

An Economy Answerable to Life

Beyond GDP, Unequal Exchange, and the Life-Coherent Reordering of Progress



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Academic White Paper

May 2026

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Abstract

The contemporary Beyond GDP agenda marks a significant opening in global development thought. It recognizes that gross domestic product cannot adequately measure well-being, equity, ecological sustainability, social resilience, or future viability. The 2026 United Nations report *Counting What Counts: A Compass of Progress for People and Planet* proposes a globally applicable dashboard of 31 indicators designed to complement GDP by tracking well-being outcomes, equity and inclusion, environmental sustainability, and the forms of capital that support future well-being. It also emphasizes that indicators should inform planning, budgeting, and policy rather than merely describe outcomes (United Nations, 2026).

Yet better measurement alone cannot explain why the world economy continues to generate ecological overshoot alongside widespread deprivation. Jason Hickel's 2026 IDS Annual Lecture, "Capitalism, Imperialism and Ecology," provides the missing political-economic layer. Hickel argues that the central contradiction of the present world system is not scarcity in the aggregate, but misallocation: vast productive capacities are organized around capital accumulation rather than human needs, ecological repair, and democratic provisioning. He frames the global crisis as a double failure: planetary boundaries are being exceeded while billions remain deprived of decent living standards (Hickel, 2026).

This white paper develops a life-coherent synthesis of the Beyond GDP agenda and Hickel's political economy. It argues that progress must be redefined not as output expansion, but as the democratic organization of production, distribution, finance, trade, technology, and governance around life-capacity, ecological integrity, structural repair, and future viability. Hickel's analysis is interpreted alongside McMurtry's life-value onto-axiology, Galtung's theory of structural violence, and Maturana and Varela's account of autopoiesis and world-bringing. The resulting framework reframes development as life-coherent provisioning: the creation of social, ecological, institutional, and economic conditions through which all people can live dignified lives within planetary boundaries, without externalizing harm onto other peoples, species, ecosystems, or generations.

Keywords

Beyond GDP; Jason Hickel; life-coherent progress; unequal exchange; degrowth; post-growth; life-value onto-axiology; structural violence; autopoiesis; civil commons; democratic provisioning; planetary boundaries; decent living standards; ecological economics; small island developing states.

Executive Summary

The global movement beyond GDP marks a significant opening in the redefinition of progress. Gross domestic product remains useful as a narrow measure of monetized economic activity, but it cannot tell whether people are well, whether life-necessities are secure, whether ecological systems are being regenerated or destroyed, whether inequalities are widening, or whether

current prosperity is being purchased at the expense of other peoples, species, ecosystems, and future generations. The United Nations Beyond GDP agenda therefore creates an important new compass by calling for multidimensional measures of well-being, equity, sustainability, resilience, and future viability.

Yet a new compass is not enough if the vessel remains powered by the same engine. This white paper argues that the deeper crisis is not only one of mismeasurement, but of misorganization. The dominant economy does not merely count the wrong things; it organizes production, finance, trade, technology, and governance around accumulation rather than life-capacity, ecological integrity, democratic provisioning, and repair. Jason Hickel's political economy clarifies this missing layer. His analysis shows that ecological overshoot and human deprivation coexist not because the world lacks productive capacity, but because productive capacity is misallocated: destructive excess is overprovided while life-necessities remain underproduced.

This paper develops a life-coherent synthesis of the Beyond GDP agenda and Hickel's critique. It interprets Hickel's work alongside John McMurtry's life-value onto-axiology, Johan Galtung's theory of structural violence, and Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's account of living systems, autopoiesis, and world-bringing. Together, these perspectives make it possible to understand the present crisis as a civilizational inversion: money-value has become sovereign over life-value; avoidable deprivation has been normalized within social structures; ecological overshoot has been externalized; and whole worlds of policy, economy, and development have been brought forth through distinctions that make accumulation appear natural and life-necessity secondary.

The life-coherent framework proposed here reframes progress as the democratic organization of the life-means. Progress is not simply more output, faster growth, or higher national income. It is the secure and equitable provisioning of the material, social, ecological, and institutional conditions through which persons and communities can live, develop, participate, care, learn, create, deliberate, belong, and flourish. Decent living standards define a minimum life-capacity floor. Planetary boundaries define a life-supporting ceiling. A life-coherent economy must operate within this corridor: enough for all, within the conditions that allow life to continue.

This paper also extends the Beyond GDP agenda by emphasizing cross-border life-drain. National progress cannot be judged only by domestic indicators. A country may appear prosperous while relying on labour, land, materials, energy, ecological space, and financial flows appropriated from elsewhere. Hickel's work on unequal exchange reveals how prosperity in the global North is often sustained through structural transfers from the global South, while debt, ecological burden, climate vulnerability, and constrained sovereignty flow back in return. A life-coherent dashboard must therefore include relational accountability: no society can be considered genuinely progressing if its well-being depends on the deprivation or ecological destabilization of others.

The paper further argues that degrowth is best understood not as universal austerity, but as differentiated life-coherent convergence. High-consuming economies must downscale destructive and unnecessary throughput, while materially deprived societies must expand life-necessary provisioning. The task is not to choose between growth and degrowth in the abstract,

but to ask what must grow, what must shrink, what must be shared, what must be repaired, and what must be protected.

The proposed life-coherent progress dashboard includes seven domains: life-necessity sufficiency, life-capacity development, life-ground integrity, distribution and inclusion, democratic control of life-means, cross-border life-drain, and repair and future viability. These domains are intended not merely as indicators, but as guides for institutional redesign, public investment, planning, budgeting, trade policy, ecological repair, and democratic accountability.

Small island developing states, and the Caribbean in particular, provide a powerful diagnostic lens for this framework. In SIDS, climate vulnerability, food dependence, debt exposure, water insecurity, fossil-fuel dependence, coastal degradation, public health strain, and constrained sovereignty are visibly interlinked. These societies reveal why GDP-centred measures are insufficient and why progress must be judged by life-ground security, provisioning resilience, regional cooperation, and meaningful sovereignty.

The central conclusion is that an economy becomes legitimate only insofar as it serves life-capacity, protects the life-ground, repairs life-damage, and remains democratically answerable to the communities and ecosystems through which life continues. The task is therefore not simply to move beyond GDP. It is to bring forth an economy answerable to life.

Acknowledgements

This white paper was developed through an iterative process of conceptual synthesis, drafting, revision, figure development, and editorial refinement. The author acknowledges the assistance of ChatGPT, an AI language model developed by OpenAI, which served as a dialogical and editorial companion in helping to structure the argument, refine the prose, identify citation and reference alignment issues, and support the development of figure concepts and captions.

The intellectual responsibility for the final framing, interpretation, argument, and publication rests with the author. AI assistance was used as a tool for drafting, organization, critical reflection, and editorial support, not as a substitute for authorial judgment, scholarly responsibility, or final review.

The author also acknowledges the wider community of scholars and practitioners whose work informs this synthesis, including those working in Beyond GDP measurement, degrowth and post-growth political economy, life-value onto-axiology, peace research, ecological economics, autopoiesis, public health, small island resilience, and democratic provisioning

1. Introduction: When the Compass Is Not Enough

The Beyond GDP movement has emerged because the dominant measure of economic success no longer corresponds to the conditions of human and planetary flourishing. GDP measures monetized production, but it does not distinguish between activities that nourish life and activities that damage it. Pollution cleanup, illness, deforestation, military expansion, speculative construction, disaster recovery, and rising household insecurity can all increase GDP. The metric is therefore structurally indifferent to the difference between life-generation and life-damage.

The 2026 United Nations Beyond GDP report is an important corrective. It proposes a dashboard that measures well-being directly, tracks equity and inclusion, monitors natural, human, social, and institutional capital, and links data to policy action through planning, budgeting, and statistical capacity-building (United Nations, 2026). The report defines progress as equitable, inclusive, and sustainable well-being, grounded in peace, human rights, and respect for the planet. It also recognizes that people and planet are deeply interconnected and that cross-border spillovers matter in an interdependent world.

