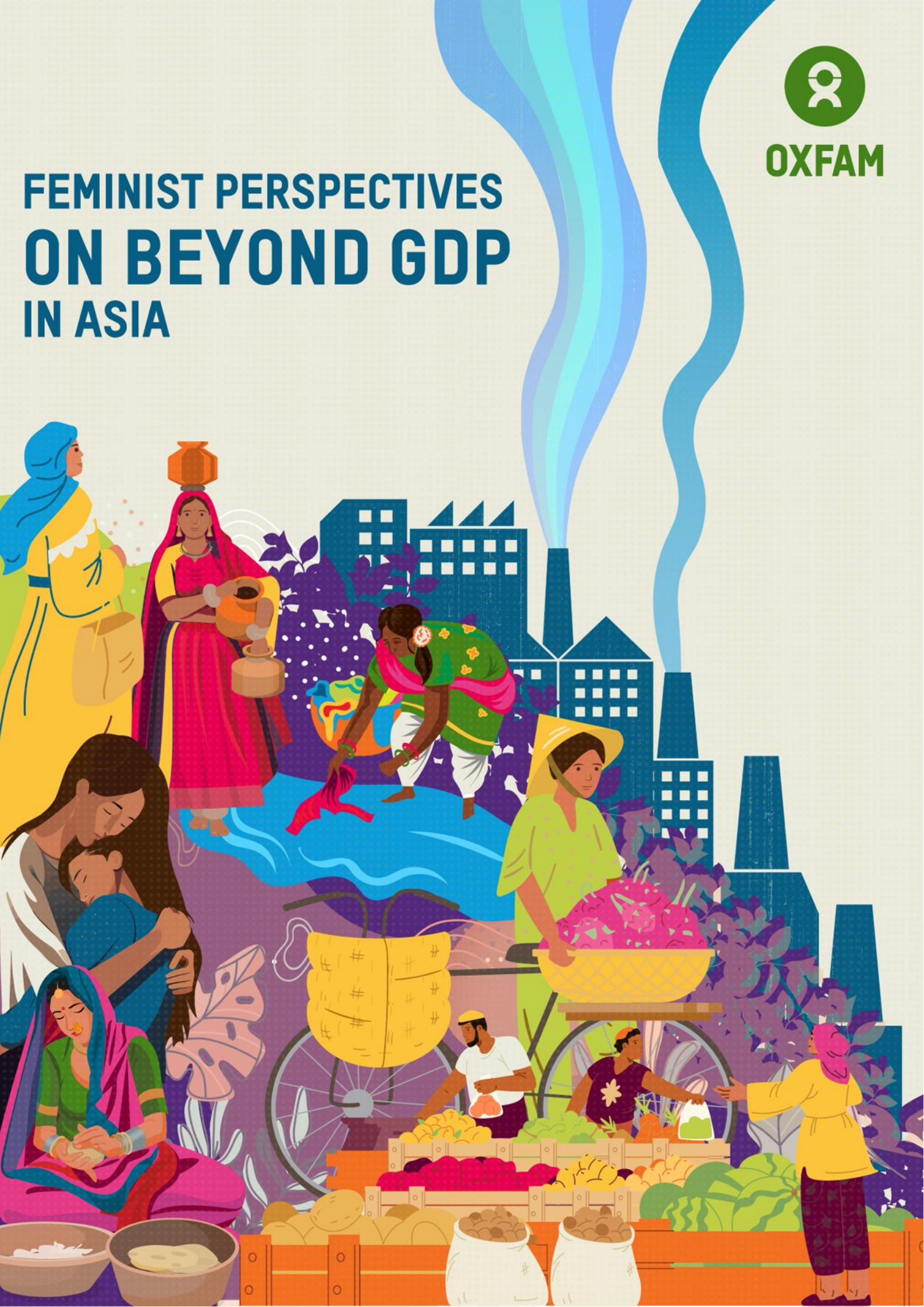
FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON BEYOND GDP IN ASIA



Abstract

Asia's rapid GDP growth masks severe costs, including displacement, environmental depletion, and high inequality. A shift beyond GDP is essential, and alternatives must be feminist, ecologically just, and decolonial. While Asia explores wellbeing metrics, most merely *complement* GDP, failing to fundamentally challenge the growth paradigm or address systemic injustices. True transformation requires an equity- and justice-oriented approach that dismantles the political economy maintaining GDP dominance. Current "beyond GDP" metrics in Asia lack the political power to fundamentally challenge the growth-first agenda, often failing to capture intersectional inequalities or systemic environmental destruction. This report highlights pathways for building alliances with feminist movements to embed transformative alternatives in the region.

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Table of Contents

List of abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Nations
EoLI	Ease of Living Index
DAWN	Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GMS	Greater Mekong Subregion
GNH	Gross National Happiness
HAI	Human Achievement Index
HDI	Human Development Index
IMF	International Monetary Fund
KQoL	Korean Quality of Life
LILAK	Purple Action for Indigenous Women's Rights
MyWI	Malaysia Well-being Index
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PSLM	Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement
SEEA	System of Environmental Economic Accounting
SEWA	Self-Employed Women's Association
SDI	Sustainable Development Index
SMEs	Small and medium-sized enterprises
SPI	Social Progress Index
SUV	Sport utility vehicle
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

Glossary

Please note that definitions of the GDP alternatives mentioned in this report can be found in Annex 1 at the end of the document.

Term	Definition
Austerity	A set of policies characterized by significant and rapid reductions in public spending, often targeting areas like education, healthcare and social protection. This is frequently combined with measures aimed at increasing tax revenues, typically through regressive or indirect taxation rather than wealth taxes. Austerity often promotes privatization and deregulation to the benefit of the corporate sector. Meanwhile, those with the lowest incomes face reduced support, fewer job opportunities and greater insecurity. Such policies reflect the priorities and values of those in power.[1]
Decent work	Defined by the International Labour Organization as: 'opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men'.[2]
Decolonial	Approaches and frameworks that seek to dismantle colonial and neocolonial structures of power, challenging entrenched systems of racial, gender and geopolitical inequality. These actively disrupt legacies of domination and exploitation, and advocate for the recovery of marginalized perspectives, knowledge systems and ways of being that have been suppressed or erased by colonial ideologies.[3]
Degrowth/post-growth	A planned reduction of energy and resource use designed to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a way that reduces inequality and improves human and ecological wellbeing.[4]
Economic growth	The increase in the real production of goods and services within a nation's economy over a specified period of time.[5] It is usually calculated as the rate of growth of GDP in a given timeframe compared to the previous period.
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.[6]

Growth paradigm/Growthism	An economic paradigm that asserts that economic growth is a universal remedy for some of the most pressing challenges of modern societies and is imperative to avoid economic and social crises.[7]
Gross Domestic Product (GDP)	The total market value of all final goods and services produced within the borders of a country in a given period of time (usually a calendar year).[8] It counts all so-called 'productive' output, including public goods and services provided by the government such as education. GDP is the most widely used indicator for measuring the size of an economy and how that economy is performing.[9]
Unpaid care and domestic work	The essential provision of care and domestic services performed within households and for community members. Because the person engaging in the activity does not receive a wage, the work is considered 'unproductive' and therefore is not counted in GDP calculations. Unpaid care and domestic work includes ensuring that the wellbeing and daily needs of household and community members are met; it includes caring for children, elderly people, people who are ill and people living with disabilities, as well as domestic tasks such as cooking and cleaning.[10]
Neoliberalism	The dominant form of political-economic governance that is based on the expansion of market relationships, centred around promoting liberalization, deregulation and privatization in line with a reduced role for the state.[11]
Women's labour force participation	The percentage of women in an economy's paid labour force. This excludes women who engage in unpaid domestic care work and those who work in the informal economy.[12] It also does not consider quality of work or the proportion of women in decent work.

1. Introduction

For over 40 years, the Global South – including Asia – has been subjected to a 'GDP growth at any cost' model, driven by international financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, and reinforced by national policies driving inequality and promoting privatization, austerity and debt. This has led to extreme inequality and the consolidation of corporate power, while perpetuating economic structures that extract wealth from the Global South to the Global North.[13]

In this context, it is critical to champion a 'beyond GDP' agenda across Asia – not only to challenge dominant economic models but also to encourage governments to adopt alternative metrics to GDP. This agenda does not call for the outright rejection of economic growth, but rather a strategic shift: prioritizing growth in sectors that enhance wellbeing, in order to reduce inequalities and accelerate a just transition away from fossil fuels.[14] The prevailing growth-centric model is deeply rooted in neoliberalism, colonialism, imperialism and patriarchy. In particular, women's unpaid care and domestic labour, which economies rely on, remain largely invisible in GDP calculations, and measures of inequality and environmental degradation are also ignored.[15] To challenge this orthodoxy, we must move beyond GDP as the fundamental measure of economic success and advocate for radical feminist alternatives.

About this paper

This paper examines the forces shaping Asia's growth-driven agenda, rooted in (neo)colonial legacies, and offers a feminist critique of the growth paradigm and the dominance of GDP as a policy-guiding metric in the Asian context. The report then evaluates existing beyond GDP approaches in Asia from a feminist perspective. It examines these approaches to assess the extent to which they are gender just, ecologically just, and decolonial. While these three lenses are inextricably intertwined, they are explored separately for the purpose of a more granular analysis.

The analysis shows that while some actors champion approaches aimed at moving away from using growth, consumption and productivity as the main indicators of societal progress, many merely want alternatives to complement GDP rather than transform the system. Existing alternative frameworks may highlight the need for long-term sustainability, justice, ecological resilience, equity and inclusion – addressing the gaps left by GDP – but often remain constrained by conventional economic understandings of 'progress'. Most beyond GDP wellbeing metrics in Asia are still rooted in the implicit notion that social, environmental and cultural considerations of wellbeing are secondary to GDP growth, embedded in a context of coloniality, debt, austerity and narratives of scarcity that purport that states do not have the resources to invest in wellbeing, gender or environmental justice. Therefore, breaking free from the

dominance of GDP requires going further than descriptive measures of wellbeing: it demands approaches that fundamentally challenge the existing growth paradigm and the political economy that keeps it in place.

We argue that any transformative alternative to GDP must be rooted in an equity and justice-orientation and feminist principles which prioritize social, political and economic equality and justice for all and tackle the intersecting systems of oppression that the poor, women and marginalized genders and groups encounter as a result of entrenched norms and power dynamics. This includes centring ecological resilience and harmony with the environment as core principles for long-term wellbeing and challenging Global North-centric assumptions of development, redressing or confronting the historic, colonial origins of injustice and dispossession.

Endless economic growth is driving structural injustice and ecological breakdown

On the surface, Asia appears to be making remarkable progress when measured by traditional output and income metrics (i.e. GDP and GDP growth). As a whole, the region scores well above the global average in GDP terms.[16] In 1980, Asia's global share of GDP was only 21%, but this had shot up to 47% by 2025.[17] The six largest South-East Asian economies (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam) are set to outpace China in terms of GDP growth.[18]

Economists and policymakers alike have praised Asian countries for lifting millions of people out of poverty, crediting this success to the fruits of economic growth, especially in China and India.[19] However, this economic growth has often come at a significant cost. In many cases, it has widened economic, social and environmental inequalities, depleted natural resources that are crucial for long-term wellbeing, forcibly displaced swathes of people from their lands to make space for large-scale development projects and relied on the exploitation of an artificially cheapened and repressed labour force that lacks fair pay and social protection.[20] For instance, despite their seemingly impressive growth metrics, South Asia and South-East Asia are the most unequal sub-regions in Asia. South Asia is one of the fastest growing regions in the world (driven primarily, but not solely, by India).[21] Yet this growth benefits only a few – in India, the richest 1% hold 40% of the country's total wealth.[22] Social spending in the region remains critically low, and the outcomes of this are reflected in its long-term wellbeing indicators. South Asia underfunds education, spending just 2.7% of GDP (the lowest of all regions) in 2022 compared to the global average of 3.8%.[23] Health spending is similarly inadequate. In 2021, Bangladesh and India allocated only 0.4% and 1.2% of GDP respectively to health, far below the global average of 6%.[24] As a result, the average person in Bangladesh and India has a life expectancy approximately 10 years less than that of the average person in Japan and South Korea.[25]

GDP does not differentiate between economic activity which harms or benefits people and the environment. It overlooks critical factors such as wealth inequality, human well-being, climate change, unpaid work, social bonds, the depletion of natural resources, and the societal importance of services like healthcare.

