


FORUM

Degrowth, green growth, and climate justice for Africa

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Abstract

The concept of degrowth aligns with the principles of Climate and Environmental Justice (CEJ) in significant aspects. Both frameworks underline the need for new global structures and social movements that promote ecological conservation, local economic regeneration, and social well-being that goes beyond material accumulation. Therefore, degrowth can reinforce the pursuit of transformative global climate justice. However, I contend that significant contradictions remain between degrowth and North–South climate justice. I argue that on both conceptual and policy grounds, a ‘strong version’ of the green economy provides a better foundation for seeking international climate justice for Africa than degrowth. I also contend that green growth is a more pragmatic and realistic approach to global climate justice because it is more sensitive to the norms, structures, and dynamics of global politics.

Keywords: Africa; climate justice; degrowth; green growth; international climate justice

Introduction

International cooperation is required to address the significant global problem of climate change. Such cooperation has been increasing in recent years. However, questions of justice and fairness, notably between developed and developing countries, remain among the most intractable global climate governance challenges.¹ International climate justice entails ensuring that countries least accountable for climate change but most susceptible to its effects do not endure a disproportionate amount of its consequences.² It is also about ensuring that the countries and other entities (like companies) most responsible for the emissions that cause climate change are held accountable for their actions. As a continent that contributes little to climate change but suffers a great deal from its impact, Africa has led the call for climate justice in international climate change agreements.³

International climate justice principles have long been conspicuous elements of the international climate regime, with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) the central component.⁴ However, despite numerous proclamations and initiatives, a substantial

¹Chukwumerije Okereke, ‘Climate justice and the international regime’, *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 1:3 (2010), pp. 462–74.

²Stephen M. Gardiner, ‘Climate justice’, in John S. Dryzek, Richard B. Norgaard, and David Schlosberg (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Climate Change and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 309–22.

³Patrick Bond, ‘Climate justice in, by, and for Africa’, in Matthias Dietz and Heiko Garrelts (eds), *Routledge Handbook of the Climate Change Movement* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 205–21.

⁴Chukwumerije Okereke and Philip Coventry, ‘Climate justice and the international regime: Before, during, and after Paris’, *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 7:6 (2016), pp. 834–51.

equity gap remains, and climate justice continues to be a major issue of controversy in international climate diplomacy.⁵

Both green growth and degrowth are conceptual products of the quest for an alternative economic paradigm in response to the environmental and climate crisis affecting the whole world.⁶ Both seek reductions in the use of natural resources and a shift away from the reliance on fossil fuels, and both seek to promote equity, justice, and alternative forms of production and consumption.⁷ Therefore, both degrowth and green growth scholarship can complement and reinforce international climate justice. However, there are also important differences. While the concept of green growth is based on the idea that economic growth can be decoupled from environmental degradation, degrowth expressly seeks to shrink the size of the global economy by reducing consumption and production.⁸

As an African scholar whose primary interest is international climate justice, I am concerned with whether the moral imperative for international climate justice for poor countries around the world (and especially in Africa) is better served by a global economic paradigm of degrowth or green growth. I approach this question keeping in mind Dobson's⁹ observation that environmental sustainability and social justice are not always coterminous. It is possible to imagine a world that is environmentally sustainable without social justice and a world that is socially just without being environmentally sustainable.¹⁰ My position is that while certain degrowth ideals and policy recommendations accord with those of international climate justice, there exist notable tensions, not least the need for large-scale economic growth that is required to lift millions in Africa out of poverty. Thus, I contend that 'strong' or 'genuine green growth'¹¹ with its emphasis on greening innovation and investment, and 'improved human well-being and social equity',¹² in the context of international cooperation provides a more promising and feasible foundation for the pursuit of climate justice in Africa and the Global South.

I start by providing the premise for climate justice for Africa. I then examine the strengths and weakness of degrowth and green growth as bases for the pursuit of climate justice for Africa and the rest of the Global South before offering some concluding thoughts, including implications of global climate justice for the international order.

Climate justice for Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa currently contributes less than 5 per cent of global emissions, but its people have long been on the front lines of climate impacts.¹³ With a per capita carbon emission of 0.12, it will take an average Rwandese 129 years to emit the same quantity of carbon as an average American (with CO₂ emissions per capita of 15.52)¹⁴ in one year. It is predicted that by 2050 as many as 105 million people in Africa could migrate internally due to worsening climate impacts.¹⁵

⁵IPCC (2022) Summary for Policy Makers.

