

**A**t this year's UN climate conference, COP29, countries pledged only a quarter of the \$1.3tn (£1.02tn) a year needed to respond to the climate crisis, with no new commitment to cut greenhouse gas emissions. And, despite covid-19, the adoption of a strong pandemic agreement is becoming more unlikely.

Health multilateralism is in transition. The political, economic, and academic powerbase of the global north, along with western ideological hegemony, is weakening. Reaching consensus in a multipolar world is much harder, with strong voices from the global south, constantly shifting alliances, and diminished trust as a result of reduced financing and constant crisis.

Into this uncertainty Donald Trump returns as US president, a gift to populist politicians and right wing movements worldwide. His campaign rhetoric, strongly critical of science and public health, has emboldened a global drive to weaken international health organisations, commitments to equitable access to healthcare, gender equality, reproductive rights, and investments in women's health.

But focusing on Trump diverts from considering emerging powers elsewhere. 2025 will see the fourth consecutive presidency of the G20—representing 19 of the world's largest economies and the European Union and African Union—held by the global south:

## A new world order for health

As power shifts from the global north to rising stars in the global south, Trump's renewed attacks on multilateralism could have profound consequences, says **Ilona Kickbusch**

Indonesia, India, Brazil, and from 2025 South Africa. Brazil's vibrant G20 agenda to fight global inequity is diametrically opposed to Trump's policy choices. South Africa's presidency will surely push in a similar direction, especially with the African Union now a G20 member.

The global health agenda is increasingly influenced by BRICS, (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), now expanded to include Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates; G7; and G20 meetings, which also include health and finance ministers' meetings and increasingly create new health mechanisms and institutions. The World Health Organization (WHO) seeks support and cooperates to set agendas at these meetings.

A reset in global multilateralism is desperately needed, but no progress has been made despite repeated calls. Meanwhile, global south leaders are forming new alliances, regional groups, and financial mechanisms and institutions—for example, China's Belt and Road Initiative and the BRICS New Development Bank. The BRICS group is

creating a vaccine research and development centre and mechanisms to regulate health products. The New Public Health Order for Africa from the African Union calls for a revamping of financial institutions to reduce focus on development aid.

New tensions will emerge as large middle income countries will need to balance growing

### Determined diplomacy efforts are needed to tackle stalling progress on major global health challenges

geopolitical interests with commitments made to support developing countries and to shaping a more equitable multilateralism. After Trump threatened to leave WHO in 2020, political negotiations, financial support from the EU, and pressure to act together during the pandemic helped WHO member states skirt an institutional crisis.

Now others need to step up. Determined health diplomacy efforts are needed to tackle stalling progress on major global health challenges. Brazil, India, and China are founding WHO

members and have a historic opportunity to shape its future. If the US withdraws, 193 countries will remain. China would be the largest single contributor of assessed contributions, balanced by the EU countries combined. Brazil holds the next BRICS presidency, and South Africa and Canada the next G20 and G7 presidencies. Might a new coalition be the deal makers?

Trump might be willing for the US to remain in WHO if it paid much less. The EU also wants a deal: more voice for its high contribution. If other large G20 countries invested more in WHO a deal might be struck. All contributors will seek reforms in priority setting, transparency, accountability, and efficiency.

In 2026 the US is due to hold both G7 and G20 presidencies, but Trump's commitment is doubtful. Campaigning will soon begin for the election of WHO's next director general. Several BRICS countries are eyeing the position. What happens in 2025 is critical for health multilateralism in an ever more fragmented world driven by transactional diplomacy.

The G7 and G20 must push for tangible action to increase health equity and ensure human rights for health, and the World Health Assembly in May must reach a pandemic agreement, re-establish a fundamental commitment to WHO, and set a route to reforms essential to secure its future.