GDP fails to account for the costs of ecological degradation, particularly as it doesn't differentiate between market activities that harm or benefit the environment and society, and who takes on that harm or benefit. In South-East Asia, investment in oil and gas development is projected to more than triple from US$9.5 billion in 2022-2023 to US$30 billion in 2024-2025, contributing positively to GDP without accounting for the socio-ecological costs of extraction.[26] By treating harmful activities like fossil fuel production the same as investments in education or healthcare, GDP obscures the real costs of environmental degradation, including the damage it does to societies by exacerbating inequities, dispossessing communities and poisoning the common goods on which we depend.

GDP growth has also been fundamentally tied to increased resource extraction and greenhouse gas emissions, causing the world to have already breached six of nine planetary boundaries (climate change, biosphere integrity, land system change, freshwater change, biogeochemical flows and the introduction of novel entities).[27] India, the world's fifth-largest economy by GDP, is the third-largest greenhouse gas emitter in the world due to its economic activity.[28] It has also exhibited one of the highest growth rates for a Global South country, and as the engine of growth demands ever more jobs in cities, vehicles and energy consumption, the country's residents are facing an air pollution crisis. Studies have confirmed that India's economic growth is the primary driver of its pollution, and that this has led to severe health impacts, including respiratory susceptibility to infections (in turn increasing vulnerability to diseases such as COVID-19, leading to more deaths).[29] It should be noted that a significant share of these emissions stems from production aimed at satisfying global consumption demands, meaning India is not solely responsible for its high emissions. Its per capita emissions also remain less than half the world's average.[30]

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.[31]

Across Asia, we see a trend of rising emissions with GDP growth, while the Global South has contributed the least to ecological breakdown. [32] [33] To achieve their wellbeing and development goals, such as securing basic needs, creating decent jobs, raising income levels and achieving food and energy sovereignty, many countries in the Global South may

still need economic growth and an increased use of material resources and energy.[34] The Earth4All collective estimates that low-income countries require 5% annual GDP growth until reaching a GDP per capita of US$15,000, in order to eliminate poverty and secure wellbeing for the most vulnerable.[35] It is crucial for growth in such countries to be based on sectors that raise the incomes and wellbeing of ordinary people, while globally staying within planetary boundaries. It has been estimated that 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.[36]

It is countries in the Global North that have the greatest responsibility to abandon 'growthism', reduce current levels of resource use and emissions and reorganize their economies around human and ecological wellbeing.[37] Indeed, much of the ecological devastation underpinning growth has been driven by unsustainable levels of energy and resource use by the Global North.[38] A transformation away from growthism would also enable the entrenched levels of poverty and inequality in many Global North countries to be effectively addressed.[39]

Yet despite the clear link between growth and ecological breakdown, many mainstream economists, policymakers and private sector actors champion 'green growth',[40] which continues to centre economic growth by arguing that growth could be sustained by redirecting capital to 'green' initiatives. This includes reliance on technocentric 'solutions' like geoengineering, carbon markets and carbon capture technology, all of which involve continued exploitation of labour and resources under the guise of climate action while distracting from the need for a complete fossil fuel phase-out. Most egregiously, the green growth paradigm views global environmental breakdown not as a crisis but as an 'opportunity' that can be realized through the privatization, commodification and marketization of nature. Whole landscapes, especially in the Global South, are characterized as carbon sinks, biodiversity preserves and sources of ecosystem services or alternative energy, providing new economic incentives to profit from ecological crisis.[41]

It is both possible and necessary to shift away from endless consumption to meet wellbeing objectives and legally mandated human rights and environmental commitments

Growth does not automatically result in poverty reduction and job creation; this is driven (in part) by investments in healthcare, education and other public goods and services, all of which can increase GDP but are not typically the focus within a growth-oriented paradigm. One study shows that providing decent living standards for the entire world would

require only 30% of our current resource and energy use.[42] Economists and social scientists, including Manfred Max-Neef, Amartya Sen, and Martha Nussbaum, have developed frameworks like the fundamental human needs taxonomy and capabilities approach, which suggest that essential human needs such as health, food, security, relationships and free time do not depend on infinite growth and consumption.[43] Economists Joseph E. Stiglitz (who sits on the UN Secretary-General-appointed High-Level Expert Group on Beyond GDP),[44] Jean-Paul Fitoussi and Martine Durand have also argued that GDP cannot explain the health of countries and societies, or even economic performance, concluding that there is a need to develop a dashboard of indicators to uncover who benefits from growth and whether growth is sustainable.[45]

Yet in both Northern and Southern countries, we are witnessing a dominant economic model that is structurally geared towards GDP growth in socially unnecessary and ecologically destructive sectors. Powerful multinational companies, elites and their government enablers relentlessly pursue the maximization of profit and shareholder value. This drives the overproduction of unsustainable, exploitative and socially inessential goods, from fast fashion and gas-guzzling SUVs (used by the richest in society alone) to phones designed for 'planned obsolescence'.[46] Decentring growth and advancing feminist wellbeing economies therefore requires rejecting the narrative and politics of scarcity, and instead embracing 'radical abundance': scaling back destructive industries and consumption while expanding public investments in low-carbon transport, renewable energy, housing, healthcare, education and social protection; redistributing resources; and prioritizing community wellbeing and ecological integrity over endless waste.[47]

The opportunity to advance the beyond GDP agenda

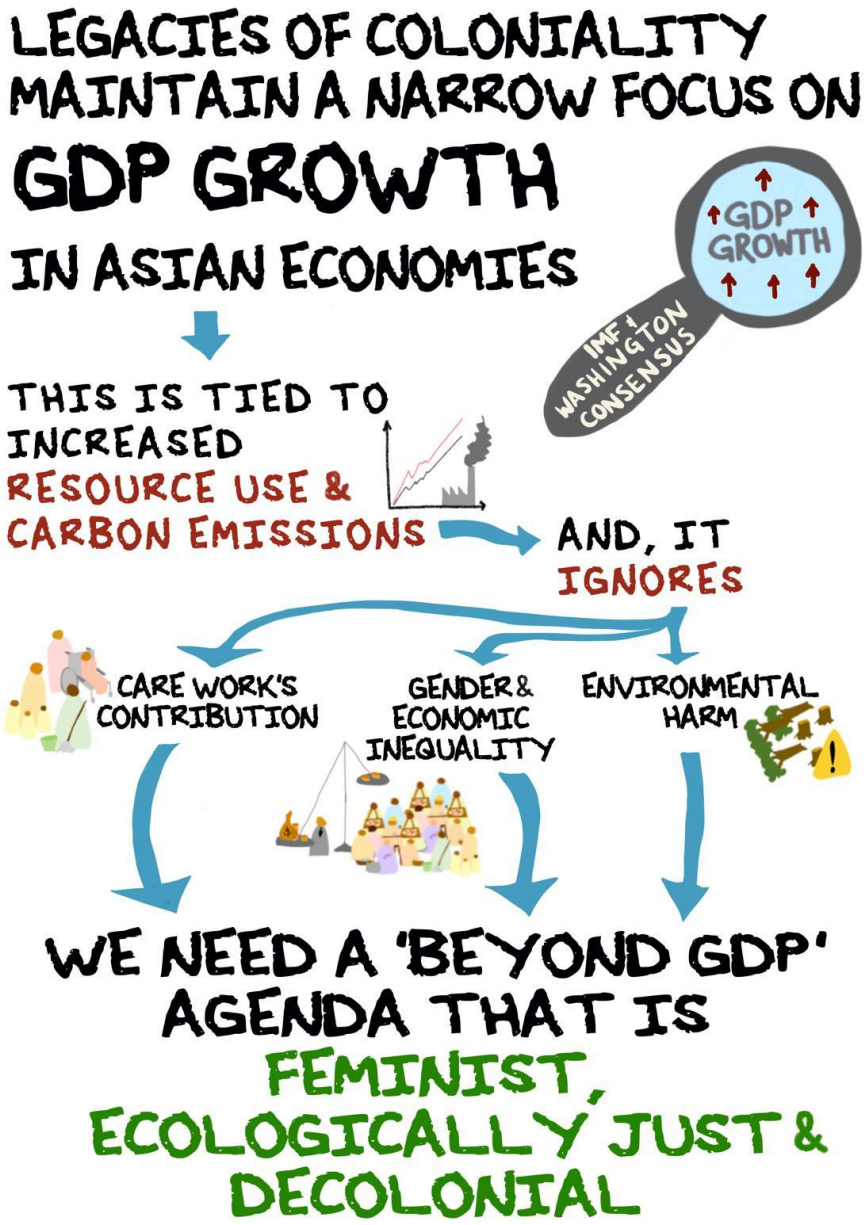
There is growing international recognition of the need to move beyond GDP. The UN Secretary-General is advancing this effort by overseeing the development of a set of alternative metrics, in line with the 2024 Pact for the Future (Action 53), recognizing that GDP provides an incomplete picture of prosperity and sustainable development.[48] In May 2025, the UN Secretary-General appointed an independent High-Level Expert Group to develop a conceptual framework that outlines key dimensions of progress and proposes a set of country-led, universally relevant indicators for a sustainable development dashboard. The 14 experts in the group will also advise on how to implement the dashboard effectively and strengthen data systems to support its use.[49]

Wellbeing indicators are not new – the Human Development Index (HDI), devised by economist Mahbub ul-Haq in the 1990s, is a well-known example.[50] However, the HDI was intended only as a supplement to GDP to assess developmental outcomes; it does not replace GDP nor challenge the growth-driven economic paradigm. The increasing

institutional attention for the beyond GDP agenda at the multilateral level therefore provides a critical opportunity to put forward genuine alternatives rather than mere complements, informed by an equity, justice-oriented and feminist analysis and principles, as well as the voices of Indigenous and justice-oriented movements around the world.

Scope and limitations

- This report primarily focuses on South Asia, South-East Asia and East Asia. The following countries and regions were included in the analysis: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Hong Kong, South Korea, China and Taiwan.
- The report includes an analysis of existing beyond GDP approaches in Asia but has not included every approach that has been implemented in the above countries. Instead, it focuses on capturing a diversity of approaches and the best-known ones. The focus is also on beyond GDP approaches that are implemented by governments, to understand the institutional momentum (or lack thereof) behind this agenda in Asia. As a result, it does not explore people's alternatives that may not be institutionally endorsed, including approaches and worldviews such as Eco-swaraj from India, Shohoj and the Nayakrishi Andolan movement in Bangladesh and solidarity economies like those promoted by the Confederation of Indonesia People's Movement.[51]


LEGACIES OF COLONIALITY MAINTAIN A NARROW FOCUS ON
GDP GROWTH
IN ASIAN ECONOMIES
GDP GROWTH
IMF / WASHINGTON CONSENSUS
THIS IS TIED TO INCREASED RESOURCE USE & CARBON EMISSIONS
AND, IT IGNORES
CARE WORK'S CONTRIBUTION
GENDER & ECONOMIC INEQUALITY
ENVIRONMENTAL HARM
WE NEED A 'BEYOND GDP' AGENDA THAT IS
FEMINIST, ECOLOGICALLY JUST & DECOLONIAL

2. The neocolonial growth paradigm in Asia: A feminist critique

GDP is often treated as the gold standard for judging economic success. But it tells us far less than we think about whether people's lives are improving, inequality is falling, or the planet is thriving. The critique of GDP from an equity- and justice-orientation highlights how it prioritizes market activity over human and ecological well-being. A feminist critique, furthermore, challenges the capitalist growth-oriented paradigm on the basis that it entrenches inequality through labour exploitation, resource extraction, ecological devastation and other violent systems of oppression, such as coloniality, sexism, classism, racism, casteism and ableism. Around GDP, this critique highlights the metric's patriarchal and colonial underpinnings, and its failure to account for gendered and intersecting inequalities in power, access, voice, choice, agency and rights.