⁶Hubert Buch-Hansen and Martin B. Carstensen, 'Paradigms and the political economy of ecopolitical projects: Green growth and degrowth compared', *Competition & Change*, 25:3–4 (2021), pp. 308–27.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Giorgos Kallis, 'In defence of degrowth', *Ecological Economics*, 70:5 (2011), pp. 873–80.

⁹Andrew Dobson, 'Social justice and environmental sustainability: Ne'er the twain shall meet?', in Robert D Bullard, Julian Agyeman, and Bob Evans (eds), *Just Sustainabilities* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), pp. 83–95.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Per Espen Stoknes and Johan Rockström, 'Redefining green growth within planetary boundaries', *Energy Research & Social Science*, 44 (2018), pp. 41–9.

¹²UNEP, 'Towards a green economy: Pathways to sustainable development and poverty eradication', *Nairobi, Kenya: UNEP* (2011).

¹³IPCC (2022) Summary for Policy Makers.

¹⁴CO₂ emissions by country per capita. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/270508/co2-emissions-per-capita-country/>.

¹⁵Qirui Li and Cyrus Samimi, 'Sub-Saharan Africa's international migration constrains its sustainable development under climate change', *Sustainability Science*, 17:5 (2022), pp. 1873–97.

Climate-induced migration is already a major factor contributing to violent conflict in various parts of Africa, where herders regularly clash with farmers over access to water and pasture. About 70 per cent of the African population is not connected to the electricity grid, and nearly 90 per cent of rural dwellers have to cook with firewood and animal dung.¹⁶ Yet the need to achieve global climate goals implies that Africa would have to address its energy poverty challenges in a climate-constrained space. In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), 4 out of every 10 people live on less than 1.9 United States dollars a day, and the number of people living in extreme poverty has increased between 2010 and 2020, with climate change arguably contributing.¹⁷

The climate change situation mirrors other dimensions of environmental and economic inequality. People in rich countries consume up to 10 times more natural resources than those in the poorest countries.¹⁸ On average, an inhabitant of North America consumes around 90 kg of resources each day, while in Africa each person consumes only around 10 kg per day.¹⁹ Despite over three decades of fighting hunger, about 200 million African children are suffering malnutrition (a number projected to rise to 433 million by 2030).²⁰ Yet the United Kingdom throws away 9.5 million tonnes of food waste in a single year.²¹ As this issue's editors point out in the introduction, the crucial question for international politics in the last two decades has been less about resource scarcity and more about how to ensure fair distribution of and equitable access to goods and services. This is the context for considering which of degrowth and green growth provides a more promising basis for advancing climate justice goals for Africa and, indeed, other poor developing countries.

Degrowth and international climate justice

Degrowth is an economic and social movement that seeks to reduce the size of the global economy and promote a more sustainable way of life.²² It is based on the idea of strong biophysical limits, that the current economic system is unsustainable and that radical reduction in production and consumption is urgently required (see Lorenzo Fioramonti, 'Post-growth theories in a global world: A comparative analysis', this issue). While their critique of the prevailing capitalist economic system is centred on its promotion of widescale environment destruction, many degrowth scholars also highlight the impact of neoliberal economic doctrine in promoting global inequalities and stress the need for environmental justice within and between countries.²³ It has therefore been suggested that degrowth is consistent with, and even necessary to, achieving international environmental and climate justice.²⁴

Akbulut et al.²⁵ have advanced several theses on the relationship between degrowth and environmental justice which are applicable to climate justice. First, they note that both movements

¹⁶Raluca Golumbeanu and Douglas F. Barnes, 'Connection charges and electricity access in sub-Saharan Africa', *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper* (2013) (6511).

¹⁷Ariel H. Fambu and Patricia T. Yomi, 'Is democracy pro poor in Sub-Saharan Africa?', *Journal of Policy Modeling*, 45:1 (2023), pp. 10–30.

¹⁸Friends of the Earth Europe, Brussels (Belgium); Sustainable Europe Research Institute SERI, Vienna (Austria); GLOBAL 2000, Friends of the Earth Austria, Vienna (Austria) (2009), available at: <https://friendsoftheearth.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/overconsumption.pdf>.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Olutosin A. Otekunrin, Barbara Sawicka, and Idris A. Ayinde, 'Three decades of fighting against hunger in Africa: Progress, challenges and opportunities', *World Nutrition*, 11:3 (2020), pp. 86–111.

²¹Available at: <https://www.businesswaste.co.uk/food-waste-2023-the-facts/>.

²²Buch-Hansen and Carstensen, 'Paradigms and the political economy'; Kallis, 'In defence of degrowth'.

