BEYOND GROWTH: HOW CAN WE END POVERTY AND BUILD A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE?





Posted on 6 Aug 2026 3-minute read Human rights and policy Sustainable design

It is common to hear across various media, and more broadly in public and political discourses, that our economy is not growing, or not growing fast enough. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) figures are regularly shared, often accompanied by alarmist messages about slow growth. But do we need economic growth to improve social and ecological wellbeing?

Economic growth is believed necessary to advance 'progress' and 'development'. However, increasing evidence shows that economic growth is at the root of several negative social and ecological impacts. Economic growth relies on the infinite expansion of production and consumption, which cannot simply be assumed to be positive or productive. According to the United Nations (UN) Global Resource Outlook 2024, if current patterns do not change, resource use is projected to increase by 60% from 2020 levels by 2060. The endless expansion of the economy translates into high levels of resource use, more frequent and intense natural disasters, and other negative ecological impacts.

To sustain economic growth, there is a need to exploit both the natural environment and human labour. An example of this exploitation is the rise of precarious work and the growing number of working poor, who, despite holding one or more jobs, are unable to secure decent living conditions. As stated in a UN report on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, poverty and privilege continue to reproduce themselves in vicious cycles, creating entrenched inequality and an increasing intergenerational divide. As highlighted in the World Inequality Report 2026, such inequality is a political choice rather than an inevitability. Different choices remain possible.

Eradicating poverty beyond growth

To overcome the limits of the current economic model, there is a growing interest in the idea of post-growth. This approach seeks to prioritise social and ecological well-being over economic growth and private profits. While systemic change is necessary, how to catalyse socio-economic transitions and navigate their multiple societal dimensions remains an open challenge. How can we feasibly move towards post-growth economic systems able to sustain good lives and reduce inequalities? Is it possible to change production and consumption systems, making the economy more inclusive and sustainable? Which government mechanisms should be implemented to escape path dependencies, inject long-term planning, and ensure intergenerational fairness?

These are challenging questions, but not impossible ones. The new Roadmap for Eradicating Poverty Beyond Growth presented by the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Olivier De Schutter, presents 80 policy measures aimed at eradicating poverty and reducing inequalities while decreasing dependency on growth. As argued in the report:

— —

the quest for growth at all costs can [...] exacerbate violations of rights, as governments seek to attract investment by lowering taxes on corporate profits, by weakening labour protections and by reshaping regulatory frameworks in favour of capital, thereby putting profit maximisation and investor confidence above social justice, decent work and care (p.3).

The roadmap presents policy proposals across six pillars: economic systems transformations; labour policies and the care economy; universal basic services and social protection; ecological justice; transforming the international economic order; and democratic planning and governance.

From social measures aimed at introducing minimum income guarantees and universal childcare benefits, to policies that could improve ecological sustainability, such as the introduction of the right to repair and anti-obsolescence measures, the newly published roadmap does not lack practical proposals. For example, it proposes ecological fiscal reforms, including the introduction of luxury carbon taxation, which would exempt essential goods and services from carbon taxes (e.g. household heating and food) and address more luxury and non-essential consumption (e.g. private jets and high-end consumer goods). To address profit shifting by corporations and wealth concealment by ultrarich individuals, the report also calls for an increase in corporate profits taxation facilitated by the adoption of a UN Framework Convention on Tax Cooperation.

Employee ownership and participation are presented in the report as ways of reducing the excessive economic power and control of large corporations. The roadmap also stresses the importance of advancing alternative democratic industrial and investment policies that could prioritise public and cooperative ownership of strategic assets, such as electricity grids and storage, as well as a nationalisation of pension funds to curb financial speculation, invest in public priorities and shift away from individualised pension designs that perpetuate structural inequalities and unfair retirement outcomes. From food sovereignty to stronger rights of nature, the report compiles an ambitious program of domestic and multilateral policy proposals.

Escaping the trap of growthism

It is time to acknowledge that economic growth is not a precondition for progress. As De Schutter argues, the endless expansion of the current economic model “undermines the material conditions necessary for the realisation of human rights” (p.3), therefore, it is necessary “to escape the trap of growthism: the ideological belief that no progress is possible without first increasing the total output of the economy” (p.6). A different socio-economic system is necessary and possible.

The systemic nature of poverty requires systemic responses which involve a selective and contextualised adoption of measures and the coordination of reforms at different political levels to create a mutually supportive policy environment.

Policies should direct economic activities to satisfy the needs of the population, avoiding forms of growth that are export-dependent, extractive, rooted in low-wage competition or geared towards simply satisfying growth-driven markets. The report makes it clear that governments should move beyond crisis management to more ambitious reforms.

From scientific publications to various reports of intergovernmental organisations, such as the roadmap discussed here, practical post-growth policies are being explored and proposed. From the 'cost-of-living' crisis to bushfires, across the country, communities are demonstrating strong resilience and adapting. What is lacking is not evidence or policy ideas or practical alternatives, but political courage. The challenge is no longer to imagine alternatives to growth, but to create the political conditions necessary to realise them.

SHARE

MEET THE AUTHOR

Sabrina Chakori

Chancellor's Research Fellow, DVC (Research)

EXPLORE

→ **Ultimo Institute**

Sabrina Chakori



Dr Sabrina Chakori is a researcher, educator, policy advisor and multi-award-winning social entrepreneur working to enable sustainability transitions. She is a Chancellor's Research Fellow at the University of Technology Sydney and Honorary Lecturer at The University of Sydney. Her work contributes to transition theory by exploring transition processes and dynamics.

Sabrina Chakori

Chancellor's Research Fellow, DVC (Research)
TBA

- Masters Research or PhD student supervision
- Collaborative projects
- Media enquiries

View profile →

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

UTS acknowledges the Gadigal people, the Boorooberongal people of the Dharug Nation, the Bidiagal people and the Gamaygal people upon whose ancestral lands our university stands. We would also like to pay respect to the Elders both past and present, acknowledging them as the traditional custodians of knowledge for these lands.

City Campus

15 Broadway, Ultimo, NSW 2007

Get in touch with UTS

FOLLOW US

A MEMBER OF

Copyright © 2026 ABN: 77 257 686 961 CRICOS provider number: 00099F

TEQSA provider number: PRV12060 TEQSA category: Australian University