An 'ecofeminist' analysis, as popularized by academics Marina Mies and Vandana Shiva, links the 'growth of violent, undemocratically imposed, unjust and unfair economic policies' with the 'growing frequency and brutality of violence against women'.[52] Its challenge is rooted in four key factors:

1. First, a patriarchal economic model separates value from disvalue, labour from non-labour and places value on certain types of knowledge. Women who sustain their families, children, community and society through unpaid care and domestic work are viewed as non-productive and economically inactive, with this being particularly pronounced in the devaluation of subsistence economies of the Global South.[53]
2. Second, capitalist patriarchy violently 'displaces women from their livelihoods and alienates them from the natural resources on which their livelihoods depend.' When infinite growth is prioritized in a world of limited resources, that growth is only maintained through 'the powerful grabbing of the resources of the vulnerable'.[54]
3. Third, economic reforms tend to undermine democracy, handing over government functions to private interests. While governments act as if economic reforms are separate from politics, they impose economic models that clearly reflect the political interests of a particular gender and class.[55]
4. Finally, and tying together the criticisms above, capitalist patriarchy treats everything, including women, as commodities to be bought and sold. This regime of profit and control devalues both human life and the environment, particularly as neoliberal economic policies privatize essential resources like food, land, water and even women and children. Together, these policies

> serve to undermine social values and intensify patriarchal violence, all in the name of 'growth'.[56]

Devised in the 1930s in the USA by economist Simon Kuznets, GDP was initially established as a measure to assess economic output during the Great Depression. Over time, GDP has become the yardstick for governments to measure success.[57] As a metric designed by white men in the Global North, GDP has been shaped by a Eurocentric view of progress, linking development and collective wellbeing to the mass production of goods, increased productivity and unrestrained economic growth.[58] As such, it has contributed to the marginalization of alternative and Indigenous ways of valuing progress and wellbeing, including principles that prioritize care, reciprocity, solidarity and environmental stewardship.

Global North countries built their wealth on colonial exploitation and continue this legacy by outsourcing polluting, low-value industries to the Global South. By GDP standards, these nations are praised for their economic strength, despite their prosperity being dependent on extracting Southern labour (including women's unpaid care and domestic work) and resources at minimal cost while systemically violating worker and community rights and destroying the environment.[59] A previous Oxfam report highlights how: '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.'[60]

Neocolonial expansionism is the political engine behind the growth paradigm in Asia

The dominance of GDP as a metric reflects the prioritization of economic growth as the core measure of progress. In Asia, this growth paradigm has been shaped by a legacy of Western colonialism and the neocolonial push for expansion. From the 16th to 20th centuries, colonial powers violently exploited their colonies in Asia for raw materials to fuel their industrialization.[61] Britain, for instance, monopolized India's cotton resources, importing them tariff-free to expand its textile industry, fuelling its industrial revolution. This dominance enabled Britain to overtake India and establish itself as the world's leading cotton textile manufacturer in the 19th century.[62] To grow lucrative commercial crops like cotton, opium, indigo and jute at the behest of the British, farmers in India were forced to abandon subsistence farming of food crops – a factor that drove many famines while India was under colonial rule.[63] Europeans also dominated rubber plantations in South-East Asia, particularly in British Malaya (modern Malaysia) and the Dutch East Indies (modern Indonesia). These plantations supplied rubber for steam cylinders, tyres, shoes and other products, which saw a surge in demand

during the industrial revolution in Western Europe and North America.[64]

Today, neocolonial powers have outsourced or offshored their labour-intensive manufacturing across the Global South, where labour (especially women's labour) is cheaper and raw materials are more abundant.[65] This hidden transfer of value sustains high levels of income and consumption in the Global North and constitutes an egregious drain of wealth. Annually, Northern appropriation of Southern resources amounts to US$10 trillion in losses for the Global South – outstripping the amount the South receives in aid by a factor of 30.[66] Colonialism, the effects of which persist through unequal power relations and coercive pressure from international financial institutions, has seen many Asian economies continue with an export-led model of industrialization and growth – manufacturing goods to export to the rest of the world, rather than organizing productive capacities around their own development needs.

This model has allowed wealthy Global North countries to sustain exponential economic growth (instead of having to slow down growth as their own labour becomes more expensive and resources more scarce), while dwarfing domestic production in the Global South and making countries reliant on imports to meet basic needs.[67] Across Asia, this export-driven growth model has left the working class – especially women – highly vulnerable to global demand fluctuations, as starkly revealed during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, Sialkot in Pakistan produces nearly 70% of the world's soccer balls, with women workers' pay and conditions typically lower than those of men.[68] The city also serves as a global hub for surgical instrument manufacturing. As a result of reliance on foreign consumption demand, workers and communities in Sialkot faced acute drops in demand in the midst of the pandemic.[69]

While export-driven growth is often presented as an opportunity for countries in the Global South to reduce poverty and increase industrialization, the pursuit of a cheap labour force to produce inexpensive goods for global consumption entails relying on low-wage, especially affecting the large numbers of women workers operating in special economic zones,70 often in precarious conditions.[71] Pressure from buyers forces down wages and production costs to obtain higher profit margins, leading to increased informality for many women workers – leaving them without minimum wage protections, healthcare or the ability to bargain for labour rights, as well as heightened exposure to gender-based violence.[72] In South Asia, over 80% of women working in non-agricultural sectors are informally employed.[73] This precarity is also illustrated by Malaysia's electronics manufacturing industry, where women have long formed the majority of the workforce. The industry has often employed young, unmarried women of ethnic Malay (as opposed to Chinese or Indian) origin, most of whom have no more than a lower secondary level education and experience weak social or class mobility.[74] The Malaysian government has argued that unionizing the electronics industry would drive away foreign investors; in any case, women have consistently remained underrepresented in labour unions.[75] Gendered labour precarity can also be observed in

Bangladesh's garment industry, which is a major driver of GDP growth and export-driven demand. Around 80% of its employees are women, who face conditions like unsafe working environments, wage theft, lack of social protection and gender-based violence.[76]

While corporations and people – but particularly wealthy elites – from the Global North are primary benefactors and drivers of this growth and profit-driven arrangement, domestic elites in the Global South have long been complicit in maintaining Northern dominance. Throughout colonized Asia, domestic elites in the military, bureaucracy and judiciary worked to serve the interests of colonial powers by enforcing colonial laws, suppressing local dissent and engaging in rent-seeking behaviour.[77] Post-independence, gatekeeping elites have often maintained hold over power and resources. In India, for example, colonial-era land tenure systems and bureaucratic structures enable continued rent-seeking by powerful elites through land grabs and displacement of marginalized communities, often to build profitable, large-scale industrial and infrastructure projects.[78]

The Northern-led IMF and multilateral development banks are fuelling the growth paradigm in Asia

The IMF and austerity

International financial institutions are a primary channel through which neocolonial powers impose a growth-oriented paradigm upon Asia. The IMF has played a central role in this process. Since the 1980s, the IMF has tied its loans to neoliberal conditions such as privatization, trade liberalization and austerity, while undermining social welfare and ecological sustainability.[79] Initially known as structural adjustment programmes, these conditionalities have evolved into today's agenda of 'fiscal consolidation' and the promotion of financialization and public-private partnerships – a dynamic described by academic Daniella Gabor as the 'Wall Street Consensus'.[80]

The IMF's quota-based power structure grants the most power to the richest countries, especially the USA, which has enough vote shares (16.49%) to veto decisions requiring a supermajority vote. By contrast, emerging and developing economies in Asia hold just 13.1% of votes, despite having 48.5% of the world's population and 31.9% of global GDP, making Asia the most underrepresented region at the IMF.[81] As a result of their underrepresentation, which is rooted in the wider history and context of coloniality, countries in the Global South bear the brunt of IMF-imposed austerity (often linked to achieving growth-oriented objectives) and hold little power to shape the institution's priorities. In countries such as Cambodia, Indonesia and Bangladesh, IMF-backed public wage bill cuts have consistently eroded the quality of essential services like education and healthcare, exacerbating unpaid care loads

for women and undermining decent work for highly feminized workforces.[82]

Under austerity, women must increase their provision of unpaid care and domestic work to compensate for cuts to public services. In Asia and the Pacific, women perform 80% of all unpaid care and domestic work.[83] This unequal responsibility is starkest in South Asia: in Pakistan and Bangladesh, women spend 11 and 8 times longer respectively than men on unpaid care and domestic labour.[84] Yet, because this labour is unpaid and therefore considered 'non-productive', none of its value is captured in GDP, even though 'productive' economic output would not be possible without it.

Privatization of public goods and services is often rationalized under austerity, in part because it can boost GDP in the short term by generating higher revenues; however, it also results in higher barriers to access. In India, an increasing reliance on large-scale, for-profit hospitals has resulted in staggering healthcare costs, which have driven people all over the country into debt and poverty.[85] Rural and migrant women are especially likely to go without essential healthcare due to rising costs.[86] Across South Asia, community healthcare workers (who are disproportionately women) have long formed the backbones of their underfunded healthcare systems, especially in rural and underserved areas, but they are regularly considered to be state 'volunteers' and so denied wages.[87]

Hierarchical care chains across Asia

The growth-driven economic model, combined with rising demand for care workers, underinvestment in social services and widening wealth disparities, has created a hierarchical 'care chain' shaped by gender, nationality, class, ethnicity and race.

In East Asia, declining birth rates, rising life expectancy and high women's labour force participation have fuelled a reliance on migrant domestic workers from countries like Indonesia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka, who take on caregiving roles in place of local workers. Migrant domestic workers in Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan endure exploitative conditions, including underpayment, emotional and physical strain, and constant surveillance from employers through home CCTV and behaviour policing. Despite being essential to host economies, migrant domestic workers are often treated as unskilled labour and excluded from migration policies that favour so-called high-skilled workers such as nurses and teachers.

Though more effective regulation and enforcement in countries and regions like Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan may result in better conditions for migrant domestic workers, gaps exist for workers in countries with less effective law enforcement, such as Thailand and Cambodia.

CASE STUDY | Growth for whom? IMF-driven austerity in Sri Lanka

Despite Sri Lanka's history of strong universal welfare measures, the country's public sector has been severely weakened by a devastating debt crisis and IMF-imposed austerity. These challenges are entrenched within

the broader neoliberal framework, which prioritizes market liberalization, fiscal consolidation and economic growth over social wellbeing.

After defaulting on its debt in April 2022, Sri Lanka sought its 17th IMF support package since its independence in 1948. Yet because IMF prescriptions favour creditor repayment and investor confidence – hallmarks of growthism – they inherently disregard the wellbeing of a population burdened by a rising cost of living and deteriorating public services. For instance, the IMF recommended that Sri Lanka allocate a mere 0.6% of GDP for targeted cash transfers as a social safety net (rather than prescribing universal social services), while demanding up to 4.5% of GDP for debt servicing. In 2024, Sri Lanka was set to pay 78.6% of its government revenue towards external debt payments – the highest among developing countries that year.

Prior to the debt crisis, Sri Lankans enjoyed a relatively robust healthcare system, with more than 95% of Sri Lankans relying on free public healthcare services. The country achieved a child mortality rate of 6.9 deaths per 1,000 live births – significantly lower than the global average of 37 deaths and well below that of its neighbour, India, at 35.73 deaths. Since the onset of its debt crisis, however, Sri Lanka's healthcare system has been deteriorating. In April 2022, there was a 40% increase in the cost of medicine, alongside a shortage of drugs and medical devices.