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# The 'dugnad' stories behind Scandinavian support for high taxes

The Nordic high tax model thrives on shared narratives, experience, and priorities. Equality, trust, and a demand for good quality public services create and reflect a cohesive and content society, writes **Sandy Goldbeck-Wood**

**T**he Scandinavian social democracies are widely admired for their world class public services, which are supported by high levels of taxation, productivity, and education, and equality of income and opportunity.

In 2021, for example, Norway had a tax-to-GDP (gross domestic product) ratio of 42.2% compared with 33.5% in the UK and 24.5% in the US. Conversely, income inequality is notably low in Norway, which has a Gini coefficient—a measure of income distribution within a population—of just 22.7 compared with 32.6 in the UK and 39.8 in the US, where inequality approaches that in many Latin American and African countries.

But is this egalitarianism translatable to other settings? In the Scandinavian virtuous cycle of welfare, equality, happiness, and trusted governments and institutions, it is hard to distinguish cause from effect. That Scandinavians expect, and get, high quality public services “free” or with small co-payments, and baulk at paying privately for health and education, is both cause and effect of social democracy. Any lessons are likely to be complex and cultural, and perhaps contestable.

## Widely shared burden, widely shared gain

The most striking aspect of Scandinavian taxation is not its top rate, which for example in Norway at 38% is not exceptionally high, but the number of people who pay this rate.

The income level at which people start paying the higher rate in Norway

is just 1.5 times the national average income, compared with 8.5 times in the US. Hence, while only the exceptionally rich pay higher tax rates in the US, Norway generates the bulk of its high revenue from an extremely broad base.

The burden of generous public spending is shared widely, overburdening neither the rich nor the poor. Most people, during a lifetime, are both payers and beneficiaries, and tax is, palpably, a shared investment with personal returns, rather than primarily charity for strangers.

Combined with relatively high consumption taxes on socially costly elements such as alcohol, tobacco, and cars, this model raises substantial revenue in progressive ways, fostering social equality, while also promoting public health directly.

## Shared experience, shared perspectives

In everyday terms, this flat taxation structure means that whereas a new consultant in Norway will earn around 25% less than a new consultant in the UK and pay higher rate tax, the basic salary of a postal worker in Norway is around 25% higher than the equivalent in the UK. It follows that the economic experiences of the consultant and the postal worker are more similar in Norway than they are in the UK, making it more likely that they will attend the same concerts or football matches or eat in the same restaurants.

This, in turn, increases the chances that consultants and postal workers find themselves in the same conversations. In broad terms,



**The economic experiences of the consultant and the postal worker are more similar in Norway than in the UK**

socialising is less socioeconomically stratified than in the UK, conversations less segregated, and society less split—not only demographically, but narratively.

Add to this the simple arithmetic of population size—Norway's 5.5 million versus the UK's 67-69 million—and a very different calculus of social cohesion comes into view.

## Trust and history are key

Tax tolerance in a society relies heavily on trust in the integrity, representativeness, and fairness of elected governments and institutions. To earn this trust, a state must be seen as inclusive—that is, not just benefiting a select few, or following the ideas of a dominant subgroup, but serving the broader population.

Evidence from 29 European countries demonstrates a clear, independent effect between perceived government quality and public attitudes, showing that people who perceive institutions as efficient and fair are more likely to support higher taxes and expenditures.





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Besides trust in government, and individual factors including education, income, and ideology, much of what shapes collective tax tolerance is rooted in culture: a population's willingness to pay tax reflects not only an immediate reaction to fiscal policies but also long term views shaped by history, geography, lived experiences, and concepts of work, reward, and justice.

It is no surprise that different histories shape different tax narratives. While the UK grew wealthy against a feudal background—through trade, naval exploration, colonial exploitation, and early industrialisation—Norway eked out a modest existence from farming and fishing until less than two generations ago.