However, the deeper question remains unresolved: why does the global economy continue to generate ecological breakdown and mass deprivation even when scientific evidence, moral argument, alternative indicators, and technological possibilities are increasingly available?

Hickel's contribution lies in clarifying that the problem is not only mismeasurement. It is misorganization. The dominant economy does not merely count the wrong things; it produces according to the wrong value logic. Its basic orientation is not toward life-capacity, sufficiency, repair, or ecological stability, but toward accumulation.

The central argument of this white paper is therefore as follows:

Real progress requires more than replacing GDP with better indicators. It requires reordering the economy so that production, finance, trade, technology, and governance become answerable to life-capacity, ecological limits, structural repair, and democratic control over the life-means.

This is the point at which Beyond GDP, Hickel's political economy, McMurtry's life-value theory, Galtung's anti-violence analysis, and Maturana and Varela's biology of living systems can be integrated into a life-coherent framework for progress.

2. The Double Crisis: Overshoot Amid Deprivation

Hickel begins from a paradox that should be central to any contemporary theory of progress: the world economy produces more than enough aggregate output, energy, materials, and technical capacity to secure decent lives for all, yet it continues to generate both ecological overshoot and mass deprivation. In the IDS lecture, he describes this as a double crisis of the capitalist world system: productive forces drive the overshoot of planetary boundaries while billions remain without access to basic needs (Hickel, 2026).

This paradox undermines the conventional assumption that the primary task of development is simply to increase aggregate production. Hickel and Sullivan's needs-based analysis argues that achieving good lives for all does not require all countries to converge toward the GDP-per-capita levels of high-income economies. Instead, it requires increasing the specific forms of production necessary for human capabilities and basic needs, while reducing less-necessary production in high-income contexts to enable decarbonization and reduce resource use (Hickel & Sullivan, 2024). Their analysis estimates that decent living standards for 8.5 billion people could be provisioned with approximately 30% of current global resource and energy use, if production were organized around needs, public provisioning, efficient technologies, and sovereign industrial capacity in the global South.

This finding has profound implications for a life-coherent framework. It suggests that the central problem is not biophysical impossibility. Nor is it a simple lack of growth. The problem is the social organization of production: what is produced, for whom, under whose control, and at what ecological and human cost.

In life-coherent terms, decent living standards define a **minimum life-capacity floor**. Planetary boundaries define a **life-support ceiling**. Real progress occurs in the corridor between them: the space in which human beings have secure access to the material and social conditions of dignified life while economic activity remains within the regenerative and absorptive capacities of the Earth.

This framing resonates with the safe-and-just-space tradition, including Raworth's doughnut model, which places a social foundation within an ecological ceiling (Raworth, 2017), and with the decent-living energy literature showing that high levels of human well-being can be secured with far lower energy use under efficient and equitable provisioning systems (Millward-Hopkins et al., 2020).

Figure 1 summarizes this double crisis as a problem of misaligned production rather than aggregate scarcity.

Figure 1. The Double Crisis of Misaligned Production

Ecological overshoot above, human deprivation below, and the present economy misallocating productive capacity between destructive excess and unmet needs.

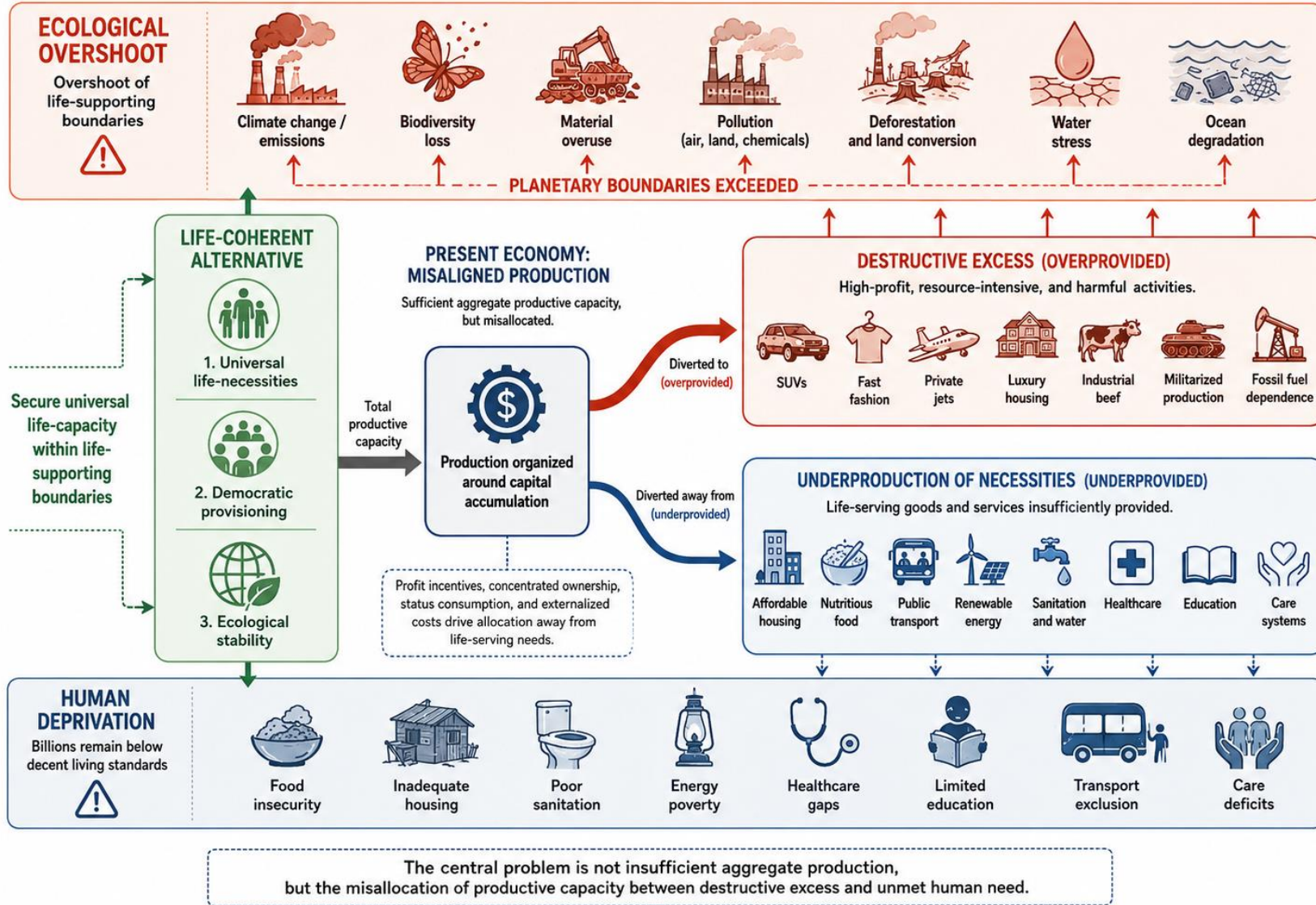


Figure 1. The Double Crisis of Misaligned Production.

The present economy contains enough aggregate productive capacity to secure decent lives for all, yet that capacity is misallocated between destructive excess and unmet human need. The figure shows ecological overshoot above, human deprivation below, and the life-coherent alternative as a sufficiency corridor between the deprivation floor and the planetary ceiling.

This formulation is consistent with the safe-and-just-space literature. O'Neill, Fanning, Lamb, and Steinberger (2018) showed that no country simultaneously met basic human needs at a globally sustainable level of resource use in their cross-national analysis, while Fanning, O'Neill, Hickel, and Roux (2022) found that nations tend to transgress biophysical boundaries faster than they achieve social thresholds.

The life-coherent interpretation may be stated concisely:

The task of progress is not to maximize output, but to secure universal life-capacity within life-supporting boundaries.