IMF policy recommendations are not entirely to blame for worsening health and other wellbeing outcomes, especially given the culpability of the local political elite. However, the IMF's pursuit of austerity is premised on reducing social spending and privatizing essential services at a time when people are *most* in need of affordable and quality public services and implicitly assumes that women will fill the gaps with their unpaid care and domestic work. The latest IMF programme in Sri Lanka has led to a doubling in goods and services taxes, which disproportionately affects low-income households, and increasing electricity tariffs, with costs surging by up to 400%. Austerity policies have triggered a sharp rise in the cost of living, with consequences including increased malnutrition, school dropouts and youth unemployment. Record-high food inflation has increased the population of Sri Lankans that are food insecure and in need of assistance, which can also have long-term impacts on health outcomes. Taxes on period products, raised to aid debt servicing, have further heightened economic vulnerability for women and girls, limiting opportunities and causing many rural girls to drop out of school.

The Asian Development Bank, extractive infrastructure projects and market liberalization

The Asian Development Bank (ADB), the largest development bank in Asia, is another key institution upholding the growth paradigm and serving elite interests. The USA and Japan are the ADB's top shareholders, each with 15.6% total shares and 12.8% voting power as of 2020.[88] Since the Bank was founded, critics have held that the USA and Japan play an outsized role over ADB lending, policy and staffing decisions.[89] US and Japanese heads of state and ADB presidents call on the ADB to focus on promoting economic growth and bolstering private investment – rather than, for instance, prioritizing decentralized and ecologically friendly models of production.[90]

In many cases, development projects financed by the ADB have driven land grabbing, displacement of Indigenous peoples and local communities and environmental degradation.[91] However, it should be noted that such transformations are not caused solely by ADB development programmes. Across Asia, the dislocation of minority ethnic groups is the result of a confluence of interlinked factors, including state-driven agrarian change, deeper integration into the global market, tourism, foreign investment, agricultural mechanization and urban migration.[92]

In spite of improvement over the past decade, the ADB has continued to encourage countries in Asia to expand extractive activities by incentivizing foreign direct investment through tax breaks and weak regulations, which allow transnational corporations to encroach on natural resources vital to Indigenous peoples and local communities through large-scale infrastructure projects, market liberalization and resource extraction.[93] This has been the case for ADB development projects in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) – an area that includes Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. In growth terms, the programmes appear successful: between 1994 and 2006, GDP in the GMS grew rapidly, exceeding 8% growth in 2005 and 2006. Formerly isolated economies like Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam could now attract significant international investment, with thriving intraregional trade and enhanced connectivity.[94]

However, many minority ethnic groups in the GMS have paid the costs of growth; their livelihoods are often highly dependent on forests, rivers and traditional agriculture, and as such they have been disproportionately affected by ecological degradation and the privatization of common resources.[95] Without access to credit, technical knowledge and commercial networks, the shift from subsistence farming to commercialized agriculture has often left these communities vulnerable to market volatility and environmental crises like droughts and floods. Traditional livelihood systems, deeply tied to cultural practices, are also frequently disrupted, causing psychological trauma.[96] The shift can be especially disempowering to women, whose roles in traditional livelihood systems may have been undermined in the transition to agricultural wage labour.[97]

3. Governments in Asia: Advancing or obstructing the beyond growth and GDP agenda?

Powerful government actors focus on growth…

Various ministries across Asia are beginning to explore alternative measures to GDP, signalling a potential shift toward equitable development frameworks that are better centred around human rights and social and ecological wellbeing. However, these efforts often fall short of driving substantial change, because the most influential state actors continue to prioritize economic growth in a way that may not always be inclusive or ecologically responsible. Economic ministries and central banks almost uniformly prioritize economic growth in their national planning and economic policymaking. This is illustrated by the case of Indonesia's Ministry of National Development Planning, which implements a National Medium-Term Development Plan that always emphasizes infrastructure development and foreign investment to maximize GDP growth, without necessarily being inclusive.[98]

…while alternative objectives are explored by institutions starved of resources

In most Asian countries, ministries responsible for protecting women's rights are often combined with broader portfolios (e.g. social affairs, community development, health, youth, family, and children) and lack both the decision-making authority and budget needed to challenge the prevailing emphasis on economic productivity. A 2015 review by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) found that national women's machineries in 17 countries – such as ministries, departments, divisions, committees, councils and offices – receive annual funding ranging from just 0.003% to 3.12% of national budgets. Staffing levels are similarly limited, with full-time employees ranging from as few as one to just under 500, and in 16 countries, these bodies have fewer than ten full-time staff.[99]

Gender-focused ministries remain constrained by the framework of growth

While strides have been made in recognizing certain issues such as unpaid care work, these efforts remain supplementary and fail to integrate such labour meaningfully into more wellbeing-orientated, core economic metrics. And while some ministries and commissions collaborate, for instance, with feminist or women's rights organizations, their efforts frequently remain constrained by the traditional, GDP-driven framework. As such, care work is framed as a 'non-productive' social issue rather than a foundational economic contributor, limiting its potential to drive transformative change centred on wellbeing.

Even in the context of social issues, neoliberal models prioritize policy interventions that drive economic growth by prioritizing deregulation, trade liberalization and privatization and promoting minimal state intervention. In gender-focused ministries, this can manifest as a strong emphasis on promoting entrepreneurship and upskilling as pathways for women's economic participation, ultimately shifting the burden of social provisioning from the state to individuals.[100] For instance, India's Ministry of Women and Child Development launched an initiative (now defunct) called the *Mahila E-haat* platform, which provided an online marketplace to support women entrepreneurs in formal business sectors.[101] Indonesia's Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection and Thailand's Thai Women SME Association have often emphasized the promotion of women's welfare through support for women-led small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).[102]

While such initiatives are important in addressing some economic barriers for women, they often fail to address the structural factors underpinning gendered economic injustice (e.g. lack of labour regulations, decent work, protection from gender-based violence and access to food and housing, as well as the negative impacts of broader processes of financialization and militarization, among many other factors). They may also exclude the large proportion of women who undertake informal work without legal protection and cannot participate in such schemes due to the nature of their informality. For example, in Korean rural areas, women's contributions often remain invisible in formal economic metrics.[103] Though many of these issues will fall under the mandate of other ministries (e.g. finance, labour and national planning), there is a need for greater collaboration with women and gender ministries to overcome siloed mandates and drive the transformative economy-wide change that is needed to address inequalities and remove the structural barriers to women's economic empowerment.

Regional intergovernmental platforms in Asia similarly prioritize growth above all other objectives

Governments in Asia, as in every other region of the world, often work together to maximize economic growth – a goal that takes precedence over almost any other policy objective. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), arguably the most important intergovernmental platform in Asia, explicitly states that its primary objective is to 'accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region'.[104] This aim is embedded in various policy documents, such as the ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint 2025, whose first goal is to 'Create a deeply integrated and highly cohesive ASEAN economy that would support sustained high economic growth and resilience even in the face of global economic shocks and volatilities'.[105] ASEAN also forms partnerships with other major economies to pursue economic growth. One example is the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which came into force in 2022 with the objective of liberalizing trade and investment in order to sustain growth. It comprises the 10 ASEAN countries and five other countries with which ASEAN has free trade agreements (Australia, New Zealand, China, Japan and South Korea).[106]

4. Existing alternatives in Asia: Are they sufficiently transformative and different from GDP?

Countries in Asia are increasingly recognizing the need to move beyond GDP as a measure of progress. Some actors champion approaches aimed at moving away from using growth, consumption and productivity as the main indicators of societal progress. Others want alternatives that merely complement GDP, rather than transform the system. Alternative frameworks may highlight the need for long-term sustainability, justice, ecological resilience, equity and inclusion, addressing the gaps left by GDP, which has a narrow focus on short-term economic gains. Yet even these alternatives may remain constrained by conventional economic understandings of 'progress'. Most beyond GDP wellbeing metrics in Asia are still rooted in the implicit notion that social, environmental and cultural considerations of wellbeing are secondary to GDP growth, especially in a context of coloniality, debt, austerity and narratives of scarcity. Therefore, breaking free from the dominance of GDP requires going further than descriptive measures of wellbeing: it demands approaches that fundamentally challenge the existing growth paradigm.

In this chapter, we map existing cases of beyond GDP approaches across Asia to ask: do they truly go beyond GDP, or do they replicate the orthodox economic approach reflected in GDP and the growth paradigm? This question is answered through: (1) an analysis of the 'state of implementation' – i.e. whether and to what extent beyond GDP approaches are impacting policymaking and offering genuine alternatives to the growth-oriented paradigm; and (2) an evaluation of their transformative potential in providing a feminist measure that covers gender-just, ecologically just and decolonial dimensions (see **Annex 1** for all indicators mapped). It bears noting that these dimensions are inherently interlinked, but this analysis separates key aspects of each dimension to provide a more granular analysis.

The state of beyond GDP implementation in Asia

Economic decision-making continues to be centred on achieving GDP growth, despite the existence of widely discussed alternative metrics. There is still much variation in the state of implementation of beyond GDP approaches in Asia in terms of where they align with the spectrum below, where 1 is the least effective and 5 is the most advanced.

Figure 1. State of the beyond GDP implementation spectrum.

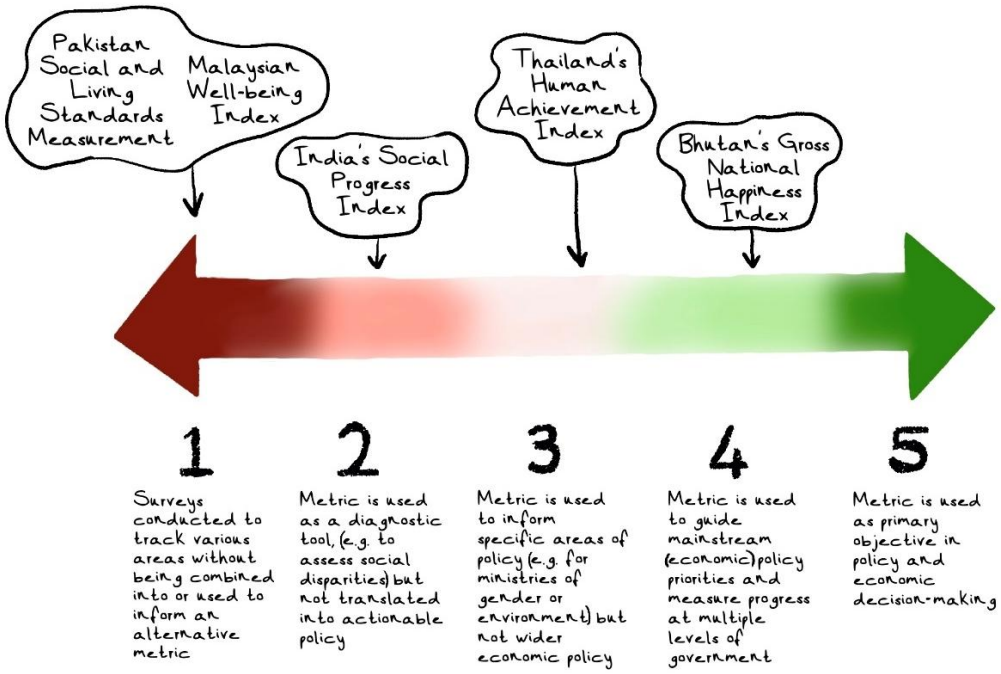


Illustration by Alex Bush

To understand the state of implementation in Asia, we analyzed the citation of beyond GDP metrics in policy documents from selected Asian countries. This study revealed very low utilization of these metrics in informing policy, especially in economic decision-making. Our findings, as mapped according to the spectrum above, indicate the following:

1. At the least-effective end of the implementation spectrum, some countries in Asia conduct surveys tracking social indicators like access to education and sanitation, but do not synthesize the findings into broader wellbeing metrics. For example, the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement (PSLM)[107] collects data across environmental, social and economic areas but does not combine this into composite scores akin to those in the Malaysian Well-being Index (MyWI).[108] This reflects a missed opportunity to build cohesive, actionable wellbeing metrics on a national scale. However, it is important to note that collecting data in this way can still inform policymaking on social investments.
2. As represented by the next (i.e. second) point in the spectrum, most metrics serve as a diagnostic tool to assess the disparity between social and economic progress (proxied by output/GDP growth). Among other diagnostic uses in the region, India's Social Progress Index (SPI)[109] data has been used to illustrate how citizens living in economically advanced districts do not necessarily enjoy enhanced wellbeing. However, these diagnostics do not translate into policies that address such disparities widely, with their use being limited to specific interventions like the Aspirational Districts. They are also not

used as a primary policy objective like GDP growth. Even policies that cite these types of metrics often do so without offering roadmaps to attain those targets. For instance, Malaysia's National Fourth Industrial Policy targets a MyWI score of 136.5 by 2030, but does not explicitly discuss the policy interventions that impact the various domains within this index.[110] By contrast, GDP growth is deeply embedded in both short- and long-term development plans, which comprise concrete measures to attain time-bound targets.[111]

3. Further illustrating its diagnostic uses, the micro-data behind these metrics is often used by researchers in expanding the knowledge base on social, economic and demographic disparities within populations, in order to inform specific areas of policy. For instance, Thailand's Human Achievement Index (HAI)[112] was combined with other datasets to reveal large inequalities within minority ethnic groups (such as the Lao Thais and Malay Thais) for the key domains highlighted by the HAI, which include elements like education, housing and living environment, and political participation, and in turn inform social policymaking.[113]
4. There are rare examples where metrics have led to further steps in implementation, impacting economic decision-making: for instance, Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) Index[114] has been used to formulate screening tools to assess how proposed public policies will impact specific domains (i.e. policy areas) within the index.[115] The GNH Index is also being used as a touchpoint for resource allocation formulas (although this is a nascent effort), indicating the potential role that wellbeing indices can play in resource distribution. Resource allocation formulas are currently based on characteristics such as population, multidimensional poverty rates and geographic isolation. Integrating the GNH Index into such formulas would enable economic policymakers to consider not just economic deprivations, but also social and environmental deprivations that lead to low wellbeing.[116]
5. No metric was determined to have achieved the fifth and most advanced state of implementation, in which an alternative metric is a complete substitute for GDP in decision-making rather than a complement to it.

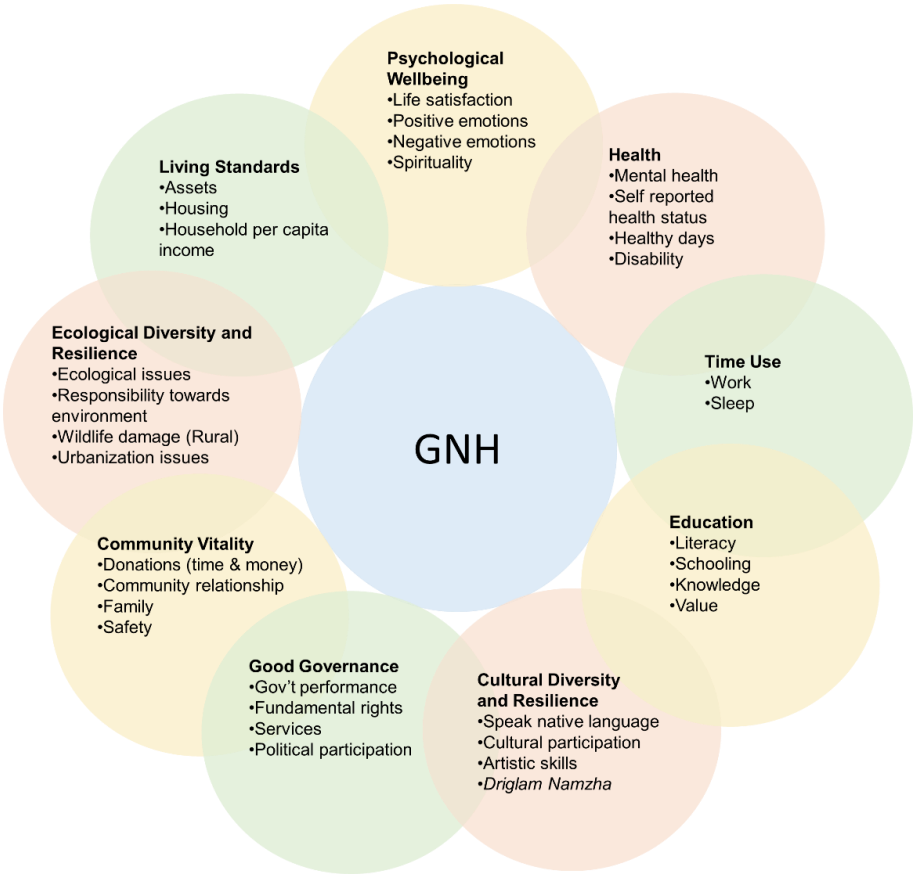
Lack of implementation does not necessarily mean that these measures have been ineffective in establishing momentum for the beyond GDP agenda in Asia. Alternative metrics have highlighted gaps in the existing mix of short-term growth-oriented policies and have acted as key diagnostic tools in certain development areas – such as poverty reduction – against the backdrop of GDP dominance. However, while alternative metrics have been used to justify 'corrective' measures to address the failures of GDP-focused policies, they have not resulted in a broader shift toward an equitable, wellbeing-centred model of development. This underscores the need for a comprehensive framework that is not anchored in GDP, nor merely a diagnostic tool to

reveal GDP's shortcomings, but one that addresses the multifaceted, intersectional dimensions of human rights and wellbeing and ecological sustainability, and informs mainstream economic decision-making.

A closer look at Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) Index

Bhutan's GNH Index[117] has received much recognition for being among the few alternative frameworks to significantly influence economic decision-making, in turn allowing Bhutan to achieve higher levels of wellbeing despite having a relatively low per capita income.[118] The metric was produced after Bhutan's fourth king declared that GDP was not an equitable measurement of societal wellbeing and should not be the primary yardstick for governance.[119] The GNH Index was thus born as a metric prioritizing societal happiness within planetary boundaries by emphasizing the integration of sociocultural, spiritual, political, economic and ecological wellbeing into national development strategies and policies. It has been described as 'a living alternative development approach [which] can provide important reflections for degrowth debates and social movements'.[120] As shown below, the index includes nine domains and 33 indicators.

Figure 3: Bhutan's GNH Index



Source: Adapted from GNH and GNH Index: A Short Guide to Gross National Happiness Index, 2012

Learnings from the GNH Index

Income does not determine happiness: Results from the GNH Index align with research demonstrating that long-term happiness is not necessarily correlated with income growth.[121] A study on GNH data from 2022 shows that while the two lowest quintiles had the lowest incidence of 'happy'

people and the three highest quintiles had the highest shares, levels of happiness in the top three quintiles were roughly similar, reinforcing the notion that wellbeing is multidimensional and depends on non-material factors such as vibrancy of community and spirituality.[122]

Accountability for wellbeing to citizens: The GNH Index gives economic measures like household per capita income equal weight to socio-cultural, political and ecological dimensions.[123] This allows Bhutanese citizens to hold their political leaders accountable for government policy to achieve these holistic dimensions of wellbeing. Government agencies also use GNH policy and project screening tools to understand whether their efforts are aligned with GNH.[124]

What does the future hold for the GNH approach?

Bhutan's government appears to be reining in its happiness-based economic approach due to negative economic conditions. In 2024, Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay suggested the need to develop a 'Gross National Happiness 2.0' because Bhutan will need to 'grow [its] economy' to address high youth unemployment rates, emigration and poverty levels. This does not mean abandoning the happiness-based approach entirely, but, according to Tobgay, balancing growth with 'social progress, environmental protection, cultural protection and good governance'.[125]

Evaluation of whether and how existing GDP alternatives can address inequality and cover gender-just, ecologically just and decolonial dimensions

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.[126] Beyond GDP frameworks must '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."'[127] (p.42)

Furthermore, GDP alternatives must comprehensively measure well-being, sustainability and social progress and include the voices of marginalized groups. Keeping this focus, this report recognizes three dimensions as particularly important: feminist/gender-just, ecologically just and decolonial. These dimensions intersect and reinforce one another, but have been used as separate categories for the purposes of this report to allow a more detailed analysis (see Annex 1 for specific indicators mapped).

Gender-just alternatives to GDP

Gender-just alternatives to GDP are crucial to dismantle entrenched patriarchal biases in economic measurement, ensuring that development truly serves not just women, but all people and advances feminist and decolonial values alongside environmental sustainability. A gender-just alternative to GDP would place care and gender justice at the core of collective wellbeing, addressing the structural drivers of inequality faced by marginalized genders and others at the intersections of multiple systems of oppression.

Rather than relying solely on women's labour force participation – a common but limited metric for assessing gendered economic outcomes – it would incorporate broader measures of economic rights, wellbeing and job quality, in alignment with the International Labour Organization's Decent Work Agenda.[128] This includes measures of gendered outcomes and disparities in unpaid care and domestic work – explicitly recognizing its critical contribution to social and economic wellbeing – as well as informal employment, wages and universal access to high-quality, gender-responsive public services. These services are particularly vital for women and gender-diverse people, as they reduce care loads, support low-income households and create opportunities for decent work.[129] Additionally, intersectional data is essential to capture how overlapping identities – such as race, class and ethnicity – shape women and gender-diverse people's access to opportunities and outcomes, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of wellbeing disparities and ensuring that resources are channelled to address these.[130]

Though the focus here is on economic indicators, as outlined above, there are many other crucial determinants of women's wellbeing that are deeply interlinked with their economic outcomes. These include measures to address sexual health and reproductive rights, gender-based violence, political participation and land, inheritance and property rights.

Gender-just dimensions of existing alternatives: What do we observe?

Countries include gender-aware indicators in varied ways. India's SPI recognizes gendered outcomes in political participation through the number of women MPs and candidates, and also addresses gender disparities in access to education and financial inclusion (e.g. access to credit). India's Ease of Living Index (EoLI) assesses wellbeing in 114 cities in India across three pillars that include 14 categories and 50 indicators. Despite its many indicators, only the 'Safety & Security' category appears to have a gendered dimension, where it calculates the number of crimes against 'vulnerable groups' (women, children and elderly people). Malaysia's MyWI measures the number of domestic violence cases under its 'Family' domain.

The Korean Quality of Life (KQoL) Indicators do not explicitly include gendered indicators, but the individual indicators (such as population with tertiary education, under the education domain) are disaggregated by gender and discussed in the KQoL reports to reveal gendered disparities.

Bhutan's GNH Index offers more comprehensive gender disaggregation, both in its overall calculation of GNH and individually across its nine domains. GNH data can be further disaggregated by rural vs urban, districts and occupational categories, enabling policymakers to identify intersectional deprivations.

Why are existing approaches inadequate?

While understanding elements such as women's political participation and gendered differences in domains such as education and health are crucial in achieving gender equality, the approaches fail to capture critical information on structural inequalities such as in job quality, unpaid care and domestic labour and deprivations among women in marginalized communities. Capturing unpaid care work is especially important in Asia, where women perform a large share of unpaid labour relative to other regions. The dearth of intersectional data in these metrics also makes it difficult to assess how women's experiences vary across ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds and other intersecting identities, which is essential for understanding the full scope of gendered inequalities and rights deprivations.