When Norway became an independent nation on 17 May 1814, it had no established feudal system, powerful bourgeoisie, or landed gentry to speak of. Instead, newly emancipated from rule by foreign powers, it was “born egalitarian.” So when untold oil wealth arrived in the 1970s, Norway had no

**Social cohesion in the city of Bergen reflects the shared history of the whole of Norway**

**The dividends of improved health, wealth, and happiness that come from income equality are hard to ignore**

cultural tradition of placing national resources in the hands of a wealthy few or selling them to foreign powers.

Instead, the people's elected representatives drove a hard bargain with foreign investors keen to secure sole rights to Norwegian territorial waters, demanding state ownership of at least 50% in all production licences. This secured prosperity for every man, woman, and child in Norway for generations to come.

Although an affluent elite has emerged, some of whom have sought tax refuge in countries such as Switzerland, it is fair to characterise Norway as a relatively poor country that has become rich collectively.

### Geography and climate curb power of private wealth

Geography and climate also affect fiscal thinking. Even a casual visitor can witness the vital role tunnels, bridges, storm proofed roads, and subsidised ferries and flights play in Norway's national economy.

When a storm halts all transport and someone you know is experiencing a myocardial infarction or preterm labour far from a hospital—a common occurrence in a large and sparsely populated country—the issue of taxes becomes deeply personal.

In life's most vulnerable situations, private wealth offers little help. What truly matters, regardless of location or income, is a tax system capable of dispatching an air ambulance or a rescue helicopter from a tertiary hospital staffed to world class standards.

Although there is fierce debate about the allocation of budgets and the regionalisation or centralisation of specialist services such as percutaneous coronary intervention or tertiary obstetric care, the solid investment in infrastructure and health services, sick pay, and parental rights is seen as a common good and a means to realising national economic, social, and geopolitical goals.

The further north you go, the less private wealth, markets, and individualised solutions seem like a panacea, and the more you realise your dependence on others. An Arctic

winter brings home the equal value of the work of doctor, ferry crew, bridge engineer, and snow plough driver, if that were in doubt. A culture not known for superficial politeness regards helping dig a neighbour's car out of a snowdrift as *de rigueur*.

Unfashionable, voluntary, shared work is a national ethical value which merits its own word—“*dugnad*” (mucking in). It is a word which describes the ethic of taxation.

### Rewards of neighbourliness

Are there lessons for old, European democracies from Norway's unique and recently privileged experience? It would be unwise to overgeneralise.