This shifts the purpose of economic analysis. The central question becomes not whether GDP is increasing, but whether social systems are provisioning food, water, sanitation, housing, healthcare, education, energy, transport, communication, care, participation, and ecological stability in a way that is just, sustainable, and repair-oriented.

3. GDP as Symptom: The Accounting Form of a Deeper Inversion

GDP is often criticized because it is incomplete. That criticism is correct but insufficient. GDP is not merely a partial measure; it is the accounting expression of a deeper value order. It records monetized activity without asking whether that activity enables or disables life. It therefore mirrors an economy in which monetary throughput can expand while life-capacities deteriorate.

This point converges strongly with McMurtry's life-value onto-axiology. McMurtry's work asks the fundamental value question: what is good, what is bad, and by what criterion can value be judged across systems, cultures, and theories? In the life-value framework, value is grounded in the enabling of life-capacities, while disvalue consists in the loss, reduction, or destruction of life-capacity (McMurtry, 2011).

GDP belongs to the money-value logic when it measures economic expansion without reference to the life-necessities, life-capacities, and life-ground on which all value ultimately depends. McMurtry's later critique of capitalism as a cancer-stage system similarly frames the dominant economic order as a self-multiplying money-sequence that destroys ecological, social, and organic life (McMurtry, 2013).

Beyond GDP is therefore indispensable, but it is not enough. A dashboard can reveal that a society is unequal, unhealthy, ecologically destructive, debt-burdened, or vulnerable. It can guide public deliberation and policy. But it cannot by itself reorganize ownership, finance, production, trade, labour, land, or energy systems. Indicators can diagnose the vessel's direction; they cannot automatically redirect the engine.

Hickel's critique adds precisely this missing layer. The old measure persists partly because it fits the needs of an accumulation-centred system. GDP counts the expansion of monetized activity, and monetized activity is what capital-centred economies are designed to increase. The critique of GDP must therefore move from measurement to valuation, and from valuation to institutional reorganization.

The life-coherent formulation is:

GDP is not merely an inadequate measure of progress. It is the statistical shadow of a deeper civilizational inversion: the subordination of life-capacity, ecological repair, and social provision to monetary throughput and capital accumulation.

4. Hickel's Engine-Room Diagnosis: The Capitalist Law of Value

Hickel's lecture is especially important because it defines capitalism not as markets, trade, or enterprise in general, but as a specific organization of production. Markets and trade long predate capitalism and may take many institutional forms. Capitalism, in Hickel's formulation, is a highly undemocratic system in which capital controls production: what gets produced, how labour and resources are used, what energy systems are deployed, and what kinds of social futures become possible (Hickel, 2026).

This matters because the objective of production under the capitalist law of value is not primarily to meet needs or maintain ecological conditions. It is to maximize and accumulate capital. The result is a systematic misallocation of productive capacity. Hickel contrasts profitable but destructive or less-necessary sectors — SUVs, fast fashion, private jets, mansions, industrial beef, and the military-industrial complex — with chronically underproduced necessities such as affordable housing, agroecology, nutritious food, public transport, and renewable energy (Hickel, 2026).

This is the engine-room diagnosis that the Beyond GDP agenda requires. A new dashboard may indicate that housing is unaffordable, emissions are excessive, food insecurity persists, and ecosystems are degraded. Hickel explains why those failures persist despite the availability of solutions: capital invests where accumulation is strongest, not where life-need is greatest.

The life-coherent translation is:

The capitalist law of value is a misalignment between productive capacity and life-capacity. It allows societies to produce more while becoming less viable.

This is also where Hickel's work reinforces Galtung. Misallocation is not merely inefficiency. When avoidable deprivation persists because production is organized around accumulation rather than need, the result is structural violence. Galtung's foundational distinction between personal and structural violence made it possible to see violence not only as direct harm, but also as avoidable deprivation built into social structures (Galtung, 1969).

Therefore, the critique of GDP must become a critique of the institutions that determine production. Beyond GDP must become **beyond misallocation**.

5. Unequal Exchange as Cross-Border Life-Drain

Hickel's second major contribution is to globalize the diagnosis. The dominant economy does not simply misallocate production within nations. It organizes extraction across the world system. In the lecture, Hickel frames capitalism as a world economy structured between core and periphery, where accumulation and growth in the core depend substantially on labour and production in the global South (Hickel, 2026).

This is the basis of his theory of unequal exchange. A 2024 *Nature Communications* study by Hickel, Hanbury Lemos, and Barbour estimates large net flows of embodied labour from the global South to the global North and argues that unequal exchange drains productive capacity that could otherwise be used for local human needs and development (Hickel et al., 2024).

The same study situates unequal exchange within a wider global political economy of wage and price inequalities, geopolitical and commercial power, global commodity chains, and constrained sovereignty. Hickel's broader research programme also includes recent work on structural adjustment, reparations, debt repudiation, atmospheric appropriation, post-growth industrial policy, and unequal exchange, indicating that this is not a marginal concern but a central axis of his current scholarship (Hickel, n.d.).

Hickel's lecture extends this diagnosis by emphasizing net flows of embodied raw materials, energy, land, and labour from the global South to the global North. He argues that if these resources and capacities were retained and organized around national development and human needs, they could substantially close decent-living gaps in the global South (Hickel, 2026).

This insight is crucial for a life-coherent progress framework. National progress cannot be assessed only within national borders. A country may appear prosperous while externalizing ecological degradation, labour exploitation, carbon burdens, land use, resource depletion, and social deprivation elsewhere. A life-coherent metric must therefore ask not only whether a society is doing well internally, but whether its well-being depends on the life-loss of others.

This gives rise to a key concept:

Cross-border life-drain refers to the transfer of labour, land, energy, materials, ecological space, financial resources, and policy sovereignty from one society to another in ways that impair life-capacity, ecological integrity, or future viability.

Figure 2 depicts unequal exchange as a relational form of life-drain rather than as a neutral pattern of trade.

Figure 2. Unequal Exchange as Cross-Border Life-Drain

Flows of labour, land, energy, materials, and ecological space from South/periphery to North/core, with deprivation, debt, and ecological burden flowing back.