Lack of disaggregation and intersectional data is, in fact, a significant issue obstructing progress towards a feminist approach beyond GDP, and even extends to the most popular beyond GDP approaches used worldwide, such as the Human Development Index (HDI). The HDI captures outcomes in health, education and income (therefore still including a derivative of GDP), but overall, it presents a national average score that is not disaggregated and hence fails to capture dynamic inequalities across regions, ethnic groups, gender or income levels. Variants of the HDI do exist to offer some level of insight into inequalities between groups – such as the Inequality-Adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI), Planetary Pressures-adjusted Human Development Index (PHDI) and Gender Development Index (GDI) – but they are still limited in their ability to provide an intersectional analysis based on overlapping deprivations. In some cases, these variations only add an extra component to the original index without fundamentally addressing the underlying disparities (ethnicity, gender, etc.) and structural drivers. This limitation means that while the HDI and its variants can provide a broad overview of development, they may overlook critical nuances that are especially important in addressing inequities faced by the most marginalized women (e.g. women in rural areas, women working in the informal sector).

Recommendations for embedding gender-just dimensions in beyond GDP approaches

- Embed the priorities and demands of women and marginalized genders in all their diversity into the development and implementation of beyond GDP approaches, recognizing that intersecting systems of oppression such as race, class, migrant status, geographical location and caste will result in different needs.

- Incorporate time-use data in beyond GDP frameworks in order to capture unpaid care and domestic work. Our mapping shows a lack of such data in Asian metrics, despite national initiatives to integrate time-use surveys in statistical systems in countries such as India, Thailand and Bangladesh.
- Incorporate gendered indicators and enable disaggregation by gender, race, ethnicity and other dimensions to observe and address intersectional deprivations.
- Integrate assessments of the quality and security of work undertaken by women, including in the informal economy, and their access to quality and affordable public services and universally accessible social protection. While it is important to capture such data for all workers (not just women), it is particularly important for women who currently face worse working conditions than men. Some key questions that need to be addressed are: Are the roles held by women supportive of workers' rights and dignity, including through payment of living wages and/or secure livelihoods? Are these jobs (in)secure in nature?
- Incorporate non-economic indicators that determine wellbeing and economic outcomes for women and gender-diverse people, including on measures to address sexual health and reproductive rights, gender-based violence, political participation and land, inheritance and property rights.

Ecologically just alternatives to GDP

An ecologically just alternative to GDP would move beyond surface-level assessments of the environment to capture the intricate connections between ecosystems, human wellbeing and long-term resource sustainability. It should aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of ecological health that includes factors such as biodiversity, carbon emissions and the long-term impacts of climate change, resource extraction, pollution and intensive large-scale agriculture.

An ecologically just framework would also shift its focus from static economic indicators to long-term ecological health, sustainable resource use and the unequal impacts of environmental harm on Indigenous and marginalized communities, particularly women within these communities. This approach recognizes that true progress lies in preserving the balance and resilience of the biosphere, ensuring wellbeing for all forms of life and fostering ethical stewardship of the planet so it is safeguarded for future generations. As recognized by Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva in their book *Ecofeminism*, patriarchy is intimately linked with ecological degradation, global militarism and the destruction of nature; thus, a feminist beyond GDP agenda must address these interlinked systems of oppression. [131]

Ecologically just dimensions of existing alternatives: What do we observe?

There is broad recognition in existing beyond GDP approaches in Asia that a healthy environment is a crucial component of wellbeing. Consequently, short-term environmental indicators like air quality and forest cover are commonly included under pillars on environmental quality, including in metrics such as Malaysia's MyWI and India's SPI. Thailand's HAI tracks

natural disasters, water quality, waste management and pollution indicators; India's EoLI includes indicators on the concentration of pollutants like sulphur trioxide; and the National Well-being Indicators in R.O.C. (Taiwan) (which is based on the OECD Better Life Index) examines air pollution, water quality and average green spaces per person in urban areas.

Some metrics go beyond short-term environmental indicators by considering long-term environmental health and/or drivers of environmental degradation. For instance, while the Korean KQoL Indicators include short-term indicators such as urban park area per capita and fine dust concentration level, it also includes an indicator on climate change anxiety as part of its environment domain, which it defines as the 'proportion of the population who are anxious [based on respondents answering "very worried" or "slightly worried"] about climate change'.

More countries are also beginning to implement the UN-supported System of Environmental Economic Accounting (SEEA) to add environmental statistics to their national accounts. Countries in Asia that have implemented the SEEA include Bhutan, India, Indonesia, Laos, Nepal and Thailand.

Why are existing approaches inadequate?

The inclusion of indicators such as air quality and forest cover highlight the importance of environmental health, but they often only do so by considering the environment's (short-term) utility for humans, valuing it for its 'ecosystem services' rather than more broadly respecting planetary boundaries and ecological integrity. This approach only considers the symptoms of ecological degradation, rather than the underlying structural problems driving it over time. While climate change is increasingly being recognized by some of the indicators in the region, mere recognition does not necessarily lead to change. There is a need to take account of how emissions and pollution impact upon communities and the environment, both beyond borders and into the future.

Similarly, the increasing popularity of natural capital frameworks like the SEEA in national accounting may also be of some concern. Such frameworks are not necessarily promoted as alternatives to GDP, but rather as a means to monitor environmental assets like energy and water resources, track the economic uses of these resources and account for return flows of waste and emissions.[132] This form of natural capital accounting can also risk commodifying nature in a way that reinforces patriarchal and colonial frameworks, as it reduces ecosystems to marketable assets and disregards their intrinsic, cultural and relational value and significance.

A fundamental shift in how we perceive environmental value is required, moving from a fixation on short-term snapshots of environmental health to more long-term environmental indicators that are underpinned by an intrinsic valuing of the natural world and a holistic understanding of wellbeing and ecological harmony and integrity.

Pathways for embedding ecologically just dimensions in beyond GDP approaches

- Include environmental indicators that challenge the short-termism of GDP growthism and address the root causes of its impacts, rather than those that merely provide a snapshot of the symptoms. Examples include countries' ecological overshoot of safe planetary boundaries based on their consumption-based emissions, as explored in the decolonial analysis below.
- Incorporate assessments of unequal environmental degradation across and within communities (including intersectional impacts), similar to the Environmental Justice Index,[133] which explores the unequal impacts of environmental hazards across regions. This may also include measures that assess access to, control and ownership of natural resources, including water bodies and forests, and other issues related to land rights.
- Rather than relying on a set of imposed indicators that gauge environmental health, actively involve Indigenous communities to understand the deep interlinkages between human wellbeing and nature and the environment. For instance, in Asia, Indigenous perspectives like the Mentawai people's *Arat Sabulungan* belief system in Indonesia, which views nature as spiritually significant and emphasizes harmony with the environment, provide valuable insights for moving beyond growth-centric models.[134] This may also include a Rights of Nature approach, which is based on recognizing and respecting that nature has the right to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles, rather than treating nature as property and productive inputs.[135] Similarly, it may involve promoting collective rights as they relate to the environment, rather than (only) individual human rights. In Malaysia's Sarawak region, for example, Indigenous communities have successfully asserted their collective land rights to halt encroachment by palm oil interests, safeguarding biodiversity, traditional ecological knowledge and women's rights.[136]

Decolonial alternatives to GDP

A decolonial alternative would strive to factor in elements such as historical land dispossession, resource extraction, carbon emissions and the ongoing consequences of neocolonial practices such as exported emissions, ensuring that economic metrics reflect the true costs of structural injustices between countries. For instance, the Sustainable Development Index (SDI),[137] developed by leading degrowth advocate Jason Hickel, retains the core components of the HDI[138] – life expectancy, education and income – while adjusting for each country's ecological overshoot, which accounts for CO_2 emissions and material footprint relative to sustainable planetary boundaries.[139] Consequently, the SDI, while developed in the Global North, adopts a decolonial perspective to some extent by challenging the Global North's growth-centric model. It emphasizes development pathways that respect ecological boundaries, promoting progress that avoids unsustainable consumption, particularly when it relies on the exploitation of labour and resources from the Global South. However, it should be noted that the SDI does not offer any disaggregation.

Redressing colonial history requires a decolonial beyond GDP approach that includes reparative justice – acknowledging the reparations owed by colonizers to formerly colonized nations in the Global South – and incorporates measures of harm caused by cross-border financial flows and emissions-intensive consumption. A truly decolonial alternative must also prioritize community perspectives and Indigenous voices in defining wellbeing, rather than the metrics and models of 'development' imposed by the Global North and international financial institutions, recognizing that wellbeing is deeply rooted in communal relationships, reciprocity, cultural practices, ecological harmony and shared values.[140]

Decolonial dimensions of existing alternatives: What do we observe?

Decolonial approaches to formulating beyond GDP metrics in Asia remain largely absent or underdeveloped. The closest approximation are metrics that incorporate the importance of local culture, such as engaging with community initiatives. For instance, **Malaysia's MyWI**[141] includes cultural indicators like museum visits and library memberships, while the **Korean KQoL** Indicators[142] includes subjective assessments on 'Sense of Belonging to a Community' under its Family/Community domain. **India's EoLI**[143] limits 'Identity and Culture' to indicators such as restoration and reuse of historical buildings and the number of cultural/sports events hosted in the city. Some indices do not include any indicators on cultural engagement; this is the case for **Thailand's HAI**,[144] even within its 'Family and Community Life' dimension.

Bhutan's GNH Index[145] provides an example of how a wellbeing metric can reflect Indigenous philosophies and ways of thinking, challenging imposed (Global Northern) perspectives on what wellbeing looks like. The GNH Index differs from other dashboard or composite measures as it emphasizes pluralism, through both objective and subjective indicators, in shaping policy. An individual is considered 'happy' if they have achieved sufficiency in at least 66% of the 33 indicators. Sufficiency in this context means meeting a predetermined threshold of wellbeing in each indicator. For instance, the sufficiency threshold in the education domain is six years of schooling, which was determined based on legal requirements, policy goals and social values.[146] In this approach, individuals can disregard the indicators that do not matter to them, giving Bhutanese people greater autonomy to define what wellbeing means to them. Similarly, the KQoL Indicators use objective indicators and subjective survey data.[147]

Why are existing approaches inadequate?

None of the metrics that we have analyzed appear to be underpinned by an explicitly decolonial framework, which would be based on principles of sovereignty, justice, solidarity, reciprocity and reparations. While cultural engagements and subjective interpretations of sense of belonging recognize the importance of community connection, they fail to challenge North-South (neo)colonial asymmetries in growth, development, extractivism and economic decision-making power. They also fail to account for the rich tapestry of Indigenous practices and community values, which could offer a more comprehensive understanding of wellbeing across different cultural contexts, particularly as many

Indigenous philosophies challenge growth-centred logic. For many Indigenous communities, wellbeing is deeply tied to land, spiritual practices, kinship networks and intergenerational knowledge, none of which are adequately captured by standard indicators. A truly decolonial approach would seek to integrate these unique, and often context-specific, cultural elements into the core of wellbeing metrics, recognizing that wellbeing is not only an individual experience but also communal, historical and ecological in nature.

Some metrics may be more effective than others in advancing a decolonial framework. While subjective perceptions can better capture localized, non-imposed notions of wellbeing to inform policymaking on a more democratic basis, evaluations based solely on perceptions may overlook vital but intangible factors like unpaid care or healthy ecosystems, if the people responding to the surveys are not aware of the importance of such factors. A mixed-methods approach combining subjective and objective indicators offers a more holistic perspective, especially in contexts where people normalize scarcity in public services and report satisfaction simply because they expect little improvement.

Pathways for embedding decolonial dimensions in beyond GDP approaches

Ensure a participatory approach to devising wellbeing frameworks, especially for the selection of domains and indicators that define wellbeing. This must include ensuring that Indigenous peoples and local communities have space to define their own notions of both individual and collective wellbeing, rather than relying on externally imposed indicators, as a crucial part of disrupting entrenched colonial dynamics, through both procedural and substantive representation.

Move beyond traditional per capita measures to measures that capture collective wellbeing, similar to New Zealand's *He Ara Wairoa* framework, in order to learn from and apply insights from cultures outside the dominant one.[148] This should also include accounting for local-level inequalities between historically marginalized groups and/or areas.