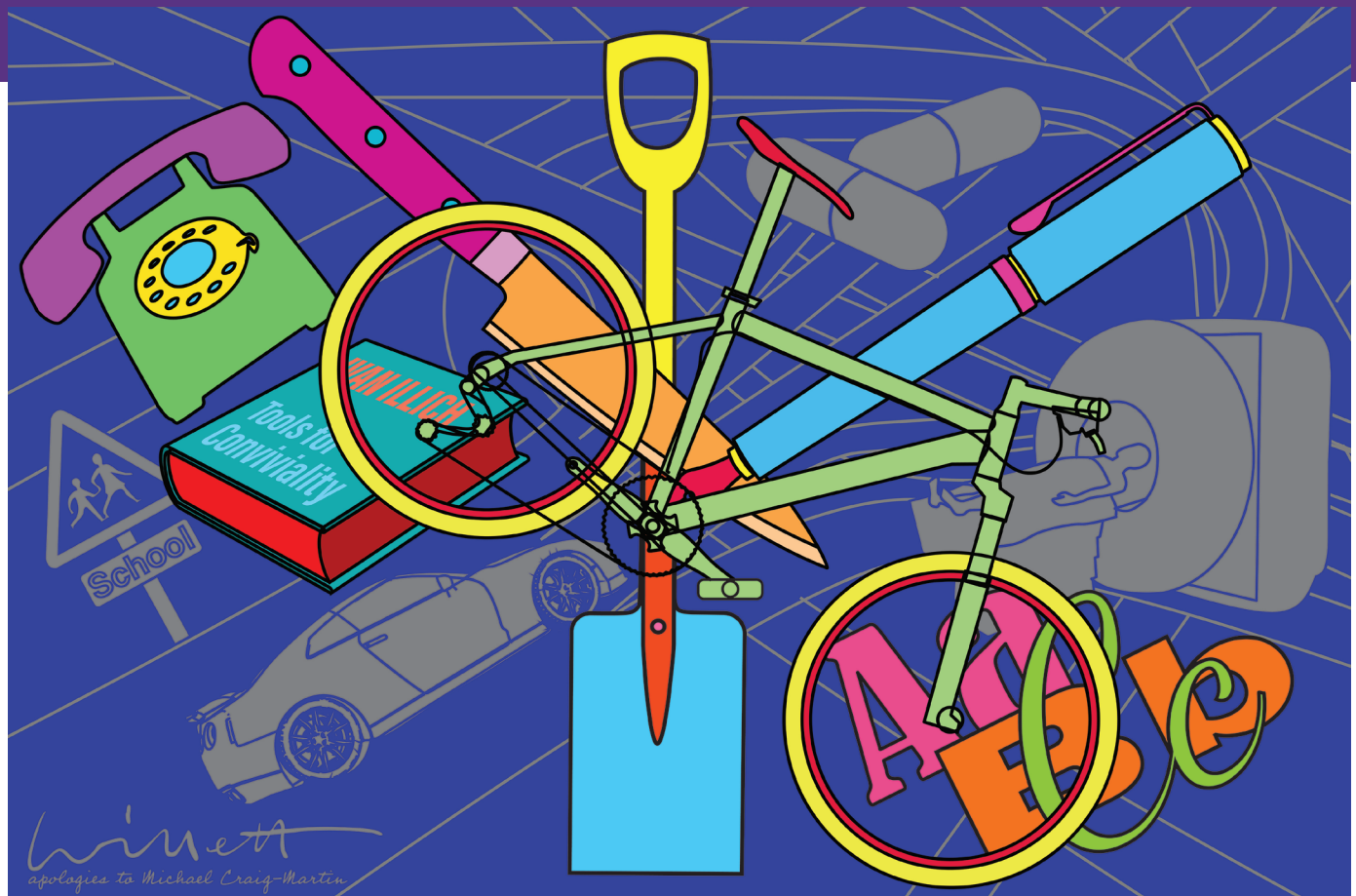
If there are lessons, they probably lie beneath the specifics of fiscal policy, in national habits of relating to each other. Another nation seeking to improve its public services might begin by reflecting on how it feels about *dugnad*—the for-better-or-worse practice of neighbourliness. It's a worthwhile reflection because the dividends of improved health, wealth, and happiness that come from income equality and social cohesion are hard to ignore.

A recent systematic review reaffirmed the adverse public health effects of “the factors that drive unequal income distribution at the system level.” Similarly, the International Monetary Fund cautions that “excessive inequality” can “erode social cohesion, lead to political polarisation, and lower economic growth.” Meanwhile, year after year, Scandinavian countries continue to lead global happiness rankings.

Other countries seeking better public services, may need to begin by asking how well people trust, or even know, each other; how well institutions and electoral systems represent everyone; and what would need to change, for tax to seem more like a win-win investment than a zero-sum game. Perhaps the newly appointed consultant and the postal worker could start the conversation, over dinner.

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# Towards a convivial society

Writer Ivan Illich foresaw our current global polycrisis 50 years ago, writes **Richard Smith**. We need to maximise “convivial tools” that enrich us and minimise “industrial tools,” not least in “health” care, that enslave and kill us

**E**xperts have warned that artificial intelligence could lead to extinction of humans. In 1973 Ivan Illich, priest, thinker, and critic of industrial society, warned in his book *Tools for Conviviality* that “a tool can grow out of man’s control, first to become his master and finally to become his executioner.”

