

Health, Equity and Planet: why we need to go beyond the GDP economy

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We might often hear the importance of increasing the Gross Domestic Product GDP, because the more the economy grows the better for all of us. This is obviously not just an Italian narrative; it is a global one. This narrative tells us we need to contribute to the economy through our paid work and spending, and if we do so the system will benefit us all. However, the payback is not equally distributed. While the five richest men in the world has doubled their wealth since 2020, five billion people have become poorer¹. In addition, important activities, such as unpaid care work (mostly done by women), is not counted in GDP calculations, while harmful practices, such as selling oil or unhealthy food, make GDP grow. Therefore, we serve the system with the hope that some benefits will trickle down to us, eventually, when in fact we are **part of a system that economically benefits mainly those who are already in economically privileged positions** and at the same time **brings negative consequences to health and planet**.

We are currently living multiple crises which intersect and reinforce each other: from climate change and biodiversity loss to ill-health caused by pollution and the overconsumption of harmful products, with the worst impacts experienced by people in more precarious socio-economic conditions further exacerbating the social inequalities already present. We know these crises are the result of the current system that 'incentives and rewards excessive production and consumption of fossil fuel-reliant goods and services'² to ensure GDP growth, making **economic growth an end in and of itself**.

What if instead we treated the economic system as a mean to an end? **What if that end was achieving planetary health equity, 'the equitable enjoyment of good health in a stable Earth system'**³? I do not think anyone would disagree with the idea that everyone deserves to live a healthy life, which requires equal distribution of resources and services within the limits of the planet on which we depend upon. However, 'how we get there' is where some people might push back because they benefit from the system as is or because change seems too difficult and costly. We know though that when there is an emergency, like has been the Covid-19 pandemic, we can make big changes in a short time that previously seemed unthinkable. However, reacting to emergencies is destabilizing and brings many problems, as we saw during the pandemic. What we need though is to **be proactive rather than reactive**, making planned changes to transform the current economic system prioritization of health, equity and the planet before the multiple crises become too severe or irreversible, as in the case of climate change.

This is why at the [Planetary Health Equity Hothouse](#), at the Australian National University, **we focus on understanding the drivers of the current system** to develop a framework for policy and practice that can

¹ Riddell, Rebecca, Nabil Ahmed, Alex Maitland, Max Lawson, and Anjela Taneja. 2024. "Inequality Inc. How corporate power divides our world and the need for a new era of public action." <https://www.oxfam.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/INEQUALITY-INC-Oxfam-Report-2024.pdf>

² [Planetary Health Equity Hothouse website](#) – definition for 'consumptogenic system'

³ [Planetary Health Equity Hothouse website](#) – definition for 'planetary health equity'

shift the system to **advance health of people and planet equitably rather than solely GDP growth and wealth accumulation**. Reframing the goal of our economic systems makes us **reconsider our institutions, commercial activities, norms, and behaviours**, leading to their reshaping in line with this new goal.

Recognizing that the current system is not working for most people, in Italy as elsewhere, that GDP growth is a flawed measure of wellbeing, and that change is not just possible but necessary to tackle the crises our society are facing, is the first fundamental step. The path ahead is complex and challenging, but our work at Hothouse aims to produce the necessary scientific knowledge that enables today's policymakers to not only **see the opportunities**, in the short and long term, that lie ahead in a system guided by principles of health, equity and planet **but also where to act to affect change**. We regard this [first Italian Beyond Growth conference](#) as an **excellent opportunity not to be missed by Italian policymakers to move beyond simple recognition of the problem into action**, supported by researchers and civil society organizations guided by the planetary health equity goal.

For the original blog in Italian go [here](#).