Account for North-South asymmetries by including indicators that highlight ecological and social injustice, similar to the SDI,[149] which adjusts for environmental impact between countries. Other examples of indicators and metrics to factor in may include patterns of migration; quality of work; dependence on outsourcing of work and utilization of cheap migrant labour; the contribution of migrant labourers that are not receiving social security or welfare; and elements of coloniality that are perpetuated through global economic governance, such as sovereign fiscal and policy/decision-making space, debt, taxation and climate finance. An important element of such measures is that they account for relations between countries, rather than simply measuring wellbeing within one country. This ensures that wellbeing metrics do not implicitly favour high-consumption, high-emissions lifestyles and instead value sustainable development pathways appropriate to each region.

5. Opportunities to advance the beyond GDP agenda in Asia: Connecting with feminist demands

Dislodging GDP from its dominant position requires multiple strands of action including transforming narratives in academic curricula, political debate and popular media, challenging the perception that GDP growth is universally positive. Creating new cross-disciplinary, cross-movement and cross-institutional consensus is important to shape alternative frameworks.[150] To ensure the alternatives reflect the priorities and values that are currently excluded, such a process would need to meaningfully engage women, Indigenous people and those in positions of vulnerability. Likewise, efforts must centre voices from the Global South and invite broad public participation in shaping the alternative agenda.

Advancing feminist, decolonial and ecologically just alternatives to GDP requires a more equitable and democratic distribution of decision-making power. This chapter particularly explores the feminist and women's rights ecosystem of beyond GDP approaches in Asia, analyzing critiques of GDP, regional economic and political contexts and broader feminist aspirations for economic and gender justice. By linking these aspirations to the beyond GDP agenda and other struggles to shape alternative frameworks, beyond GDP advocates can foster a more inclusive and universal approach.

The analysis focuses on feminist organizations rather than broader climate, environmental, social or economic justice movements – unless they are explicitly tied to women's rights. However, many feminist groups are embedded in wider justice-oriented movements, advocating on multiple fronts. This targeted approach highlights opportunities for feminist and women's rights groups to broaden their movement base, engage more deeply with structural issues and build regional and cross-country connections through beyond GDP advocacy. In Asia, where government crackdowns, militarization, economic insecurity and shrinking civic space threaten activism, justice-oriented movements must unite to challenge the prevailing economic paradigm.

Critiques of GDP and the growth paradigm in Asia's feminist ecosystem

As discussed in previous chapters (**The neocolonial growth paradigm** and **Existing alternatives in Asia**), feminist criticisms of the growth paradigm include its undervaluation of care and domestic work. On that basis, movements advocate for care work to be embedded in national accounting frameworks to capture the true extent of women's economic contributions (whether in the formal, informal or care economy) and the extent to which the economy is underpinned by care work.

For example, **Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era** (DAWN), a global organization that also works specifically in Asia, has produced research on how global international financial institutions perpetuate growth-centric models and austerity policies that undermine women's rights, violate human rights, undervalue care work and sideline Southern feminist perspectives.[151] In a similar vein, Sri Lanka-based **Feminist Collective for Economic Justice** points out that in Sri Lanka, priorities like 'rapid economic growth' and 'economic modernization' often overshadow the need for social protections, with decision-makers undermining protections for marginalized populations while raising defence budgets.[152]

However, despite the varying feminist critiques of growth models and GDP, there is a noticeable gap in terms of organizations proposing clear alternatives to GDP. This is partly due to the complexity of developing a comprehensive framework that can capture the gendered nuances of wellbeing, social equity and ecological resilience, especially one that is aligned with a structural feminist analysis. This gap presents an opportunity for feminist organizations to contribute to the beyond GDP movement, mainly by being active participants that develop and advocate for actionable alternatives that reflect the realities of women and gender-diverse people's economic wellbeing and development. Feminist organizations can draw on their on-the-ground experiences and knowledge to inform more powerful and mainstream stakeholders of inclusive and equitable economic metrics, as a means to catalyze a wider shift to economies centred on care. This will require collaboration with economists, statisticians, policymakers and communities to ensure that any proposed alternative measures are conceptually sound and can be implemented in practice. It will also require sufficient resourcing and a commitment to embed alternative approaches as a central part of decision-making, rather than a marginal measure that has little impact on policy objectives.

Advocacy opportunities for the beyond GDP agenda: Connecting with feminist demands for economic, social and environmental justice in Asia

Champions of the beyond GDP agenda can strengthen their movement by aligning with feminist demands for economic, social and environmental justice, engaging organizations that may not have previously focused on this issue. Feminist advocacy across Asia is shaped by colonial histories, sovereign debt, austerity and varying levels of state involvement in economic and social matters. Recognizing these nuances is essential for understanding how growth- and GDP-focused economic models impact different regions and advocating for alternative frameworks that address the specific needs and realities of diverse communities.

However, (grassroots) feminist groups focused on local issues often face barriers to engaging in systemic advocacy, including limited resources, unclear outcomes and technical language. Overcoming these challenges is crucial to ensuring an inclusive and intersectional beyond GDP movement. In Asia's feminist ecosystem, informal networks and grassroots movements play a vital role in advancing economic justice, particularly in politically repressive or resource-constrained environments. Rooted in community-driven advocacy, these groups – especially those led by marginalized women, such as Dalit and Indigenous leaders – highlight the real-world impacts of GDP-centric models on households, small enterprises and marginalized communities. Their insights and strategies are essential for challenging the limitations of growth-driven narratives. The analysis below therefore explores (non-exhaustive) examples of how the beyond GDP agenda can be linked to existing feminist work on economic justice in Asia.

South Asia: Championing labour rights for women in informal and precarious jobs

In South Asia, championing women's labour rights in informal and precarious jobs serves as a critical entry point for feminist activism in advancing beyond GDP approaches. With large segments of the population – particularly women – involved in informal work that lacks formal social protection, economic justice issues lie at the core of the region's feminist advocacy. Addressing the precarious conditions faced by these women, who are vital to local economies but remain unprotected and undervalued, has become essential to feminist

movements in countries like India and Bangladesh.[153] A prominent example is the **Initiative for Right View** in Bangladesh, which advocates for social protection measures that include women, especially in the informal sector.[154] The initiative highlights how women are integral to the functioning of the global system but are constrained in low-wage, unsafe jobs with limited mobility. Another example is the **Self-Employed Women's Association** (SEWA) in India, which has prominently advocated for the rights of informal women workers by organizing them into cooperatives.[155] SEWA's mission emphasizes the need for both economic independence and dignity for women working in informal sectors such as domestic work, street vending or agriculture – aspects that growth-oriented metrics do not take into consideration. SEWA has recently expanded its advocacy to include the impacts of climate change, recognizing that environmental degradation disproportionately affects women in rural areas as they depend on natural resources for their livelihoods. This showcases how feminist organizations in the region understand the interconnectedness of gender and climate struggles, which result from the same neoliberal framework, demonstrating a growing understanding that economic and environmental issues must be addressed and overcome together.

Many women work in conditions of informality in low-wage, precarious roles even within supposedly *formal* industries, such as garment factories, where protections are often limited.[156] Feminists working on labour rights across South Asia uniformly denounce this state of affairs, where increases in economic output and women's labour force participation rates often fail to translate into better wages or conditions for the working poor, the majority of whom are women. Feminist organizations advocate for structural changes like wage equity, safe working conditions, and universal social protection systems. They advocate for an end to gender-based violence, and champion an economic system that recognizes and values all forms of work – paid, unpaid, formal and informal – while redressing precarity and ensuring decent work for all. In pushing for these reforms, they align with beyond GDP principles by challenging systems that prioritize profit over people. For instance, **Sramik Samhati** in Bangladesh advocates for fair wages and better working conditions in garment work.[157] Its efforts reflect the feminist critique of neoliberalism, which calls out how women's labour force participation is often increased by trapping women in exploitative, low-wage conditions. Recent protests in Bangladesh, such as the 2024 student demonstrations against controversial job quotas, highlight similar grievances, including systemic corruption and economic inequities.[158] By connecting people's lived experiences to broader systemic issues, these movements expose the failures of top-down, foreign direct investment led and export-oriented growth models, and call for alternative frameworks that prioritize equity, sustainability and social justice over profit.

East Asia: Addressing structural barriers to women's paid labour force participation and the rights of migrant domestic workers

In East Asia, organizations working on gendered issues frequently focus on addressing barriers to female labour force participation. For example, **The Women's Foundation** in Hong Kong provides lower-income women with financial and digital literacy training, employability training, mentorship programmes and scholarships.[159] However, it is important for feminists to address structural (as well as individual) barriers, particularly gendered workplace discrimination and lack of labour rights. An example of an organization that does this is the **Hong Kong Women's Coalition on Equal Opportunities**, which addresses gender-based violence, workplace discrimination and the structural hurdles faced by working-class women who have limited access to education, resources and legal support.[160] The coalition pushes for stronger protections and policies that take into consideration how class inequality worsens gender discrimination in the workplace. Organizations that address structural barriers may be valuable partners in supporting the beyond GDP agenda, as they recognize how women are contributing to economic output yet face exploitative or discriminatory conditions that are swept aside in the drive for growth.

As this report has shown, many women in East Asia are already part of the workforce but have few to no protections, particularly if they are migrant workers performing care or domestic work (see ***Hierarchical care chains across Asia***). Feminist organizations in East Asia recognize this and work to champion the rights of marginalized women beyond simply increasing women's labour force participation. In Hong Kong, there is a strong and emerging domestic workers movement[161] comprised of labour rights groups providing psychological, financial and legal support, such as the **Hong Kong Federation of Asian Domestic Workers Unions**.[162] **The Awakening Foundation** in Taiwan is another such movement, with a strong focus on advocating for migrant women workers' rights by pushing for legal reforms and policies that ensure their fair treatment.[163] Informal networks such as the **Migrant Empowerment Network** in Taiwan have also emerged to advocate for fair treatment, legal protections and better working conditions for migrant domestic workers.[164] By challenging exploitative practices like unpaid overtime, these movements highlight the flaws of growth-focused policies and provide an opportunity to advance feminist perspectives in the beyond GDP agenda, centring rights and wellbeing for the most marginalized women. Beyond GDP advocates can align with East Asian movements fighting for the economic rights of those whose contributions remain invisible within the growth-driven model.

South-East Asia: Challenging growth-oriented extractivism and environmental injustice

In South-East Asia, critiques of growth are often rooted in feminist discourses on land ownership and environmental injustice, with feminist organizations addressing issues of land dispossession and environmental degradation caused by extractive industries. Acknowledging this, feminist organizations in South-East Asia advocate against land grabs by corporations, condemning them as part of an economic model that prioritizes large-scale industrial projects over local wellbeing for the sake of facilitating non-inclusive economic growth. Organizations such as Just Associates have been central in organizing young women across South-East Asia to challenge land dispossession and environmental degradation in complex political and social landscapes and forums.[165] One initiative it has established, called Forum Aktivis Perempuan Muda (Young Women's Activist Forum), provides training and resources for young women in Indonesia to advocate for land rights and climate justice.[166] Similarly, Humanis in Indonesia equips local groups to resist land grabs and environmental exploitation by providing training, resources and advocacy support focused on gender equality, diversity and inclusion and climate justice.[167] Its initiatives empower women to assert their rights against industrial encroachment, prioritizing community-led environmental stewardship over GDP-driven development.[168]

Across South-East Asia, both formal feminist organizations and informal feminist movements play a crucial role in defending Indigenous women's land rights, ancestral territories and livelihoods against extractive industries like mining, logging and agribusiness. In the Philippines, organizations like LILAK (Purple Action for Indigenous Women's Rights)[169] position Indigenous women as key agents of change in climate action and sustainable resource management. Informal networks driven by Indigenous women also resist large-scale extraction, as they recognize that their survival is deeply tied to ecological justice, often working without financial backing or institutional support.[170] For instance, Indigenous women in Mindanao (an island in the Philippines) have spearheaded anti-mining protests through community-based, intergenerational knowledge and local leadership rather than formalized structures.[171] These movements challenge growth-driven, extractive models that disregard Indigenous knowledge and disproportionately harm Indigenous women, who face intersecting oppressions based on gender and Indigeneity. Integrating Indigenous perspectives into a beyond GDP agenda is therefore essential to champion inclusive alternatives that directly confront intersecting systems of oppression.