Illich argued that widespread industrialism would destroy us. The book foresaw, and describes better than any contemporary book, our current global polycrisis of climate change; destruction of nature; pandemics; multiple wars; the prospect, even likelihood, of nuclear war; gross inequality; growing debt; mass migration; populism; and failing institutions, including health services. Illich writes

about subjects that we discuss commonly now: post-industrial society and degrowth or “withdrawal from growth.”

There is no disputing that growth, which took off with industrialisation in the 19th century, has brought benefits including increased life expectancy, a profusion of goods, better housing, and increased leisure. A high gross domestic product, writes the psychologist Steven Pinker, “correlates with every indicator of human flourishing.” Growth has also allowed politicians to avoid the difficulties of redistribution by growing rather than sharing the cake. “But,” points out the economist Daniel Susskind, “the very same technologies that we have relied on to maintain that ascent have been not only growth promoting but also climate-

destroying, inequality-creating, work-threatening, politics-undermining, and community-disrupting.”

It remains unclear how we might have an economy that provides the benefits of growth without the harms. At best, argues Susskind, there will be trade offs; and Illich, who like the others is better on the problem than the solution, argues that we should maximise “convivial tools” like the bicycle and minimise the use of “non-convivial tools” like cars. In healthcare this might mean much more emphasis on relationships; physical activity; meaningful work; a plant based diet; community strength; self-care; a wide range of healers, including nurses and GPs; and much less emphasis on hospitals, drugs, and tertiary care.

## Convivial tools

Illich calls for a “convivial society,” whose fundamental values are survival, justice, and self-defined work.

Currently our survival is threatened, the world is filled with injustice, and few have the privilege of being able to define their own work. In a convivial society “modern technologies serve politically interrelated individuals rather than managers,” Illich says.

“Convivial tools,” wrote Illich, “are those which give each person who uses them the greatest opportunity to enrich the environment with the fruits of his or her vision.” Convivial tools are easy to use, accessible to all, and their use is not compulsory and does not impinge on another’s use of the tool. Examples are libraries, the alphabet, a pen, a spade, a knife, a guide to self-care, a bicycle, and even a phone. Everybody could have a bicycle without people being killed and the planet being polluted.



## Industrial tools

Industrial tools, in contrast, are designed with predetermined meaning, cannot be used by everybody, and give one set of people power over others. Illich lists multilane highways, strip mines, compulsory schooling, intensive farming, mass media, and medicine as examples. “Destructive tools,” writes Illich, “must inevitably increase regimentation, dependence, exploitation, or impotence, and rob not only the rich but also the poor of conviviality.”

A car is a non-convivial tool: it has enslaved and killed many people. Most people in the world do not have cars, and most of those who do are dependent on them because of the distances they must travel. Around a million people a year are killed by cars, with 20 injured for every death. Cars are a major contributor to the outdoor air pollution that kills 4.2 million people a year prematurely and a key driver of climate change, an existential threat to humanity.

## Balance of life

Illich identifies six ways in which industrial, or non-convivial, tools upset the balance of life, lead to polycrisis, and may lead to the destruction of humanity.

### Degradation of the biosphere

The damage to nature that was alarming in 1973 is terrifying now. Illich thought that humans could find themselves totally

enclosed in an artificial world “with no exit . . . a prisoner in the shell of technology, unable to find again the ancient milieu to which he was adapted for hundreds of thousands of years.” That seems a prescient description of our world now, in which we have already heated the planet by 1.5°C compared with pre-industrial levels and are headed towards an increase of 3°C or more, making much of the world uninhabitable.

### Radical monopoly

What Illich calls “radical monopoly” means not only that we must go to doctors to manage our sickness, to school to be taught, and to undertakers to dispose of our dead, but also that it is impossible for us to imagine not doing so. It’s unthinkable that we would decline to go to the doctor when possibly dying, or decline treatment for cancer when it might possibly cure us.