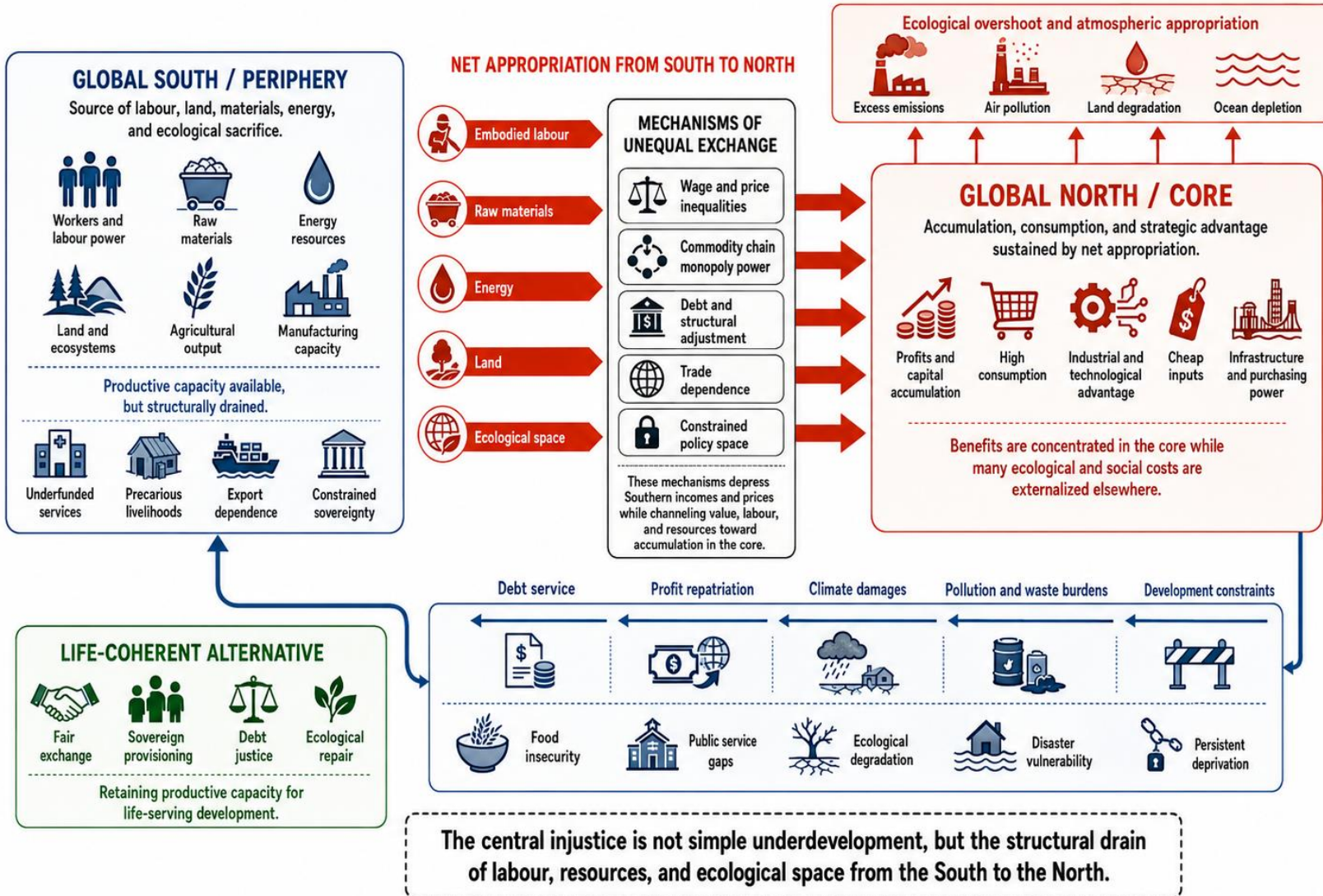


Figure 2. Unequal Exchange as Cross-Border Life-Drain.

Unequal exchange transfers embodied labour, raw materials, energy, land, and ecological space from the global South/periphery to the global North/core. The benefits of accumulation, consumption, and strategic advantage are concentrated in the core, while debt burdens, profit repatriation, climate damages, pollution burdens, and development constraints flow back to the periphery. A life-coherent alternative requires fair exchange, sovereign provisioning, debt justice, and ecological repair.

Cross-border life-drain transforms the Beyond GDP agenda. It requires every national dashboard to include relational accountability. No economy can be considered life-coherent if its domestic well-being depends on externalizing deprivation, ecological damage, labour exploitation, or climate vulnerability beyond its borders.

6. Degrowth Reinterpreted as Differentiated Life-Coherent Convergence

Hickel's work is often associated with degrowth, but the term is frequently misunderstood. Within a life-coherent framework, degrowth should not be interpreted as generalized contraction, austerity, or anti-development. It is better understood as differentiated convergence: contraction of destructive excess where consumption and production exceed ecological limits, combined with expansion of life-necessary provisioning where basic needs remain unmet.

This interpretation is consistent with Hickel's broader degrowth argument that high-income economies must reduce destructive throughput while reorganizing production around human needs, public provisioning, and ecological stability (Hickel, 2020).

Recent post-growth research co-authored by Hickel synthesizes five core principles for ambitious mitigation with high human well-being: well-being, sufficiency, reduced inequalities, repurposing of the economy, and North–South convergence (Slameršak et al., 2026). The article explicitly argues for reducing less-necessary production, reorienting the economy toward human needs and ecological goals, and pursuing equitable convergence within and between countries.

High-consuming economies must reduce throughput in sectors that do not serve life-capacity and that obstruct rapid decarbonization: fossil fuels, luxury emissions, private jets, oversized private transport systems, planned obsolescence, militarized production, speculative construction, and other energy- and material-intensive forms of accumulation. At the same time, materially deprived societies require expanded access to energy, housing, sanitation, healthcare, education, food systems, public transport, digital infrastructure, and sovereign productive capacity.

Hickel and Sullivan's needs-based analysis states the same principle in empirical terms: the path to good lives for all lies not in generalized GDP convergence, but in increasing the specific production required for capabilities and needs, ensuring universal access through public provisioning and decommodification, reducing less-necessary production in high-income countries, and building sovereign industrial capacity in the global South (Hickel & Sullivan, 2024).

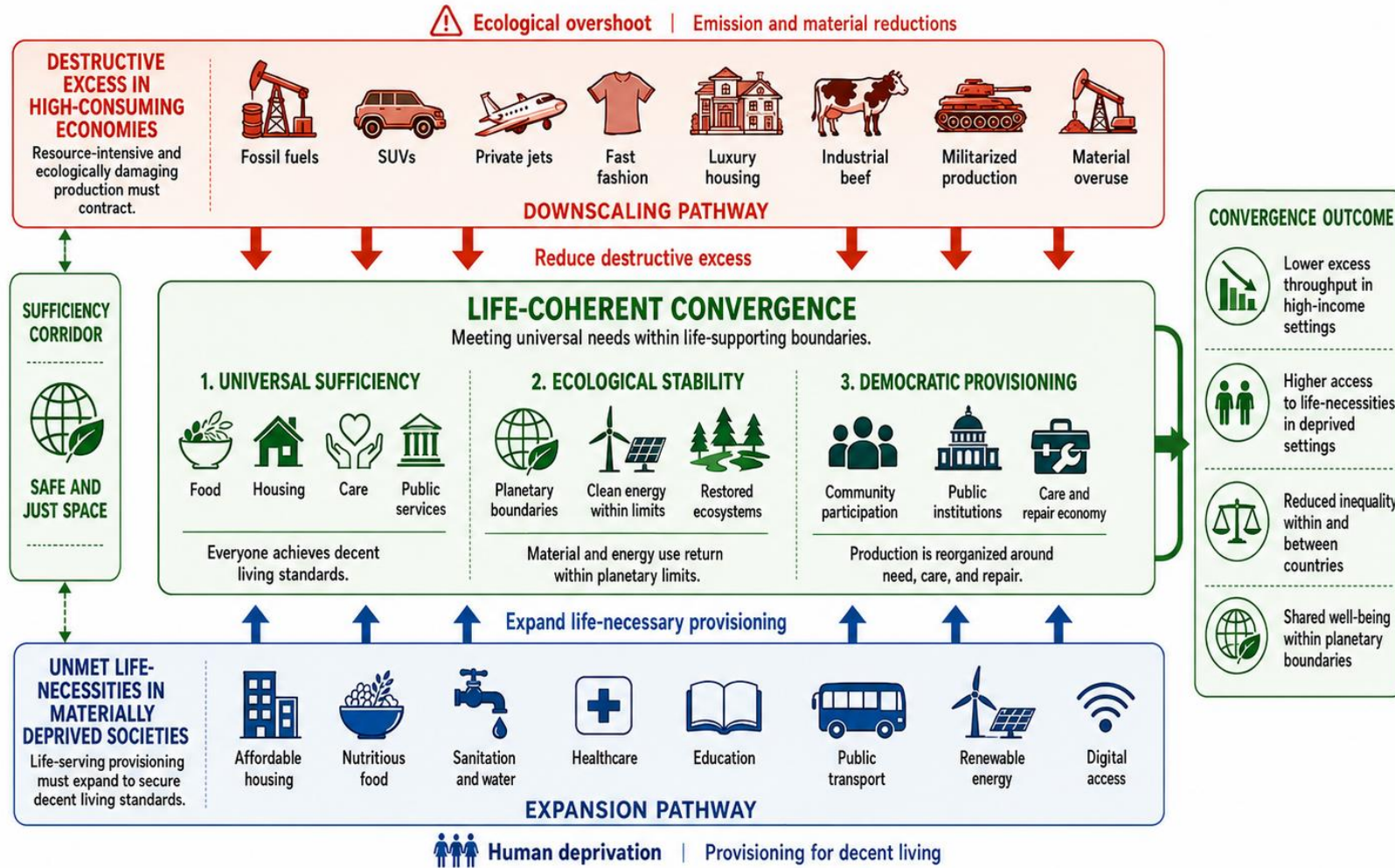
The life-coherent formula is:

Less where production destroys life.
More where life-necessities remain unmet.
Enough where sufficiency secures flourishing.
Repair where historical and ecological damage has accumulated.

