

Loris Petrini* - 3 July 2023

Looking Back on the beyond Growth Conference - Building Pathways Towards a Post-Growth European Economy

Post-growth histories in the EU

Most, if not all, post-growth stories begin with the 1972 *Limits to Growth* report. This landmark publication, which influenced the debate on economic growth for over half a century, seems to remain of utmost relevance today, as shown by the *Earth for All* report, an updated global modelling published in 2022¹. Although the *Limits to Growth* provided fertile ground for growth critiques, it should not eclipse another insightful text, written from the very heart of European institutions in the same year: the Mansholt letter. In 1972, Sicco Mansholt, a politician from the Dutch Labour party who was, at the time, Commissioner for Agriculture, wrote to the Commission's President Franco-Maria Malfatti calling for a radical shift away from growth².

In his letter, informed by the ongoing work from the Club of Rome, Mansholt anticipated a poly/crisis caused by the excessive use of planetary resources and designed, in response, a macro-economic programme revolving around sufficiency – although he did not explicitly mention the term. Mansholt also intended to strengthen social justice for he projected an extension of public services and immaterial goods as well as a significant transfer of resources from the Global North to the Global South. In this bold text, he even asserted that “one should not only aim for zero growth but even for negative growth”. In contrast to global or national solutions to rising environmental issues, Mansholt identified Europe as the most relevant forum for a socio-ecological approach to economic planning. Hence, if European institutions have been shaped by a growth imperative, they have also been the cradle of growth-critical discourses. Nevertheless, Mansholt's suggestion was fiercely opposed. European economies continued to expand at the expense of our ecosystems, until they ended up overshooting six of the nine planetary boundaries³. But as the climate emergency hit our

collective understanding of the future and after youth protests blossomed across the continent, new proposals to achieve socio-ecological well-being gained popularity and came back to the top of the EU's agenda. As it stands today, the European Green Deal constitutes the most promising step towards a holistic action plan for the green transition. However, its logic remains firmly anchored in growth-oriented narratives, and its ability to ensure a sufficiently rapid shift remains uncertain⁴. In addition, the upcoming revision of fiscal rules is projected to further constrain any attempt to finance a Green Deal without growth.

In the meantime, academic debates addressing the detrimental effects of growth have been flourishing, paving the way for alternative economic designs where well-being replaces growth as the guiding principle of policymaking, like Kate Raworth's *Doughnut economics*⁵. In contrast to the green growth logic deployed at EU level⁶, ecological economists suggest scaling down all harmful and unnecessary forms of production and consumption to build a smaller and yet more resilient economy that allows all people to thrive⁷. The required transition, Dan O'Neill explained, is one that goes from exponential growth to a steady-state economy through a temporary phase of de-growth⁸. This transition, however swift it needs to be, must also be done democratically and in a spirit of greater social justice.

While they remained controversial, these alternatives were progressively diffused across EU policy circles and eventually gained momentum. A first Beyond Growth conference, albeit relatively confidential, was organized in 2018. In response to the first building blocks laid by Ursula Von der Leyen's Green Deal at the beginning of her mandate, post-growth ideas needed to be discussed in a larger forum. This time, attention from policymakers had grown sufficiently to attract high profiles, as reflected in the re-

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cent decision by the European Research Council to award post-growth research projects a 10 million euros grant⁹. Ahead of the conference, the proponents of post-growth could therefore claim a first victory, as their views were considered relevant enough to secure the participation of the EU's top officials, including Von der Leyen herself.

Another step towards a post-growth European economy

For three days, a collective commitment to initiate transformative change was expressed in the Parliament. European political leaders gathered to find a way out of an economic system that, as they themselves admitted, fails us in both ecological and social terms. Over 4500 participants joined the event, and the EP's hemicycle was charged with an unusually activist atmosphere. Indeed, both the audience and the panellists agreed on the imperious need to bring back humanity within planetary boundaries while tackling the root causes of social inequalities. As the EU still overshoots the Earth's biophysical capacity and fails to meet basic social needs despite being a wealthy region, it is safe to admit that alternatives to GDP growth must be explored.

However, two levels of speech clashed. Scholars, activists and civil society organisations pointed to the responsibility of current decision-makers in the perpetuation of extractive economies that exploit nature for the benefit of a wealthy minority. To reverse the trend, they called for a radical departure from what they denounced as a collective 'obsession with growth'. Conversely, EU top officials rejected these accusations, and declared instead that a more resilient model of economic growth had to be found. Although she opened the doors of the house she leads to the talks, EP President Roberta Metsola initiated the first debate with another green growth statement, asserting that the EU's future was about growth. Throughout the next plenary sessions, commissioners reiterated their commitment towards integrating a broader range of economic indicators and designing a "new sustainable growth strategy". This more cautious approach, focusing on adding well-being indicators rather than ditching GDP and avoiding the repellent word 'de-growth' deceived part of the audience. Nevertheless, Von der Leyen's speech opened the way for a critical juncture as she endorsed Robert Kennedy's famous quote "GDP

measures everything except that which makes life worthwhile" and acknowledged herself that "a growth model based on fossil fuel is simply obsolete"¹⁰. What remains to be proven, however, is whether the next Commission will succeed in not only operationalising the Green Deal but also boosting the EU's ambition towards respecting planetary boundaries.