### Overprogramming

Compulsory schooling teaches “the accountant’s view of the value of time, the bureaucrat’s view of the value of promotion, the salesman’s view of the value of increased consumption, and the union leader’s view of the purpose of work,” according to Illich. Through overprogramming we

## It’s unthinkable that we’d decline to go to the doctor when dying

are absorbed into the radical monopoly: we can see no other way.

### Polarisation

“The concentration of privileges on a few,” writes Illich, “is in the nature of industrial dominance.” Those who build and control the industrial tools become richer, while those who must use undertakers rather than bury their own dead are impoverished. The International Monetary Fund reports that about 10% of the world’s population owns 76% of the wealth, takes 52% of income, and emits 48% of greenhouse gases. The poorest half of the world’s population takes only 8.5% of income.

### Obsolescence

Obsolescence is intrinsic to an industrial economy. Illich was writing long before smart phones, where a new one appears every year, but in his day cars were replaced regularly. “Renewal,” he writes, “is intrinsic to the industrial mode of production coupled to the ideology of progress.” We have come to think that new is better, including in medicine. But new clothes and medical treatments

create new wants, most of which are not available to most people and add to the strain on the planet.

### Frustration

Illich argues that all these realms must be kept in balance and failing to do so, as we clearly have failed, leads to the sixth problem of pervasive frustration. Britain, the first country to industrialise, is filled with frustration—with politicians and political systems, the NHS, the police, the polluted rivers, the education and criminal justice systems, everything.

## Where now?

“Almost overnight,” Illich predicted 50 years ago, “people will lose confidence not only in the major institutions but also in the miracle prescriptions of the would-be crisis managers. The ability of present institutions to define values such as education, health, welfare, transportation, or news will suddenly be extinguished because it will be recognised as an illusion . . .

“People will suddenly find obvious what is now evident to only a few: that the organisation of the entire economy toward the ‘better’ life has become the major enemy of the good life.” (Trump’s election is a rejection of much of what many have held valuable for the past 50 years.)

The dangers of growth are increasingly recognised (although not by mainstream politicians, for whom it remains a panacea), but nobody, including Illich, can paint a clear picture of how degrowth might work or what a post-industrial society would look like.

Illich foresaw that “withdrawal from growth mania will be painful, but mostly for members of the generation which has to experience the transition and above all for those most disabled by consumption.” It should be easier for subsequent generations, if there are any.

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## “Health” systems

In *Limits to Medicine*, Illich describes a takeover of health and the care of the pregnant, abnormal, hurt, sick, or dying by health professionals. Non-professionals are excluded from care of their relatives and friends. Illich sees the business of doctors as “preservation of the sick life of medically dependent people in an unhealthy environment.” This seems an accurate description of the work of current “health” systems, which are “sickness systems” in that most of what it does is manage people who are sick. Very little is spent on public health or “prevention,” which is in itself part of the “sickness system” in that it is

concerned with preventing sickness or disease rather than promoting health. The dominance of health professionals leads to “social control, prolonged suffering, loneliness . . . and frustration produced by medical treatment,” Illich claims.

Yet, writes Illich, “people have a native capacity for healing, consoling, moving, learning, building their houses, and burying their dead. Each of these meets a need. The means for the satisfaction of these needs are abundant so long as they depend primarily on what people can do for themselves, with only marginal dependence on commodities.”

## EDITORIAL

## Degrowth: a new logic for the global economy

Increasing production does not necessarily translate to better social outcomes

We are in the middle of a mass extinction event driven by human economic activity crossing multiple planetary boundaries.<sup>1</sup> Yet it remains business as usual for large transnational corporations engaged in record profiteering,<sup>2</sup> especially fossil fuel producers.