Figure 3 reframes degrowth and development as differentiated pathways toward sufficiency, repair, and shared flourishing.

Figure 3. Differentiated Life-Coherent Convergence

Three pathways: downscaling destructive excess, expanding unmet life-necessities, and converging toward sufficiency within planetary boundaries.



The goal is neither universal austerity nor unrestricted growth, but differentiated convergence toward enough for all within planetary boundaries.

Figure 3. Differentiated Life-Coherent Convergence.

Life-coherent convergence does not mean universal austerity or unrestricted growth. It requires downscaling destructive excess in high-consuming economies, expanding life-necessary provisioning in materially deprived societies, and converging toward universal sufficiency within planetary boundaries. The goal is enough for all within the safe and just space of ecological stability and democratic provisioning.

This formulation avoids the false opposition between growth and degrowth. It asks a more exact question: what must grow, what must shrink, what must be shared, what must be repaired, and what must be protected?

7. McMurtry, Galtung, Maturana, and Hickel: Toward a Fourfold Synthesis

Hickel's political economy becomes more powerful when situated within a wider life-coherent grammar.

McMurtry provides the axiological criterion. The fundamental question is not whether economic activity expands, but whether it enables or disables life-capacity. Hickel's capitalist law of value can be interpreted as a contemporary political-economic expression of McMurtry's money-value system: accumulation proceeds even when it undermines the life-ground on which all value depends (McMurtry, 2011, 2013).

Galtung provides the violence diagnosis. Unequal exchange, structural adjustment, sanctions, debt dependency, ecological overshoot, atmospheric appropriation, and deprivation are not merely unfortunate side effects. They are forms of structural violence when they predictably constrain life, shorten lives, and prevent the satisfaction of basic needs. Cultural violence appears when these arrangements are normalized through narratives of development, competitiveness, efficiency, modernization, fiscal discipline, or market inevitability (Galtung, 1969).

Maturana and Varela provide the world-bringing ontology. Economies are not neutral machines. They are worlds enacted through distinctions, emotions, institutions, and recurrent practices. Terms such as growth, productivity, competitiveness, investment confidence, scarcity, and development are not merely descriptive. They help bring forth the world in which they operate. Autopoiesis and cognition therefore matter because living systems are not passive objects moved by external commands; they participate in the bringing forth of worlds through structural coupling and recurrent relational patterns (Maturana & Varela, 1980).

Hickel provides the political economy of misallocation and extraction. His work explains why life-necessities remain underproduced, why destructive sectors expand, why the global South remains drained of productive capacity, and why ecological overshoot is concentrated in high-consuming regions.

The synthesis may be stated as follows:

McMurtry clarifies the life-value test. Galtung exposes the violence hidden inside normal economic arrangements. Maturana and Varela explain how living systems bring forth worlds through distinctions and relations. Hickel reveals the political economy by which production is misallocated and life-capacity is drained. The life-coherent framework integrates these insights into a practical grammar for reordering progress around life.

Figure 4 presents this synthesis as a fourfold grammar of life-coherent progress.

Figure 4. The Fourfold Synthesis

McMurtry/life-value, Galtung/structural violence, Maturana/world-bringing, and Hicckel/political economy surrounding life-coherent progress.

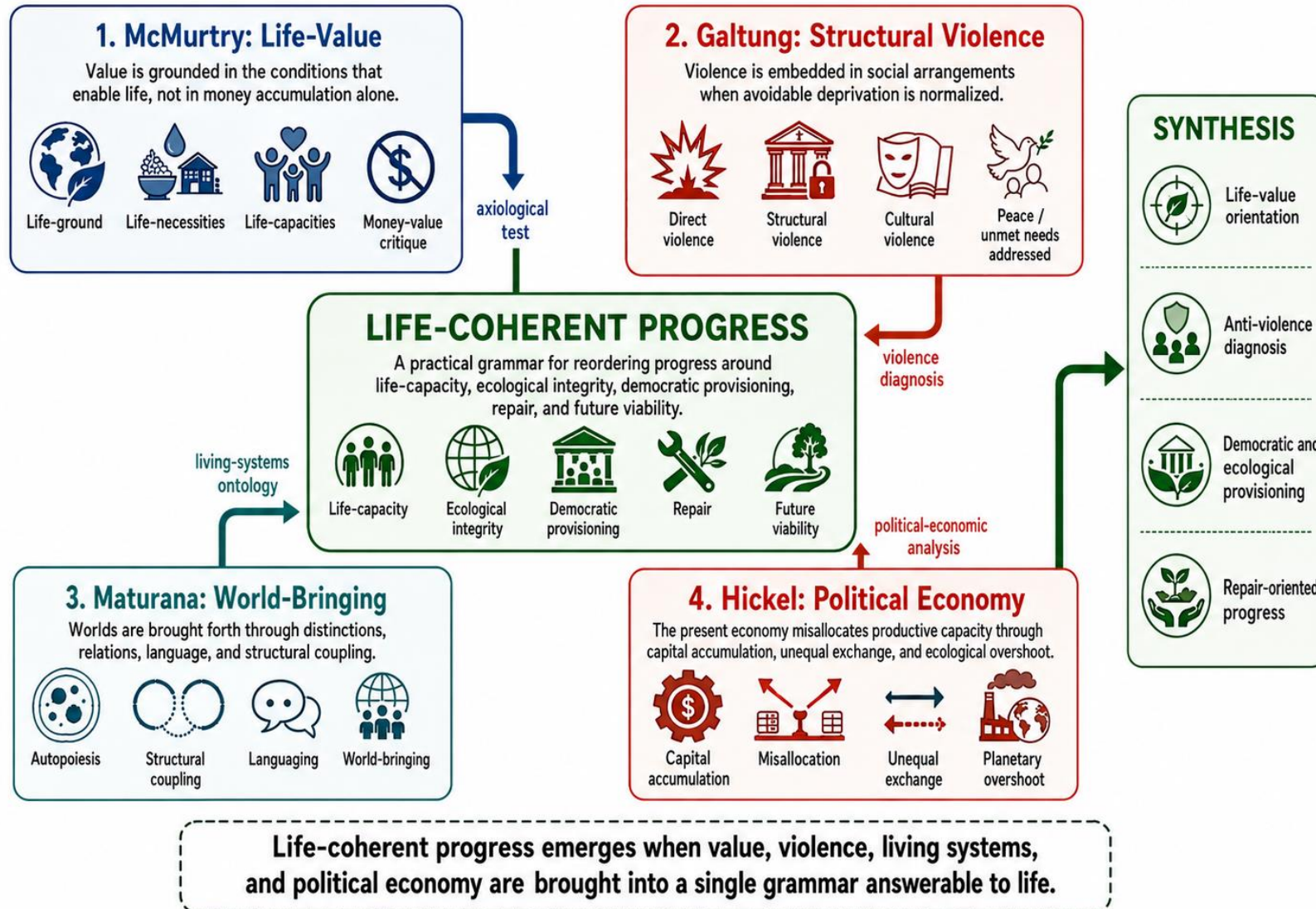


Figure 4. The Fourfold Synthesis.