Alongside plenary sessions, where multiple visions confronted each other, critical issues for a post-growth agenda were addressed in the twenty focus panels, such as the [energy transition](#), [financial tools](#), [feminist and care economics](#), [industrial policies](#), [universal basic services](#), or [biodiversity protection](#). For most EU policymakers, [financing welfare systems](#) and [promoting jobs](#) in the absence of growth remains highly challenging. To answer their concerns, panelists mapped post-growth futures where both ecological health and social equality is guaranteed across and beyond EU countries, in contrast to the current economic order which, for them, increases social risks. They outlined governance tools that ensure a fair allocation of resources in order to drastically reduce inequalities but also called for a collective redefinition of human needs based on sufficiency. Multiple policy instruments among which declining caps on resource use, progressive taxation, or job guarantees have been designed for this ambition to be materialised.

Traditional discussions on the construction of [new economic indicators](#) that integrate socio-ecological concerns also ran parallel to more unexpected talks urging policymakers to decolonize EU environmental policy. The panel dedicated to the [Global South](#) recalled that economic growth was both produced by and productive of unequal power relations. Therefore, a green transition that does not engage respectfully with marginalized communities bears the risk of shifting environmental burdens to the Global South, thereby triggering devastating impacts on the communities that have already suffered the most¹¹. This external component of post-growth transformations, highlighted by new approaches to [trade policy](#), aims at addressing the risks of a new scramble for critical materials for communities outside Europe. Aligned with such a de-centred approach, panellists suggested that the EU should also learn from existing cosmologies that shift away from Western visions of development, like *Ubuntu* in South Africa or *Buen Vivir* in Ecuador.

Overall, the large scope covered by the conference helped to build integrated knowledge on many aspects of post-growth transitions. Most discussions invoked feminist scholarship, decolonial views, and social justice ideals, thereby creating connections and alliances among different groups to favour their convergence around concrete political strategies.

Strategies for achieving prosperity without growth

The Beyond Growth Conference offered a platform for EU policymakers caught in the inertia of Brussels law-making requirements to face the expectations of young Europeans and harsh scientific realities. Usually governed by the routine of committee meetings and cross-party coalitions, the EP turned instead into a forum for forward thinking. However, if a strong sense of collective emulation could be sensed, given the general consensus on the need for a paradigm shift, no one in the audience succumbed to self-satisfaction. Students, aligned with the de-growth movement, warned against the risk of capture from EU decision makers and regretted that the stance was not radical enough. For them, the reluctance to openly address historical legacies of imperialism and the tendency to put forward what has already been achieved at EU-level risks watering down the ambitions of a de-growth agenda. Yet, Philippe Lamberts, the Green MEP who coordinated the event, insisted that carrying growth critiques into the heart of European institutions was already unusually radical.

Given that panellists were often preaching to the converted, the conference alone did not make growth alternatives visible to the wider public. The lack of media coverage, apart from a few exceptions¹², also indicates a difficulty in diffusing post-growth ideas outside the Parliament. And when alternatives to growth are mentioned, they are often poorly informed¹³, despite constant debunking. Yet, in a bid to expand the impulse of the conference, several open letters from environmental NGOs, civil society organisations and scholars have attempted to offer concrete policy guidelines¹⁴. For the participants, the priority consists in reaching all policymaking spheres, in Brussels but also nationally. To put this into practice, however, a mass movement urging EU officials to depart from the status quo is required. Here, diverse strategic paths have been outlined: some prefer

co-opting the upcoming elections of the European Parliament, while others prefer a more direct solution to seize political power and regain a democratic hold on EU politics.

The biggest challenges now lie ahead. In upcoming debates, de-growth scholarship can be helpful in designing pathways away from growth¹⁵, but their ideas are yet to be debated more thoroughly at EU level. To build a coherent trajectory aligned with the outcomes of the conference, three main avenues can be identified.

First, new institutional arrangements could be found to achieve a complete overhaul of the European economy. The EU's no-growth diet may start from the Green Deal itself, which could be hijacked using growth-agnostic precepts to transform business models and rethink consumerism¹⁶. However, the conversion of EU institutions may only be radical if it also spills over to economic governance tools. To achieve this, the Commission's DG GROW could be turned into a new 'DG Well-being'; the European Semester could abandon its focus on debt-to-GDP ratios; and the Stability and Growth Pact could be replaced by a 'Sustainability and Well-being Pact' that leaves room for necessary investments in the transition and ensures enforceable socio-ecological targets¹⁷. Biophysical limits would therefore be firmly embedded in macroeconomic modelling.

Second, democratising post-growth in the EU appears to be equally essential. Anuna de Wever, a leading figure of the youth climate strikes in Belgium, asserted that the conversations we hold about growth exclude most communities that suffer the most from this quest for perpetual growth¹⁸. Inclusionary policies designed for but also by the most vulnerable may give way to the development of care economics, practices of commoning, and cooperative enterprises. A related consideration emerges from the necessity to bring environmentalists and workers closer in the fight for socio-ecological justice. Indeed, post-growth ideas must obtain democratic support. And while the experience of citizens' assemblies has shown that people are likely to voluntarily embrace de-growth policy proposals, this can only be ascertained by generalising such experimentations.

Third, the EU could endorse an inclusive geopolitical agenda for post-growth so as to avoid building a Eurocentric model of decarbonization that accelerates the destruction of ecosystems in the Global South. The EU's trade and development policies have long been accused of exploiting the world's natural resources and the current track could reproduce these patterns. Here, redefining the way we value ecosystems in line with environmental justice standards,

instead of putting a price on nature through offsetting agreements, may be a first step towards building more equal relationships with third countries.

Such transformation would undoubtedly affect the EU's DNA, but it is worth seizing this life-time opportunity to finally ensure that all people can live on a thriving planet.

Footnotes

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