²³Jason Hickel, 'What does degrowth mean? A few points of clarification', *Globalizations*, 18:7 (2021), pp. 1105–11.

²⁴Neera M. Singh, 'Environmental justice, degrowth and post-capitalist futures', *Ecological Economics*, 163 (2019), pp. 138–42; Padini Nirmal and Dianne Rocheleau, 'Decolonizing degrowth in the post-development convergence: Questions, experiences, and proposals from two Indigenous territories', *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 2:3 (2019), pp. 465–92.

²⁵Bengi Akbulut, Federico Demaria, Julien-François Gerber, and Joan Martínez-Alier, 'Who promotes sustainability? Five theses on the relationships between the degrowth and the environmental justice movements', *Ecological Economics*, 165 (2019), p. 106418.

are concerned with reducing of the size of the global economy by downscaling production and consumption to reach a smaller social metabolism, but also with non-materialist concerns such as human rights, cultural aesthetics, democracy, autonomy, and equity, all of which they argue have been severely compromised under the current dominant paradigm of neoliberal global economic growth. They note that both the degrowth and environmental justice movements are concerned not only with the size of the global economy but also with the specific political economy and power configurations that produce and govern it. It is suggested that a smaller 'socio-metabolic configuration' – a term used to cover both the biophysical and politico-institutional dimensions of the economic structure – is vital for achieving sustainability and justice. Identifying the current scale of environmental destruction as a product of global capitalist economy and associated institutions, degrowth scholars are dismissive of the promise of green technological innovation to improve the livelihood and well-being of local people in poor countries, insisting that the focus should rather be on highlighting the scale of dispossession, the web of exploitation, and the supply-chain violence associated with the social modernism of low carbon infrastructure.²⁶ See also Miriam Lang, 'Degrowth, global asymmetries and ecosocial justice: Decolonial perspectives from Latin America' in this issue. As Singh puts it, both environmental justice and degrowth 'promote "other-than-capitalist" ways of being and strive to redefine life.'²⁷

I concur that by emphasising questions of power, control, hegemony, and who decides, degrowth makes a vital connection to international environmental and climate justice movements, which have long called for distributional, recognition, participation, and procedural justice at all levels of environmental decision-making. Furthermore, increasingly, some degrowth scholars emphasise that degrowth should be primarily focused on high-income nations.²⁸ However, despite these important links, degrowth is essentially a critique of the current economic system, which is based on the idea that economic growth is necessary for human progress. With a few notable exceptions,²⁹ international climate justice has not been of central concern to degrowth scholars.

As Fioramonti correctly observes, many degrowth proposals focus on cross-cutting collaboration at the local level, orchestrated by municipalities. With the majority of the emphasis on the creation or restoration of self-managed communities through direct democracy, degrowth has had less to say about global politics for climate justice (see Fioramonti, 'Post-growth theories in a global world', this issue). The assumption seems to be that inequality will be addressed, and the cause of justice somehow automatically served by the reduction of metabolic flows and by transitioning to smaller economies that emphasise local production and consumption.

There are fundamental challenges in using degrowth as a basis to seek climate justice for Africa and other poor countries of the world, some of which have been highlighted by other scholars.³⁰ First, African countries need more and not less growth to be able to address deep poverty challenges, improve well-being, and increase their adaptive capacities to climate change. It is true that lowering global carbon emissions will lessen climate change impact on Africa, but the scale and consequences of vulnerability imposed by poverty are as destructive to well-being, if not more so, than those imposed by greenhouse gas emissions. Most rich countries have achieved their current high levels of resilience and adaptive capacities to climate change through large-scale growth.

²⁶Alexander Dunlap and Louis Laratte, 'European Green Deal necropolitics: Exploring "green" energy transition, degrowth & infrastructural colonization', *Political Geography*, 97 (2022), p. 102640.

²⁷Singh, 'Environmental justice', p. 139.

²⁸Hickel, 'What does degrowth mean?'

²⁹Matthias Schmelzer and Tonny Nowshin, 'Ecological reparations and degrowth: Towards a convergence of alternatives around world-making after growth', *Development* (2023), pp. 1–8; Carlos Tornel, 'Climate change and capitalism: A degrowth agenda for climate justice', in Paul Harris (ed), *A Research Agenda for Climate Justice* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019), pp. 64–76.

³⁰Beatriz Rodríguez-Labajos, Ivonne Yáñez, and Patrick Bond et al., 'Not so natural an alliance? Degrowth and environmental justice movements in the Global South', *Ecological Economics*, 157 (2019), pp. 175–84.

