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## **Should economic growth be prioritised over environmental sustainability?**

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'Environmental protection is more important than growth.' Yale University conducted a poll in 2018, which showed that 70% of Americans agreed with this statement (Jankowski, 2018). Perhaps more strikingly, in 2019, the European Council on Foreign Relations asked people in fourteen European countries, 'Do you believe that environment should be made a priority even if doing so damages economic growth?' With only two exceptions (where the percentage of those who agreed fell slightly below 50%), majorities of 55-70% in every country agreed with this statement (Hickel, 2021). So, if public opinion is so strongly in favour of environmental sustainability, why is this even a question? This essay will focus heavily on economic growth in terms of developed or high-income countries as this is where the problem lies in terms of environmental sustainability.

Firstly, we must understand why it is that economic growth has become such a priority within today's society. The United Nations (2023) states that 'sustained and inclusive economic growth can drive progress, create decent jobs for all and improve living standards.' Additionally, under our capitalist society, economies are growth-dependent. They must be constantly expanding, their GDP figure growing ever higher, or they risk entering the dreaded recession (Hickel, 2021). Under a recession, we see declines in sales and profits (Investopedia, 2024), unemployment runs rife, and standards of living fall. For a government with the primary objective of social welfare, this is clearly not an ideal situation, so it is understandable that they might want to prioritise economic growth for the sake of the general population. Recently, we have seen countries such as the USA (under Trump) focus heavily on economic growth, for example by pushing to reshore secondary sector industries and, supposedly, support USA-based businesses and manufacturers through the imposition of tariffs on several countries and trade blocs. Meanwhile, Trump is also actively going against

environmental sustainability, such as by withdrawing from the Paris Agreement both in 2020 (BBC, 2020) and again showing his intention to in 2025 (White & Case, 2025).

However, in terms of improving quality of life, studies have shown that economic growth does not always translate into higher standards of living and the issue we are facing is that growth in high-income countries is not inclusive. Drets, Antal, and van den Bergh (2018, p. 265-272) cite Easterlin et al.'s work (2013), suggesting that, in high-income countries, long term economic growth has not translated into rising social welfare for several decades. So why is it that governments and firms want to promote economic growth, if not to improve social welfare? This brings us back to the notion of a capitalist society - if every industry, sector, and economy is constantly growing, those at the head of these industries, sectors, and economies receive a continuous flow of profit. Under capitalism, growth has no end-point (Hickel, 2021), and the resources that we exploit, goods we produce, and the energy we use to do so go directly towards making the filthy rich even richer, at the expense of literally everyone else. This is happening every day, at a deeply troubling rate. Annually, the richest 1% of the global population receives approximately \$19 trillion in income - nearly a quarter of global GDP (World Inequality Database, 2021, cited in Hickel, 2021, p. 28). This means that a quarter of the resources we exploit directly benefits the richest people in the world, all of whom are already millionaires, and does nothing to improve the quality of life of the general population.

Now, we must understand why it is that environmental sustainability is so important. We are currently facing, arguably, the biggest threat to humanity that we have ever faced. Except, it is not just the future of the human race which is at stake, but also the futures of millions of plant and animal species. Currently, one million species are threatened by extinction as a result of climate change, some within decades, and species are being lost 1,000 times faster than they have been at any time in recorded human history. There are a number of reasons for this: rising global and oceanic temperatures, increased frequency and magnitude of extreme weather events, and increased drought are just a few (United Nations, no date). Take warming oceans as an example: as the ocean becomes warmer, it can absorb an increased volume of carbon dioxide and so becomes more acidic, a process known as ocean acidification. This can have detrimental impacts on marine organisms and ecosystems, as seen in the most recent mass-extinction event 66 million years ago, when, studies have shown, ocean pH dropped by about 0.25. This seemingly minor change led to the extinction of 75% of all marine species. On our current emissions trajectory, our oceans are set to experience a drop in pH of 0.4 (Hickel, 2021, p. 7 cites Carrington, 2019), of which both the primary and secondary impacts would be unprecedented. Not only would this impact these species themselves, but would also have a detrimental effect on the food chain, and food supply for the global population. In conjunction with droughts, rising temperatures, soil depletion, pollinator die-off, and more, this could result in spiralling food emergencies (Hickel, 2021) and potentially a global food crisis. This is just one eventuality. The impacts that climate change will have on the planet are vast and terrifying, and are looming ever closer.

We can see that pursuing economic growth is a clear driver in the ecological breakdown of our planet. In fact, excess growth and accumulation in high-income countries, particularly the very rich within those, contributes massively to the issue. Meanwhile, many low-income countries remain well within their means, often at the expense of social welfare (University of

Leeds, 2018, cited in Hickel, 2021, p. 20). Arguably, these countries should continue to prioritise economic growth, in order to be able to develop and to improve the living standards of their populations, perhaps aided by high-income countries in doing so sustainably. In terms of the developed world, it seems we face opportunity cost: do high-income countries continue to grow at the expense of the environment, or do we protect the environment at the expense of economic growth? This raises the question of whether these two priorities can coexist - is there a potential for green growth? Arguably, this is an oxymoron, or a poor attempt at greenwashing. Economic growth, especially under capitalism, is reliant on the constant production of goods, and thus the constant extraction of resources. Pursuing profit will not allow for sustainable resource extraction - the system is too impatient to only take its fair share. Another question raised is the idea of being 'saved' by technology, that we could continue to grow sustainably if it were powered by renewable energy. For example, China is a country that has relied heavily on industrialisation as a path to development, but is now investing into environmental sustainability through a number of clean air policies or 'action plans' (Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, no date). However, there is a fatal flaw in this ideology - growth still needs extraction. As Hickel (2021) states, 'A growth-obsessed economy powered by clean energy will still tip us into ecological disaster.' Growth is the issue here, now how we go about doing it.

The question remains: should we prioritise economic growth over environmental sustainability? Do the benefits of economic growth outweigh the costs of the ecological breakdown of our planet? This question is almost laughable. One major issue in terms of climate change is how quickly the threat is growing and how little time we have to act. China may be investing into sustainability now but, chances are, this is too little, too late. If we continue to pursue economic growth in the way that we do, a way that does not bring about social welfare for those who need it, and that puts a great deal of strain on our environment and resources, we will never be able to escape the consequences. If our economies stop growing, we may fall into a recession, but we will live. We have time to solve this issue in the long run and we can deal with the consequences in the short term. If we have any hope of recovering our planet, we must act **now** and, if that means neglecting economic growth, so be it.

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