Life-coherent progress emerges from the integration of four complementary lines of thought: McMurtry's life-value criterion, Galtung's diagnosis of structural and cultural violence, Maturana and Varela's living-systems account of world-bringing, and Hickel's political economy of misallocation, unequal exchange, and ecological overshoot. Together, these provide a practical grammar for progress answerable to life.

8. From Indicators to Institutions: Why Dashboards Need Power

The Beyond GDP dashboard is strongest when it is linked to policy, planning, budgeting, and accountability. The UN report explicitly states that data should guide decisions and recommends using indicators in planning, budgeting, and policy processes while strengthening statistical capacity (United Nations, 2026).

However, a dashboard becomes transformative only if it is connected to institutional power. If indicators show rising food insecurity, the response cannot be limited to better reporting. It must involve food systems, land policy, wages, agroecology, public procurement, social protection, school meals, and trade arrangements. If indicators show ecological overshoot, the response must involve energy systems, transport, housing, industrial policy, material use, and consumption patterns. If indicators show inequality, the response must involve taxation, public services, ownership, labour rights, social protection, and democratic participation.

This is where the civil commons becomes central. Democratic provisioning means that the life-means — water, food, housing, healthcare, education, energy, transport, knowledge, care, and ecological protection — are governed as shared conditions of life rather than as mere commodities. This does not imply one institutional form for all contexts. Provisioning may involve public systems, cooperatives, commons-based governance, regulated markets, social enterprises, community institutions, or hybrid arrangements. The decisive criterion is whether the institution is answerable to life-need, ecological integrity, and democratic accountability.

A life-coherent institutional test may therefore be formulated:

Does this institution expand life-capacity, reduce structural violence, protect the life-ground, repair prior damage, and remain democratically answerable to those affected?

Hickel's current research programme is already oriented toward this institutional terrain. His research listing includes work on post-growth mitigation, well-being within planetary boundaries, green industrial policy, post-growth industrial policy, debt repudiation to meet human need, structural adjustment, unequal exchange, atmospheric appropriation, and ecological responsibility (Hickel, n.d.).

These are precisely the domains in which Beyond GDP must become institutionally actionable.

9. Toward a Life-Coherent Progress Dashboard

A life-coherent dashboard should build on the UN Beyond GDP proposal while adding what Hickel’s analysis makes unavoidable: relational accountability, political-economic diagnosis, and cross-border life-drain.

Figure 5 translates the life-coherent framework into a dashboard architecture for assessing progress beyond GDP.

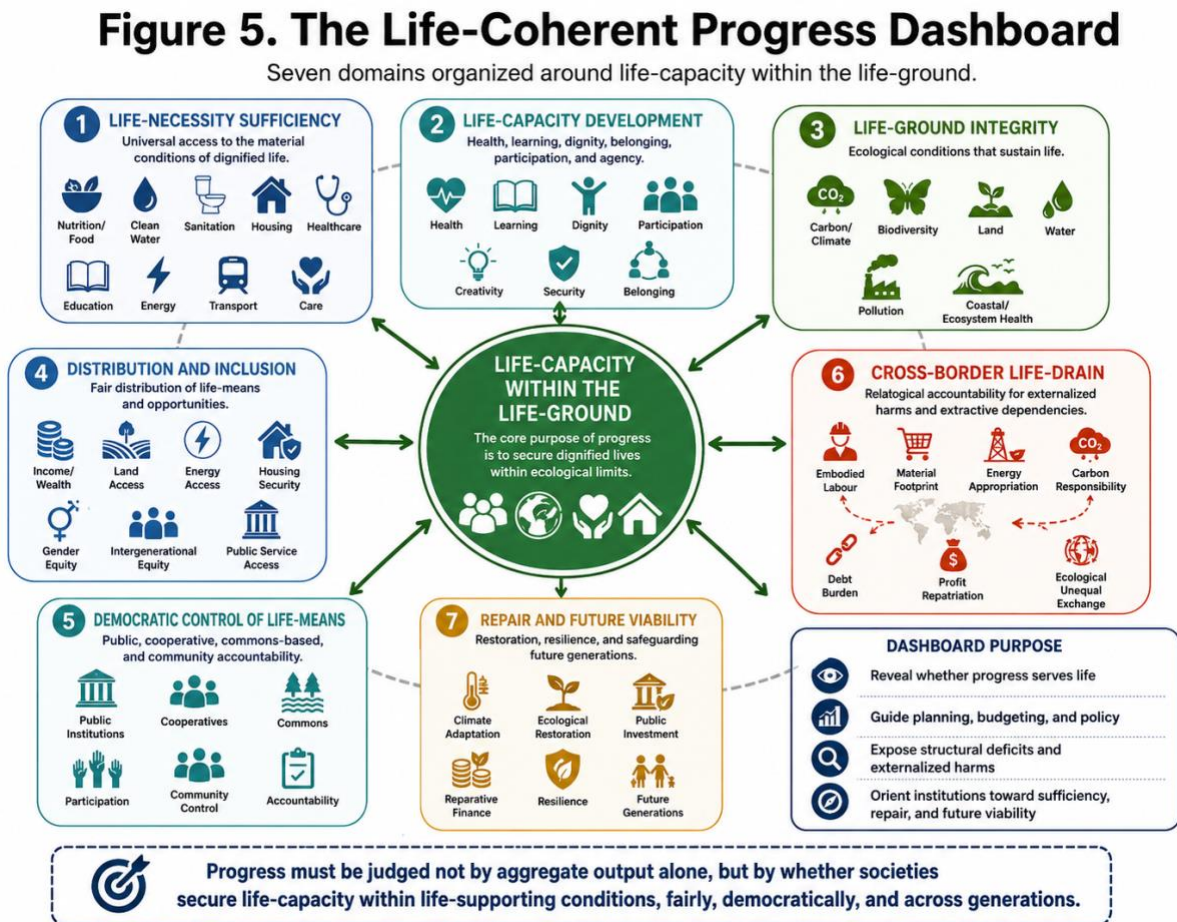


Figure 5. The Life-Coherent Progress Dashboard.

A life-coherent dashboard organizes progress around seven domains: life-necessity sufficiency, life-capacity development, life-ground integrity, distribution and inclusion, democratic control of life-means, cross-border life-drain, and repair and future viability. The dashboard shifts assessment from aggregate output to whether societies secure life-capacity within life-supporting conditions, fairly, democratically, and across generations.

Such a dashboard would include at least seven domains.

First, life-necessity sufficiency. This domain would track secure access to nutrition, clean water, sanitation, housing, healthcare, education, energy, transport, digital communication, and care. Doyal and Gough's theory of human need remains important here because it defends the objectivity of human needs against purely subjective or relativist accounts of welfare (Doyal & Gough, 1991).

Second, life-capacity development. This domain would track health, learning, dignity, belonging, participation, creativity, security, repair capacity, and the conditions for meaningful agency.

Third, life-ground integrity. This domain would track carbon emissions, material footprint, land degradation, biodiversity loss, water stress, pollution, coastal health, climate exposure, and ecosystem regeneration. The planetary boundaries literature provides the clearest scientific basis for this domain, beginning with Rockström et al.'s safe-operating-space framework and continuing through Richardson et al.'s 2023 update showing that six of nine planetary boundaries had been transgressed (Rockström et al., 2009; Richardson et al., 2023).

Fourth, distribution and inclusion. This domain would track income, wealth, land access, energy access, housing security, gendered burdens, public service access, and intergenerational equity.

Fifth, democratic control of life-means. This domain would track public, cooperative, commons-based, and community accountability over essential systems, including water, energy, health, food, housing, education, transport, and knowledge.

Sixth, cross-border life-drain. This domain would track embodied labour imports, embodied material and land use, energy appropriation, carbon responsibility, debt service burden, profit repatriation, ecological unequal exchange, and import dependence.

Seventh, repair and future viability. This domain would track climate adaptation, ecological restoration, debt relief, reparative finance, public investment, disaster resilience, food-water-energy security, and institutional safeguards for future generations. Fanning and Hickel's work on atmospheric appropriation is especially relevant here because it frames excess emissions as an issue of reparative responsibility, not merely future mitigation (Fanning & Hickel, 2023).