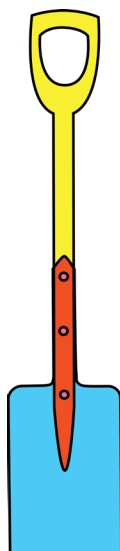
This dynamic is clear in healthcare as well. Many lives could have been saved during the pandemic if vaccine access had not been locked behind intellectual property rights to protect profits for large pharmaceutical companies.<sup>3,4</sup>

Our economic system is clearly willing to sabotage planetary and human health in pursuit of profit, capital accumulation, and economic growth<sup>5</sup>—as measured by gross domestic product (GDP). Growth in GDP is often presented as a proxy for progress, but it represents simply aggregate production. By this metric, producing €1m of bombs is valued the same as producing €1m of medicine. Clearly, it is not aggregate production that matters but what is being produced.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, perpetual economic expansion relies on unsustainable use of resources, enabled by the systematic appropriation of labour, land, material resources, and value, especially from the global south.<sup>7</sup> Yet the evidence is clear that growth does not necessarily translate to better social outcomes—because the benefits tend to accrue near the top.<sup>8</sup> Growth may be needed for human development in many parts of the global south, but rich economies have gone past that point.

Degrowth proposes a new logic for the global economy: greater democratic control over our productive capacities, so production can be centred around needs satisfaction and

**The quest for a socially and ecologically just future requires a struggle**



MALCOLM WILLET

wellbeing in harmony with ecology. A reconfiguration of our system of production is needed, beginning with the equitable reduction in global use of materials and energy. Under this logic, less-necessary activities (private jets, fast fashion, cruise ships, advertising, weapons, etc) are curtailed through a democratic process, and necessary production occurs in alignment with the health of people and ecosystems.

This leads to a truly sustainable society focused on meeting human needs (using health outcomes, housing and food access, and other social indicators as guides) rather than doing so only partially (and non-inclusively) as an epiphenomenon of economic growth.

Degrowth contrasts with “green growth”—the idea that high income economies can keep increasing production and consumption while also decarbonising by 2050. As a concept, green growth demands extraordinary leaps of faith in the face of reality. At existing rates of climate mitigation, even the best performing countries will take, on average, more than 200 years to decarbonise.<sup>10</sup>

### Shifting the balance

Not all people and nations are equally responsible for the crises. The affluent economies of the global north (and wealthy elites everywhere) use extremely high levels of energy and materials.<sup>13</sup> They are responsible for around 90% of carbon emissions in excess of the planetary boundary,<sup>14,15</sup> and maintain high levels of consumption by relying on appropriation of resources from the global south.<sup>7</sup>

Degrowth demands proportionate reparations<sup>18,19</sup> to the global south through foreign currency or technology transfer and debt cancellation as well as sanctioning and scaling down

large transnational conglomerates that cause ecological and societal harm. It calls for reduction in military spending to eliminate coercion against the global south, ending secretive tax havens and money laundering schemes, and ending foreign interventions to allow room for economic sovereignty. A starting point would be democratic determination of global governance, which is currently determined through economic or military might.<sup>20</sup>

Rich economies must reduce their use of materials and energy to ensure their ecological impacts remain within planetary boundaries. Some of this can be achieved through efficiency improvements, but for the change to be broad and fast enough, it will require scaling down less-necessary forms of production and consumption.<sup>21</sup> This can be achieved while simultaneously improving social outcomes.<sup>22,23</sup> Policies such as progressive taxation and credit guidance (steering investment away from or towards certain sectors) can be used to reduce destructive production. Public finance and industrial policy can be used to develop socially and ecologically necessary goods such as affordable housing and medicine. And a public job guarantee and universal basic services can be implemented to secure a social foundation that ensures good lives for all.

There is strong popular support<sup>24</sup> for these policies, and the world system transformation would substantially benefit the global majority. However, because of serious democratic deficits in our political system, this support doesn't manifest itself in policies.

Achieving these objectives will require organised political action. The quest for a socially and ecologically just future requires a struggle: a struggle in the global south to achieve sovereignty and economic liberation, and a struggle of working people everywhere to achieve economic democracy.

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