For example, while the Netherlands and Bangladesh have very similar geography, the Netherlands has managed to achieve resilience to flooding through extensive and expensive irrigation and flood defence systems, while poorer Bangladesh remains one of the hotspots of climate vulnerability in the world, with 5,000 deaths and 7 million homes destroyed annually by flooding events.³¹

It is unsurprising that a recent study involving environmental justice scholars and activists in parts of Africa and Latin America shows that the term ‘degrowth’ is not appealing to, and does not match the demand of, many in the Global South.³² The study also suggests that the feeling is the same in poor and marginalised communities in Northern countries. Muradian³³ expresses this sentiment more bluntly when he argues that degrowth scholarship mostly reflects the values of the well-educated European middle class who favour progressive-green cosmopolitan ideals and that the concept remains ‘too far away from the aspiration of disadvantaged populations’ whose primary concern is social mobility. Tellingly, he observes the big difference between frugality as a choice and frugality as a social condition.³⁴

This is not to say that degrowth has no advocates in the Global South. Lang (this issue) clearly favours degrowth for the Global South even if the argument can appear weak and contradictory. The argument is that: (a) there is no simple correlation between economic growth and poverty reduction; (b) much of the economic growth in Latin America has mostly benefited the rich populations of those nations; and (c) economic growth in the Global South has been mostly achieved through extractive economic activities with a net negative impact on well-being, especially for the poor and marginalised populations. These are very important observations. However, these arguments, as far as I can see, are not against economic growth per se but against unsustainable forms of extractivism and the national institutions in Latin America (the same applies to Africa) that have failed to organise national and regional politics to ensure sustainable production and fairer distribution of the proceeds of economic growth. It is true, as Lang asserts, that growth on its own does not necessarily translate to well-being for the majority, but it is also the case that most countries that have achieved prosperity for the majority did so on the back of large-scale economic growth. The literature clearly shows that economic growth is a necessary although not sufficient condition for poverty alleviation.³⁵

Lang is correct, in my view, that the need to question unsustainable economic growth and inequality transcends North-South binaries. Not only do the super-rich in the South need to reduce their ecological footprint, but the issue of wide inequality within countries (including in Africa) is also a major obstacle to sustainability.³⁶ Yet if one is looking for societies with less inequality (low GNI co-efficient)³⁷ and where people have the luxury to pursue some of the ‘essentials’ demanded by degrowth scholars – more time for recreation, caring, and intellectual pursuits – the place to look will not be Africa, where poverty is rampant, but in industrialised societies with high levels of both green and brown growth.

In general, degrowth scholars have tended to under-appreciate the role that economic growth has played in providing rich countries with the infrastructure and quality of life that they tend to take for granted – such infrastructure as railways and aeroplanes that allow for travel and recreation, hospitals that provide cures for major diseases, and mechanised agriculture to optimise

³¹ Camilo Mora, Daniele Spirandelli, and Erik C. Franklin et al., ‘Broad threat to humanity from cumulative climate hazards intensified by greenhouse gas emissions’, *Nature Climate Change*, 8:12 (2018), pp. 1062–71.

³² Rodríguez-Labajos et al., ‘Not so natural an alliance?’

³³ Roldan Muradian, ‘Frugality as a choice vs. frugality as a social condition: Is de-growth doomed to be a Eurocentric project?’, *Ecological Economics*, 161 (2019), pp. 257–60.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

³⁵ Marinko Škare and Romina P. Družeta, ‘Poverty and economic growth: A review’, *Technological and Economic Development of Economy*, 22:1 (2016), pp. 156–75.

³⁶ But this is beyond the focus of this article.

³⁷ Of the 10 countries with the highest income inequality in the world, 8 are in Africa: available at: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/income-inequality-by-country>}.

production and address hunger. Degrowth movements sometimes seem to assume that equity and justice within and between countries will be met if the economy is smaller and if local production and consumption is widely embraced (see Rajeswari Raina and Rishabh Kachroo, 'Post-growth agrifood systems: Towards an emancipatory politics', this issue). However, my experience growing up in Africa is that poverty and inequality are key features of many rural communities that are barely integrated into the global economic system. The point is not that small-scale agri-food systems (as advocated by Raina and Kachroo) are not desirable or part of the solution to hunger and climate change. My contention is simply that such approaches alone will not be sufficient to deliver the large-scale innovation and growth needed to lift millions in Africa out of poverty as intended in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and consistent with the aspiration of the majority of people in the Global South. While reducing the size of the global economy might be necessary to combat climate change, achieving climate justice for Africa requires more growth in Africa and positive affirmative measures from the international community.