This dashboard would not reject GDP as a descriptive economic statistic. Rather, it would dethrone GDP as the primary meaning of progress. Economic activity would be interpreted through a higher-order question: does it serve life-capacity within life-supporting boundaries, without externalizing harm?

10. Small Island States and the Caribbean as Diagnostic Sites

Small island developing states make the contradictions of the current global order visible with unusual clarity. GDP can rise while debt vulnerability deepens, food import dependence grows, coastal ecosystems deteriorate, climate exposure intensifies, public health systems strain, and youth futures narrow. Conventional economic indicators often miss the fragility of the life-ground and the constrained sovereignty of small states.

A life-coherent Hickel synthesis is especially relevant for the Caribbean. The region faces climate injustice, colonial legacies, import dependence, fossil-fuel vulnerability, food insecurity, coastal degradation, water and wastewater challenges, debt exposure, and narrow fiscal space. These are not separate problems. They are interconnected expressions of a world economy in which small states are often structurally exposed to external shocks, ecological harm, trade dependency, and financial constraint.

The life-coherent progress agenda for SIDS would therefore prioritize water security, wastewater management, renewable energy sovereignty, agroecology, regional food systems, universal health capacity, public education, coastal protection, climate adaptation finance, digital commons, debt justice, and regional cooperation. Hickel's analysis helps name the global structures that constrain these possibilities. The life-coherent framework helps translate that critique into an integrated programme of health, ecology, provisioning, and governance.

The Caribbean should not be framed only as vulnerable. It can also become a diagnostic and creative site for life-coherent transition. Because small islands cannot indefinitely externalize ecological and social costs, they reveal more clearly the need for integrated systems of food, water, energy, health, education, culture, economy, and ecological care. The question is not simply how small islands can become more resilient within the existing order, but how they can help demonstrate forms of progress answerable to life.

Figure 6 shows how small island states can function as diagnostic sites for the wider life-coherent progress agenda.

Figure 6. Small Island States as Diagnostic Sites

A Caribbean island system surrounded by climate, debt, food, water, energy, health, trade, and governance pressures, with pathways toward regional commons and sovereign provisioning.



Small island states reveal with unusual clarity that progress cannot be measured by GDP alone, but by the security of life-ground, the resilience of provisioning, and the recovery of meaningful sovereignty.

Figure 6. Small Island States as Diagnostic Sites.

Small island developing states reveal the contradictions of GDP-centred development with unusual clarity. Climate pressure, debt, food dependence, water and wastewater stress, energy dependence, health vulnerability, trade exposure, and sovereignty constraints converge in island systems. A life-coherent response requires regional commons, sovereign provisioning, renewable transition, ecological repair, and resilient public systems.

11. Extending Hickel through a Life-Coherent Grammar

Hickel's political economy is analytically forceful, but a life-coherent grammar can extend its reach in several ways.

First, it can translate critique into a broader language of life. Terms such as capitalism, imperialism, class struggle, degrowth, and ecosocialism are analytically important, but they can be received defensively in some policy, professional, and civic settings. Life-capacity, civil commons, democratic provisioning, sufficiency, repair, health, dignity, and the life-ground may communicate the same structural critique in a language that is more accessible across disciplines and constituencies.

Second, the life-coherent framework connects political economy to embodiment. Unequal exchange is not only a trade relation. It becomes undernutrition, metabolic disease, infectious vulnerability, toxic exposure, unsafe housing, poor sanitation, ecological anxiety, migration pressure, social fragmentation, and shortened lives. Hickel and Singh's work on capitalogenic disease is directly relevant here because it explicitly links capitalism to disease pathways, social determinants of health, and preventable suffering (Singh & Hickel, 2023).

Third, the framework adds the relational-cultural conditions of transition. Societies do not change through data alone. Transformation requires trust, participation, legitimacy, care, shared meaning, and new forms of collective agency. Maturana and Varela's work helps illuminate why new worlds must be enacted through new distinctions and relations, not merely declared through policy.

Fourth, the framework integrates peace-building. If the dominant economy produces structural and cultural violence, then life-coherent progress is not only economic reform or ecological transition. It is also peace work: the reduction of direct, structural, and cultural violence through institutions that secure life-necessities, protect the vulnerable, and repair damaged relations.

This is the distinctive contribution of the life-coherent synthesis. Hickel shows why the current economy cannot deliver real progress under its existing value logic. The life-coherent framework shows how that critique can be embedded in a wider grammar of health, peace, commons, repair, world-bringing, and future viability.

12. Conclusion: The Life-Coherent Reordering of Progress

The Beyond GDP agenda provides an important new compass. It recognizes that progress cannot be reduced to aggregate economic output and that societies require indicators of well-being, equity, sustainability, resilience, and future capacity. Hickel's contribution is to show why a new compass is not enough. The vessel is still powered by an engine organized around accumulation, unequal exchange, and the misallocation of productive capacity.

A life-coherent framework brings these insights into a broader synthesis. It begins from the premise that life is not an externality of the economy. Life is the ground, condition, and measure of all legitimate economic activity. Production is justified only insofar as it secures life-necessities, expands life-capacities, protects the life-ground, repairs life-damage, and remains democratically answerable to those affected.

The final thesis may be stated as follows:

An economy is legitimate only insofar as it serves life-capacity, protects the life-ground, repairs life-damage, and remains democratically answerable to the communities and ecosystems through which life continues.

Figure 7 gathers the argument into a final master diagram of an economy answerable to life.

Figure 7. An Economy Answerable to Life

The final master diagram: production, finance, trade, technology, and governance reordered around life-capacity, ecological repair, democratic provisioning, and future viability.