6. Conclusion and future pathways

Civil society organizations and feminist and social movements have long recognized that an economic model based on GDP growth is fundamentally at odds with ensuring human rights and the dignity and wellbeing of both people and the planet. While alternative frameworks for measuring economic and social progress have proliferated in recent years, almost none are built on genuinely justice-oriented, feminist, ecologically just and decolonial principles and approaches, nor have they been effective in influencing policy decisions on economic growth. However, many existing initiatives across Asia provide a foundation for moving beyond GDP as the sole metric of economic progress – and, more fundamentally, moving beyond an economic paradigm premised on non-inclusive GDP growth and the primacy of the market.

The work of advancing a beyond GDP agenda will face many barriers, including a lack of political will to advance radical alternatives; opposition or co-optation from entrenched interests; pervasive colonial global power structures and institutions that continue to uphold GDP and deprive states of the resources to invest in wellbeing economies; and a general lack of funding and technical capacity, especially for the rights-oriented ministries that could advance wellbeing frameworks. Nevertheless, momentum exists, and to make the most of this momentum, the pathways outlined here indicate opportunities to advance the beyond GDP agenda and critical considerations to ensure equity and integrity of the movement. It is important to note that it is impossible to elevate a single alternative metric as the ideal alternative to GDP: what we need is a rich tapestry of locally determined, radical feminist alternatives.

Civil society organizations and social movements can:

- **Coalesce and connect with a broad range of organizations and movements to push for an inclusive feminist beyond GDP agenda and build an alternative narrative that rejects growthism**. This should include connecting with a range of justice-oriented people's movements focusing on women's rights and gender justice, climate and the environment, labour rights and ending colonial exploitation of the Global South. It should also include transnational and transregional connections that facilitate learning from others that have made more progress, such as by working with Latin American civil society organizations and movements that have advanced the wellbeing economy and beyond GDP agenda, as well as connecting with degrowth movements in the Global North.

- **Relate the importance of the beyond GDP agenda to local issues** – including extractivism in development projects, labour rights, corruption, unpaid care and domestic work and social and economic inequities resulting from (among other factors) government policy.
- **Connect with progressive student collectives, academic, trade unions, farmers' movements, and other activists that are expressing political and economic discontent, and encourage them to embed the beyond GDP agenda in their demands, as such movements are often major channels for expressing grievance within existing economic systems in Asia**. It will also be important to support initiatives that strive to reform economics curricula to advance wellbeing economies and a beyond GDP approach, including by working with academics.
- **Collaborate with the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific**, which has fed into the UN's beyond GDP process, to strengthen the feminist, ecologically just and decolonial foundations of its contributions to the beyond GDP agenda.
- **Champion the beyond GDP agenda at high-level forums on gender, economic, social and environmental issues**. These include the Commission on the Status of Women; the Financing for Development Forum; the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change; Asia-Pacific Climate Week; the ASEAN Civil Society Conference; and the ADB Annual Meeting, all of which have opportunities for civil society participation. As an outcome from the 2024 UN Summit of the Future and its resulting Pact for the Future, the UN is also developing a set of proposed metrics that 'go beyond GDP to assess human and planetary well-being' – civil society should contribute to this process, to ensure that feminist perspectives and approaches are central to what is developed.[172]
- **Challenge neoliberal narratives and growth-centred ideology, including by questioning the use of terms such as 'green growth'** or 'sustainable growth', which have often been promoted to justify unsustainable modes of production and consumption based on dubious technological advancements and market mechanisms.

Governments in Asia can:

This is a summary of indicator-specific directions highlighted in the boxes under *'Evaluation of existing GDP alternatives' in chapter 4. For more details, please refer to that chapter.*

- **Engage meaningfully with civil society and people's movements, including feminist movements and Indigenous communities, to develop metrics that reflect their concerns and priorities and draw on their expertise, and ensure these drive decision-making and budgetary allocations.** This should include the priorities and demands of women and marginalized genders in all their diversities; active involvement with Indigenous communities to understand the deep interlinkages between human wellbeing and nature and the environment (integrating that understanding into beyond GDP

approaches); and meaningfully participatory approaches that ensure Indigenous peoples and local communities can define their own notions of individual and collective wellbeing.

- **Facilitate greater collaboration between economic decision-makers (including central banks and ministries of finance and economic planning) and ministries focusing on gender, climate, environment, labour, and social justice to develop and implement transformative beyond GDP approaches.** Provide resources for statistical capacity-building and data collection, so that beyond GDP approaches can capture differences in outcomes across gender, class, race and ethnicity, among others.
- **Develop and implement beyond GDP approaches based on objective and subjective indicators of wellbeing**, to capture a more holistic and localized interpretation of wellbeing.
- **Incorporate a holistic set of data and indicators within beyond GDP approaches,** centering a focus on gender, economic and social inequality reduction, including but not limited to: time-use data; assessments of the quality and security of work undertaken by women; non-economic indicators such as those related to sexual health and reproductive rights, gender-based violence and political participation; environmental indicators that challenge the short-termism of GDP growthism and address the root causes of environmental degradation; assessments of unequal environmental degradation across and within communities; measures that capture collective wellbeing, such as in New Zealand's *He Ara Wairoa* framework; and indicators accounting for North-South asymmetries, including those that highlight ecological and social injustice between countries. 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. To enable an intersectional analysis, it must also capture 'inequalities in the quality of education, health, housing, employment and social security'[173] (p.42) and disaggregate by gender, age, race, income, location, ethnicity and other social categories to enable an intersectional analysis.

International financial institutions can:

- **Promote the use of measures that could be used to finance wellbeing economies and increase the fiscal and policymaking space of countries that have historically been burdened by neocolonial growthist imperatives and the imposition of austerity.** This should include addressing cross-border tax abuse and illicit financial flows; ending unfair trade regimes that consolidate and perpetuate corporate power (e.g. the Investor–State Dispute Settlement mechanism); establishing progressive taxes on income, profit and wealth, including a global minimum corporate income tax of at least 25% (and higher for fossil fuel producers and other top polluters) and

a global minimum wealth tax; and cancelling debt for Global South countries that bear the brunt of unjust debt-related arrangements. Such measures are critical so that countries can invest in wellbeing economies and the realization of rights through public investment, rather than having to pursue growth for growth's sake.

- **Invest in research and capacity-building to support the development of beyond GDP alternatives.** This may include capacity-building for statistics and rights-oriented ministries, including the regular systematic collection and analysis of time-use data, so that these ministries have the resources necessary to create and implement beyond GDP alternatives.
- **[International Monetary Fund] Reform quota formulas so that countries in the Global South have greater decision-making power over policies** that disproportionately impact their economies, as vote shares at the IMF are determined by a quota formula that primarily focuses on GDP.
- [**Asian Development Bank] End financing for development projects that are narrowly focused on GDP growth, ensure a do-no-harm approach and subject** all investments to rigorous gendered and environmental human rights impact assessments.

Annex 1: Mapping of beyond GDP approaches

The following table lists all of the beyond GDP approaches that we analysed for the purpose of this study. Please note that not all of the approaches mapped below are included in the analysis sections of this paper, as only the most important learnings have been included/where learnings overlap they were not included.

Index/survey title	Country	Description
Gross National Happiness Index	Bhutan	The Gross National Happiness Index is a multidimensional index that seeks to provide a holistic reflection of Bhutan's wellbeing, covering both traditional aspects of wellbeing such as health and education, and less traditional aspects such as culture and community vitality.
Malaysian Well-being Index	Malaysia	The Malaysian Well-being Index is a composite index that measures the wellbeing of Malaysians by assessing five economic components (transportation, communications, education, income and distribution, and working life) and nine social components (housing, entertainment and recreation, public safety, social participation, governance, culture, health, environment, and family).
Korean Quality of Life Indicators	South Korea	Korea's Quality of Life Indicators is in the form of an annual report that provides analyses across 11 domain-specific indicators within three primary sectors: individuals, social relationships and environmental conditions. Examples of domains include education, health, leisure, and environment.
Ease of Living Index	India	India's Ease of Living Index measures the wellbeing of urban citizens in select cities by compiling indicators across four pillars (institutional, social, economic and physical) and 15 constituent components.
Multidimensional Poverty Index	Multiple countries (including Thailand, India)	The global Multidimensional Poverty Index is an annual international measure of acute poverty that goes beyond traditional monetary measures and includes deprivations in health, education and living standards facing people in poverty.

Social Progress Index	Multiple countries (including India, Thailand)	The global Social Progress Index is calculated to measure non-economic aspects of global social performance, providing transparent and actionable data and comprehensive insights into the state of society. While the global SPI measures national social progress, the same index is replicated for certain countries to measure extensive, subnational-level social progress. The subnational-level index is published for India and is currently being developed for Thailand in collaboration with local partners.
Index on Quality of Life for Elderly	India	The Index on Quality of Life for Elderly observes 45 different indicators across four key domains (financial wellbeing, social wellbeing, health system and income security) that are crucial for India's elderly people. These are observed at the subnational district level, helping to unravel varying ageing trends and identify key policy areas.
Human Achievement Index	Thailand	The Human Achievement Index, first carried out by the United Nations Development Programme and then handed over to the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, measures wellbeing progress at the national level.
Human Development Index	Multiple countries	A composite measure of average performance in three essential dimensions of human development: living a long and healthy life, acquiring knowledge and enjoying a decent standard of living. It is calculated as the geometric mean of normalized indices for these three dimensions.
Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement	Pakistan	While not an index, the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement provides data on social and economic indicators at provincial and district levels. This data is used to guide poverty reduction strategies in Pakistan, but has not been synthesized into an overarching index.
The National Well-being Indicators in R.O.C. (Taiwan)	Taiwan	The National Well-being Indicators in Taiwan (R.O.C.) is a set of metrics designed to assess overall quality of life and societal progress beyond economic growth. It is based on the OECD's Better Life Index and includes both material living conditions (housing, income and jobs) and factors contributing to quality of life (community, education, environment, civic engagement, health, life satisfaction, safety and work-life balance).

Annex 2: Mapping of feminist, women's rights and economic justice organizations in Asia

The following table lists all of the women's rights and economic justice organizations that we mapped for the purpose of this study. Please note that not all of the actors mapped below are included in the analysis sections of this paper, as only the most relevant ones have been included.

Organization	Country/region
Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD)	Asia
Asian Peoples' Movement on Debt and Development (APMDD)	Asia
Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN)	Global but with Asia-specific work
Initiative for Right View (IRV) – Bangladesh	Bangladesh
South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE)	South Asia
Philippine Commission on Women (PCW)	Philippines
Asia Monitor Resource Centre (AMRC)	Asia
Third World Network (TWN)	Global but with Asia-specific work
Focus on the Global South	Asia
Asia Pacific Women's Watch (APWW)	Asia
International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAW-AP)	Asia
Manushya Foundation	South-East Asia
Feminist Collective for Economic Justice	Sri Lanka
Forum Aktivis Perempuan Indonesia (FAMM Indonesia, or Young Women's Activist Forum Indonesia)	Indonesia
Just Associates	South-East Asia
Bangladesh Center for Workers' Solidarity	Bangladesh
GABRIELA | A National Alliance of Women	Philippines
Humanis Foundation	Indonesia
IBON International	Philippines
LILAK (Purple Action for Indigenous Women's Rights)	Philippines
Migrants Empowerment Network in Taiwan (MENT)	Taiwan
The Awakening Foundation	Taiwan
Hong Kong Women's Coalition on Equal Opportunities	Hong Kong
The Women's Foundation	Hong Kong
Sramik Samhati	Bangladesh
Self Employed Women's Association	India
Hong Kong Federation of Asian Domestic Workers Union	Hong Kong

Notes

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