It is true that many degrowth scholars often concede that poor countries would be allowed to achieve some measure of increased economic development under a global degrowth scenario. However, it is possible to imagine that injustice and poverty in poor countries may increase if rich countries embrace degrowth as the main focus of policy to address climate change, as such an approach will likely shift attention to the global management of recession and not to redistribution of resources.

Recent events during the Covid-19 pandemic provide an indication of what might happen to Africa under a degrowth scenario. During the pandemic, rich countries hoarded Covid-19 vaccines,³⁸ introduced discriminatory travel bans on Africa,³⁹ and doled out trillions to cushion their citizens from the economic impact of lockdown measures. Meanwhile, in Africa, unemployment surged, with some projections indicating up to 30 million jobs could have been lost and between 28 to 49 million people pushed into extreme poverty.⁴⁰ The situation also saw the exacerbation of climate vulnerabilities as the adaptive capacities of these countries and their available resources for fighting climate change decreased.

Consider another example. In the run-up to COP26 in Glasgow in December 2022, the European Union (EU), propelled by their EU Green Deal and buoyed by their advancement in renewable energy technologies, declared that gas was a dirty fuel and effectively banned their financial institutions from investing in gas projects in Africa. However, when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022 and the price of gas soared, the same EU states that had sought to demonise gas rebranded it a transition fuel and commenced a new scramble for gas in Africa.⁴¹ At the same time, several EU countries that had long spoke against 'inefficient' energy subsidy in Africa rolled out extensive subsidies to protect their citizens from an astronomical increase in energy prices.

These examples suggest global degrowth would likely lead rich countries to turn inwards, protecting their own citizens and leaving poor countries to suffer from the resulting economic stagnation. Degrowth can also produce fear-based populism in rich countries. Perkins⁴² was indeed

³⁸Heidi Ledford, 'COVID vaccine hoarding might have cost more than a million lives', *Nature (Lond.)* (2022); available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-03529-3>.

³⁹Lisa Forman and Roojin Habibi, 'Revisiting the legality of travel restrictions under international law during COVID-19', *International & Comparative Law Quarterly*, 71:3 (2022), pp. 743–60.

⁴⁰Epidemic/Pandemic Response in Africa: Covid-19 in Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa (2020); p. 6. Report available at: https://assets.websitefiles.com/5fdca1c14b4b91eaa7196a/5ffd408b0e86740eb60d95eb_EPRiA%20Report%202020.pdf.

⁴¹Gbadamopsi Nosmot, 'Africans decry Europe's energy hypocrisy' (20 July 2022), available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/20/europe-africa-energy-crisis-oil-gas-fossil-fuels-russia-ukraine-war/>.

⁴²Patricia E. E. Perkins, 'Climate justice, commons, and degrowth', *Ecological Economics*, 160 (2019), pp. 183–90 (p. 182).

right when she noted that while degrowth effectively highlights the problem of over-consumption in rich countries, it generally ‘under-emphasises equity and the unfair impacts of shrinking GDP on particular people and geographic areas’. Degrowth scholarship currently lacks a detailed account of how quality of life will be maintained alongside policies to facilitate international climate justice in a degrowth world. This is why key international climate justice measures such as debt for nature swap, debt forgiveness, loss and damage facility, North–South financial and technological transfer, reparation, and compensation for past harm have received very limited if any space in current mainstream degrowth literature.⁴³

Green growth and climate justice for Africa

The concept of green growth is based on the idea that economic growth can be maintained in an environmentally sustainable way. The central idea is that economic growth can be decoupled from environmental degradation using technological innovation, green investment, the correction of market failures, green polices, and different ways of organising social production and exchange.⁴⁴ Defined as an economy that improves human well-being and builds social equity while reducing environmental risks and scarcities,⁴⁵ green growth communicates new aspirations that economic growth can be decoupled from environmental degradation. It also suggests novel ways of resolving intractable North–South disputes that have plagued international environmental politics for decades. Green growth was explicitly advanced as a basis for climate justice for poor countries as far back as 2008 in the wake of the global economic crisis, when some politicians and development economists began to advance it as a possible solution for economic recovery, poverty eradication, and climate change.⁴⁶ The green economy was one of the organising themes of the RIO + 20 summit (held in 2012), attended by 197 United Nations member states.⁴⁷