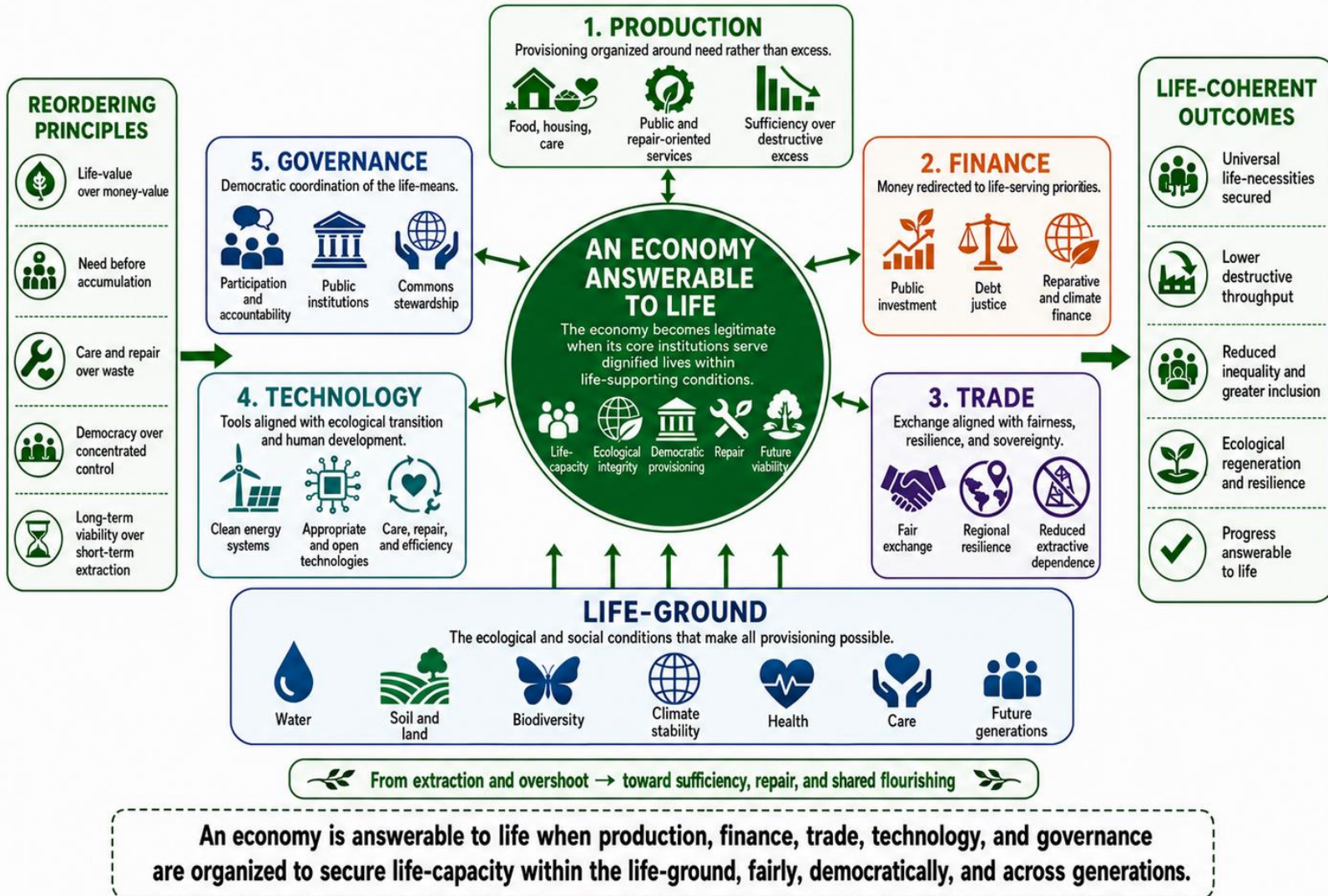


Figure 7. An Economy Answerable to Life.

The final master diagram shows the reordering of production, finance, trade, technology, and governance around life-capacity, ecological integrity, democratic provisioning, repair, and future viability. The life-ground forms the foundation of all provisioning, while reordering principles guide institutions toward life-coherent outcomes. An economy becomes legitimate when its core systems secure life-capacity within the life-ground, fairly, democratically, and across generations.

The task, then, is not simply to move beyond GDP. It is to bring forth an economy answerable to life: an economy that produces enough, shares fairly, repairs what has been damaged, releases what is destructive, and organizes the life-means as commons for present and future generations.

That is the world still possible.

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Appendix A. Key Terms

Capitalist law of value

The organizing logic by which production is directed primarily toward capital accumulation rather than human need, ecological repair, or democratic provisioning.

Civil commons

Institutions, practices, infrastructures, and shared resources that protect and enable universal access to life-necessities, including water, health, education, care, knowledge, food, housing, and ecological protection.

Cross-border life-drain

The transfer or appropriation of labour, land, energy, materials, ecological space, financial resources, or policy sovereignty from one society to another in ways that impair life-capacity, ecological integrity, or future viability.

Decent living standards

A needs-based threshold of material and social provisioning required for human dignity, including nutrition, housing, water, sanitation, healthcare, education, energy, transport, communication, and basic household infrastructure.

Democratic provisioning

The organization of essential life-means through institutions accountable to human need, ecological limits, and affected communities rather than private accumulation alone.

Life-capacity

The ability of persons and communities to live, develop, participate, care, learn, create, deliberate, belong, and flourish.

Life-ground

The ecological, social, bodily, and relational conditions without which life-capacity cannot exist or continue.

Life-value

Value understood as that which enables, maintains, or expands life-capacities within life-supporting conditions.

Money-value

Value understood as monetary accumulation, exchange value, or return on investment, irrespective of whether life-capacities are enabled or destroyed.

Structural violence

Avoidable impairment of life-chances built into social, economic, political, or institutional arrangements.

World-bringing

The process by which living beings and communities enact worlds through distinctions, relations, practices, institutions, and recurrent patterns of meaning

Appendix B. Hickel-to-Life-Coherent Translation Table

Hickel's concept	Life-coherent translation
Capitalist law of value	Money-value over life-value
Decent living standards	Minimum life-capacity floor
Planetary boundaries	Life-ground ceiling
Unequal exchange	Cross-border life-drain
Degrowth	Downscaling life-destructive excess
Post-growth	Progress without GDP expansion as ruling goal
Southern sovereignty	Recovery of control over life-means
Democratic control of production	Civil commons governance
Structural adjustment	Institutionalized suppression of life-capacity
Reparations and debt justice	Repair of historical and ongoing life-loss
Green industrial policy	Directed production for life-capacity and ecological transition
Atmospheric appropriation	Theft of ecological space and future viability

Appendix C. Proposed Life-Coherent Progress Dashboard

Domain	Indicative measures	Policy implications
Life-necessity sufficiency	Food, water, sanitation, housing, health, education, energy, transport, care	Public provisioning, universal basic services, social guarantees
Life-capacity development	Health, learning, participation, dignity, belonging, creativity	Prevention, education, culture, democratic participation
Life-ground integrity	Carbon, materials, land, biodiversity, water, pollution, coastal health	Ecological limits, restoration, circular systems, conservation
Distribution and inclusion	Income, wealth, land, housing, energy, public services	Redistribution, labour rights, taxation, social protection
Democratic control of life-means	Public, cooperative, commons, community governance	Participatory budgeting, public ownership, cooperative models
Cross-border life-drain	Embodied labour, materials, land, carbon, debt, profit repatriation	Trade justice, debt justice, supply-chain accountability
Repair and future viability	Adaptation, resilience, restoration, debt relief, future safeguards	Reparations, climate finance, long-term public investment

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Author Bio

Dr. Bichara Sahely, BSc (Biology), MBBS, DM (Internal Medicine) is a physician, systems thinker, and independent scholar from St. Kitts and Nevis. He trained in medicine at the University of the West Indies, Mona, and completed postgraduate specialist training in Internal Medicine. He served for many years as a Consultant Physician in Internal Medicine at Joseph N. France General Hospital and has also maintained a long-standing private medical practice.

Dr. Sahely's work increasingly explores the social, ecological, economic, and political determinants of health and human flourishing. His current scholarship focuses on life-coherent frameworks for health, healing, governance, ecological repair, and civilizational renewal. Drawing on medicine, public health, systems theory, life-value onto-axiology, peace research, ecological economics, autopoiesis, and the civil commons tradition, his writing seeks to clarify how institutions can be reordered around the conditions that enable life.

His recent work has examined life-coherent health, civil commons, structural violence, autopoietic world-bringing, Beyond GDP, democratic provisioning, and the special relevance of small island developing states as diagnostic sites for planetary transition. He is particularly interested in how societies can move from extractive and accumulation-centred models of development toward forms of progress grounded in life-capacity, ecological integrity, care, repair, and future viability.

Back Cover Synopsis

An Economy Answerable to Life argues that the movement beyond GDP must go deeper than measurement reform. Better indicators are necessary, but they cannot by themselves transform an economy whose core institutions remain organized around accumulation, unequal exchange, ecological overshoot, and the misallocation of productive capacity.

Drawing on Jason Hickel's political economy, John McMurtry's life-value onto-axiology, Johan Galtung's theory of structural violence, and Maturana and Varela's account of living systems and world-bringing, this white paper develops a life-coherent framework for rethinking progress. It asks not only what societies should measure, but what economies should be for.

The paper proposes that real progress means securing universal life-necessities, expanding life-capacities, protecting the life-ground, repairing life-damage, democratizing control over the life-means, and preventing prosperity from depending on cross-border life-drain. It reframes degrowth as differentiated convergence: less destructive excess where throughput is too high, more life-necessary provisioning where needs remain unmet, and enough for all within planetary boundaries.

With special attention to small island developing states and the Caribbean, the paper shows why GDP-centred development is inadequate for an age of ecological instability, debt vulnerability, food and energy dependence, and climate injustice.

The central claim is simple: an economy is legitimate only insofar as it is answerable to life.