Scholars have identified various versions of the green economy and how these relate to international environmental justice.⁴⁸ The first is the ‘Thin Green Economy’ version, which accepts that greening the economy is a useful corrective so that government and businesses can address the negative environmental impacts of industrial activity but rejects the suggestion that this warrants the fundamental restructuring of the global economic system.⁴⁹ The second is the ‘Moderate Green’ version, which acknowledges that a purely market-based capitalist economy will not deliver sustainability but retains faith in the ability of reformed liberal economic philosophy and international institutions to deliver on global sustainability. The third is the ‘Thick Green’ version, which acknowledges hard biophysical limits to growth, rejects economic growth as a policy imperative, and insists on wholesale transformation of the global economic system as imperative to the attainment of sustainability.⁵⁰ My conception of ‘strong’ green growth overlaps with the moderate and thick versions. It takes seriously the notion of planetary boundaries, incorporates green innovation and participatory democracy, and centres international justice and fairness as vital for achieving global sustainability. Here, neither growth nor degrowth is considered a worthy policy objective. Instead, the model pursues well-being for all people in a largely equal society. It broadly shares the

⁴³Tor A. Benjaminsen, ‘Virtual Forum introduction: Environmental limits, scarcity and degrowth’, *Political Geography*, 87 (2021), p. 102344.

⁴⁴Alex Bowen and Cameron Hepburn, ‘Green growth: An assessment’, *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 30:3 (2014), pp. 407–22.

⁴⁵UNEP, Green Growth.

⁴⁶Paul Ekins, ‘Introduction to the issues and the book’, in Paul Ekins and Stefan Speck (eds), *Environmental Tax Reform (ETR): A Policy for Green Growth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 3–26; Jeffrey D. Sachs, ‘From millennium development goals to sustainable development goals’, *The Lancet*, 379:9832 (2012), pp. 2206–11.

⁴⁷The other theme of RIO + 20 was how to improve international coordination for sustainable development by building an institutional framework.

⁴⁸Timothy G. Ehresman and Chukwumerije Okereke, ‘Environmental justice and conceptions of the green economy’, *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics*, 15 (2015), pp. 13–27.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 21.

same features of the ‘Well-being Economy’ described by Fioramonti and the ‘strong’ or ‘genuine green growth’ described by Soknes, Espen, and Rockström.⁵¹

Many who criticise green growth as ecological modernisation or a veneer for ‘greenwash’ often do so by conveniently aiming their attack on the ‘Thin’ version of green growth. But taken seriously, green growth offers an opportunity for renewed effort to reframe the climate-development relationship away from a focus on tensions and trade-offs and towards opportunities for synergies and co-benefits.⁵² Several COP decisions reaffirm that green growth is indispensable to sustainable development and that incentives are required to support the development of such strategies in developing countries.⁵³ In effect, green growth has been accepted as offering a new hope for continued growth in the South while also serving as a soft alternative to hard-quantified greenhouse gas emission reduction targets for developing countries. Under a shared responsibility concept, developed countries are expected to provide financial and technical incentives to developing countries to motivate them to pursue low-carbon development pathways. Unlike degrowth, green growth makes provision for green innovation, investment, and sustainable economic growth in both rich and poor countries to ensure global prosperity and the North–South resource transfers needed to secure distributional justice.

The UNFCCC, as noted, has established several initiatives to promote climate justice. These include the Green Climate Fund (GCF), which offers financial support to developing countries to help them adapt to climate change and reduce their emissions, and the Adaptation Fund (AF), which offers financial assistance to underdeveloped nations so that they can adjust to the effects of climate change. A notable example is the USD100 billion per annum pledged by rich countries to assist poor countries in tackling climate change and advancing green growth. Green growth has therefore emerged as key to reconciling aspirations for economic development, technological diffusion, and the imperative for carbon reduction necessary to meet global climate goals.⁵⁴ Some have actually argued that green growth is a matter of survival for African countries.⁵⁵ Crucially, since green growth by definition emphasises social equity and inclusion, it also offers an opportunity for African governments to address the challenges of gross inequality and lack of inclusion which currently characterise much of the continent’s growth scenario.⁵⁶

However, while several North–South climate justices initiatives have been advanced under the green growth banner, it must be admitted that they have yet to deliver real justice for Africa. A major sticking point has been climate finance, which African countries feel they have received very little of from rich countries. For example, of the USD 177 billion required by African governments to implement the climate action contained in their Nationally Determined Contribution (NDCs), they receive only 31 billion annually.⁵⁷ Similarly, the international climate regime has not delivered capacity-building or technology transfer to anywhere near the extent expected by Africa and other developing countries.⁵⁸

Figures released by the International Energy Agency (IEA) indicate that of the USD 2.7 trillion investment towards renewable energy generation globally, only 2 per cent has gone to Africa.⁵⁹

⁵¹Stoknes and Rockström, ‘Redefining green growth within planetary boundaries’.

⁵²Simon Dietz and Nicholas Stern, ‘Why economic analysis supports strong action on climate change: A response to the *Stern Review*’s critics’, *Review of Environmental Economics and Policy*, 2:1 (2008), pp. 94–113.

⁵³See, for example, FCCC/CP/2012/8/Add.1.

⁵⁴Mark A. Dutz and Siddharth Sharma, ‘Green growth, technology and innovation’, *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper* (2012) (5932).

⁵⁵Yakob Mulugetta and Frauke Urban, ‘Deliberating on low carbon development’, *Energy Policy*, 38:12 (2010), pp. 7546–9.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

⁵⁷Climate Policy Initiative: Landscape of Climate Finance in Africa. Climate Policy. Available at: <https://www.climatepolicyinitiative.org/publication/landscape-of-climate-finance-in-africa/>.

⁵⁸Matthew Rimmer, ‘Beyond the Paris Agreement: Intellectual property, innovation policy, and climate justice’, *Laws*, 8:1 (2019), pp. 1–24 (p. 7).

⁵⁹Available at: <https://www.iea.org/reports/africa-energy-outlook-2022/key-findings>.

And of this, over 50 per cent has gone to just one country – South Africa. This is despite the fact that the continent has big advantages when it comes to renewable energy generation – ranging from solar and hydroelectricity through wind and geothermal energy. Similarly, IEA data suggest that Africa has 1 per cent of the world's total installed solar power capacity, despite the fact that it has 60 per cent of the world's most promising areas to generate solar energy.⁶⁰

African governments have expressed frustration that international cooperation for a global green economy is not delivering climate justice for Africa, and some have even questioned whether the mantra of global green growth could be a guise for a new dimension of global injustice against Africa. In the same week as COP27, Former President Buhari of Nigeria wrote that while 'western development has unleashed climate catastrophe' on the African continent, 'the rich countries' green policies dictate that Africans should remain poor for the greater good'.⁶¹

Scholars have indeed identified a number of ways in which green growth could open up opportunities for climate injustice in Africa and other developing countries. These include flooding Africa with cheap and unreliable solar products;⁶² using Africa's forest for cheap carbon offsets to make space for pollution by the West;⁶³ displacing communities for renewable energy projects (sometimes called 'green landgrab');⁶⁴ and energy transition programmes based on 'geographic externalization of labour, natural resources and sink'.⁶⁵ In addition, there is the question – a major point of the degrowth critique of green growth – about whether it is indeed technically feasible to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation. These challenges partly explain why some say that green growth is a ruse for 'greenwashing' and the continuation of liberal capitalist economic policies that produce environmental degradation and inequality.

However, I am not sure such arguments provide enough basis to abandon green growth and embrace degrowth. First, 'greenwashing' is not so much a problem inherently tied to green growth as a normative concept. It is about countries and organisations lacking integrity and not keeping their promises, and this is not a problem that will disappear if nations switch to degrowth. Second, as Petschow et al. point out,⁶⁶ it cannot yet be scientifically concluded that green growth cannot deliver decoupling. Although current research has shown that the rate and scale of decoupling needed to make growth green is huge and daunting, there is no guarantee that it can never be achieved with future leaps in technological advancement. Third, given the urgency of climate change and the need for poverty alleviation, it seems more practicable to work with existing international institutions and structures already committed to green growth than to devote effort to promote degrowth which may lead to economic stagnation and poverty without any guarantee of securing justice for poor countries. This is more so the case since degrowth has been found to have a negative emotional and cognitive effect on people, while the green economy is perceived as

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ulrich E. Hansen, Ivan Nygaard, and Mirko Dal Maso, 'The dark side of the sun: Solar e-waste and environmental upgrading in the off-grid solar PV value chain', in Alex Coad, Paul Nightingale, Jack Stilgoe, and Antonio Vezzani (eds), *The Dark Side of Innovation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), pp. 35–55.

⁶³Adam G. Bumpus and Diana M. Liverman, 'Accumulation by decarbonization and the governance of carbon offsets', *Economic Geography*, 84:2 (2008), pp. 127–55.

⁶⁴Kristen Lyons and Peter Westoby, 'Carbon colonialism and the new land grab: Plantation forestry in Uganda and its livelihood impacts', *Journal of Rural Studies*, 36 (2014), pp. 13–21.

⁶⁵Felix M. Dorn, 'Green colonialism in Latin America? Towards a new research agenda for the global energy transition', *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies/Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe*, 114 (2022), pp. 137–46 (p. 137).

⁶⁶Ulrich Petschow, Nils aus dem Moore, David Hofmann, and Eugen Pissarskoi, 'Cornerstones and positions of a precautionary post-growth economy. The end of the growth-based model of prosperity', in Bastian Lange, Martina Hülz, Benedikt Schmid, and Christian Schulz (eds), *Post-Growth Geographies: Spatial Relations of Diverse and Alternative Economies* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2022), pp. 323–46.

a more favourable term for the pursuit of the multiple objectives of environmental sustainability and well-being.⁶⁷

However, none of this should be interpreted as an unqualified argument that green growth will deliver justice for poor countries. What can be said is that the prospect of achieving some form of international climate justice for Africa would seem more likely in the context of green growth than degrowth. At the same time, a strong version of green growth would not object to some form of degrowth as a policy for developed countries if it can be guaranteed that such a policy will not compromise climate justice for Africa.

Conclusion: Post-growth, climate justice, and the international order

Green growth and degrowth both have the potential to challenge the prevailing inequitable international system and contribute to international climate justice. I have argued, however, that there are serious tensions between degrowth and international climate justice such that degrowth actually threatens North–South climate justice.

As a concept dedicated to reducing global metabolic flows, degrowth does not specify how quality of life in impoverished African nations in dire need of economic development will be maintained in a degrowth world. With notable exceptions, there is a general lack of focus and clarity in degrowth studies on how justice and equity can be secured for poor countries in a world experiencing degrowth and how the difficult questions of building and securing political support for the kinds of measures that degrowth advocates for the global economy will be resolved. While many acknowledge that degrowth strategies are primarily aimed at the Global North and support the need to create ecological and conceptual space for the Global South to chart its own course, they generally downplay the potential negative impact of degrowth in rich countries on poor countries. There is also an under-appreciation of the role of economic growth in providing the infrastructure required to increase well-being and achieve large-scale poverty alleviation. Moreover, degrowth, as a post-growth communication strategy, carries negative cognitive associations and emotional reactions for many, including academics and policymakers in the South.⁶⁸

But it must be emphasised that, to the extent that they are focused on decoupling and metabolic flows, neither degrowth nor green growth will deliver justice for the poor countries of the world. Dominant green growth and degrowth discourses are focused on environmental sustainability and do not sufficiently emphasise North–South social justice. Without attention to justice, both risk ‘green colonialism’ and more climate injustice against Africa.

To address the multiple dimensions of inequality between wealthy and poor countries, fundamental reforms of the asymmetrical global economic structures and the active pursuit of policies to promote redistribution and restitution are essential (see also Raina and Kachroo, ‘Post-growth agri-food systems’, this issue). While the difficulties in reforming an international system largely driven by power and national economic interests are obvious, one should also reject the more extreme notion that moral norms of equity and justice have no place in global politics.⁶⁹ It is not even the case, as Falkner says, that ‘justice has proved to be an “unavoidable” part of the international politics of climate change.’⁷⁰ Global collaboration for climate action and green growth has already resulted in several far-reaching international climate justice declarations, norms, and actions, even if they fall short of genuine climate justice for Africa. Degrowth contributes to conversation about global

⁶⁷Maria Fernanda Tomaselli, Robert Kozak, Robert Gifford, and Stephen R. Sheppard, ‘Degrowth or not degrowth: The importance of message frames for characterizing the new economy’, *Ecological Economics*, 183 (2021), p. 106952; Stefan Drews and Antal Miklós, ‘Degrowth: A “missile word” that backfires?’, *Ecological Economics*, 126 (2016), pp. 182–7.

⁶⁸Tomaselli et al., ‘Degrowth or not degrowth’.

⁶⁹Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Explain Everything about the World* (London: Elliot and Thompsons, 2015).

⁷⁰Robert Falkner, ‘The unavoidability of justice – and order – in international climate politics: From Kyoto to Paris and beyond’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 21:2 (2019), pp. 270–8.

climate justice. However, the interconnectedness of the global economy, the negative imagery associated with degrowth, the need for large-scale growth in Africa to address widespread poverty, and the Herculean challenges of navigating degrowth policies and politics in the current international system all make 'strong' green growth a more viable basis on which to advocate for more climate justice for Africa.

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