
Why no sustainable development goals? A review of education beyond the SDGs

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ABSTRACT

This article synthesises a lecture by Dr. Helen Kopnina critiquing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and current Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The central thesis argues that the SDGs' commitment to inclusive economic growth is inherently contradictory and anthropocentric, failing to address the root causes of ecological crises. The article examines evidence of this crisis, such as the decline in wild mammal biomass, linking it to consumption patterns driven by a growth-oriented economy. It argues for a fundamental shift away from the SDG framework towards alternative models like post-growth and degrowth, emphasizing the need to prioritize regeneration and refusal over recycling within circular economy approaches. The article concludes by advocating a return to the principles of 1970s environmental education, which confronted planetary limits and fostered genuine eco-literacy, as a more effective path towards a sustainable future for all species.

INTRODUCTION

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) form the dominant global framework for addressing world challenges, promoted as a synergistic roadmap to a better future (United Nations, 2015). Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is the primary vehicle for this vision. However, Dr. Helen Kopnina challenges this consensus, arguing that the SDG framework is fundamentally flawed and that ESD may reinforce the problems it aims to solve. Dr. Kopnina's thesis is that the SDGs' commitment to "inclusive economic growth" perpetuates a growth-dependent, anthropocentric paradigm driving ecological devastation (Kopnina, 2016, 2020). This article explores this critique by deconstructing the SDGs' contradictions and biases, examining the evidence of biodiversity decline, and presenting alternative frameworks like degrowth. It concludes by advocating a return to the principles of early environmental education, which confronted planetary limits, to highlight pathways for education that prioritise ecological integrity and interspecies justice.

PRESENTATION'S HIGHLIGHTS

Dr. Kopnina's presentation delivered a systematic deconstruction of the mainstream sustainability narrative, challenging the audience to look beyond the appealing facade of the SDGs. The following sections synthesise the core arguments and evidence presented.

2.1. THE FLAWED ARCHITECTURE OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The lecture began by questioning the uncritical celebration of the SDGs. While the 17 goals and 169 targets are widely embedded in educational and policy frameworks, they are built on a foundation of critical contradictions and flawed assumptions (Kopnina, 2018). The central critique is aimed at the simultaneous pursuit of seemingly incompatible objectives. A prime example of this is the tension between alleviating poverty and hunger (SDGs 1 and 2) and protecting ecosystems (SDGs 14 and 15). The primary strategies for achieving the former often rely on expanding industrial agriculture, which is a leading driver of deforestation, soil degradation, and biodiversity loss—directly undermining the latter. The framework assumes a frictionless complementarity, ignoring the harsh trade-offs that define real-world resource management.

The presentation further highlighted the inherent anthropocentrism that pervades the goals concerning the natural world (Kopnina, 2016). SDG 14 (Life Below Water) and SDG 15 (Life on Land) are framed almost exclusively in terms of their instrumental value to humanity—as 'natural resources' and providers of 'ecosystem services'. Biodiversity is valued for its utility in fisheries, tourism, or its role in providing clean water, not for its intrinsic worth. This human-centred perspective is encapsulated in the very language of the goals, which fails to afford moral consideration to non-human species, effectively excluding them from the vision of a just and sustainable future. The lecture questioned this ethical stance, asking who we are to displace nearly every other species in our narrow pursuit of intra-human justice.

Perhaps the most fundamental flaw identified is the unwavering commitment to "inclusive economic growth" (SDG 8) as a core part of the solution. The lecture argued that this assumption is not only problematic but is the primary driver of environmental degradation (Kopnina, 2018, 2020). By failing to adequately address the root causes of ecological overshoot—namely, overconsumption, population growth, and the resource intensity of industrial production—the SDG framework effectively sustains the paradigm responsible for the crisis. The presentation posed a critical question: "Can you have your cake and eat it too?" The implicit answer was a resounding no; a truly sustainable future is incompatible with a model of perpetual economic expansion on a finite planet.

2.2. THE UNINHABITABLE EARTH: BIODIVERSITY LOSS AND CONSUMPTION

To illustrate the real-world consequences of the growth-centric paradigm, the presentation provided stark evidence of accelerating biodiversity loss. The case of the blue macaw, which became critically endangered in the wild between the first and second Rio Earth Summits, served as a poignant emblem of this decline. Its habitat in the Amazon has been decimated by deforestation, a process often justified by national policies aimed at fighting poverty through the expansion of export-oriented agriculture—a direct manifestation of the contradictions within the SDGs.

More broadly, the lecture presented a dramatic visualisation of the shift in global biomass distribution. Today, wild mammals constitute a mere 4% of the planet's total mammalian biomass. The vast majority is now dominated by humans (34%) and their livestock (62%), which exist primarily to feed the human population. This staggering imbalance, which has emerged rapidly over the last century, is

a direct result of land conversion for agriculture, particularly for meat production. The visual evidence makes it undeniably clear that the expansion of the human enterprise has come at the direct expense of the planet's wild inhabitants.

The presentation connected this macro-level crisis to individual consumption choices, noting that a reduction in meat consumption would be one of the most effective personal actions to combat biodiversity loss. However, it also acknowledged the complexity of the issue, recognising that sustainability is deeply intertwined with all aspects of modern life, from food to transport, making fundamental change a profound challenge. This led to a discussion of the ethical dimension of the crisis, posing the question: by what right do we, as one species, displace all others in our pursuit of intra-human justice and equality? The lecture called for an extension of moral consideration to non-human species, challenging the anthropocentric foundations of our dominant ethical and political systems (Kopnina, 2016).

2.3. BEYOND GROWTH: ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIC AND EDUCATIONAL FRAMEWORKS

Having established the limitations of the SDG framework, the presentation shifted to exploring viable alternatives that challenge the hegemony of economic growth. Several interconnected models were proposed:

- **Post-Growth and Degrowth:** These perspectives directly confront the imperative of endless economic expansion, arguing for a planned and equitable downscaling of production and consumption in high-income nations to bring human economy back within planetary boundaries. The work of scholars like Daniel O'Neill and Jason Hickel was referenced as providing a robust theoretical and practical foundation for this transition (Hickel, 2020).
- **Steady-State Economy:** Popularised by economist Herman Daly, this model envisions an economy where the throughput of resources remains constant and within ecological limits, shifting the focus from quantitative growth to qualitative development (Daly, 1996).
- **Circular Economy Critique:** While the concept of a circular economy has gained mainstream traction, the presentation warned against greenwashing. Dr. Kopnina argued that mainstream circular economy approaches often prioritize recycling, which frequently amounts to downcycling, rather than addressing consumption at its source. She emphasized that regeneration of ecosystems and refusal of unnecessary production and consumption should take precedence over recycling as strategies for genuine sustainability.

To make these abstract models more concrete, the lecture highlighted practical solutions such as the product-to-service shift. In this model, companies retain ownership of their products and sell their use as a service, incentivising them to design for durability, repairability, and longevity, rather than planned obsolescence. Sharing and collaborative economy models, such as car-sharing schemes, were also presented as ways to reduce resource consumption by decreasing the need for individual ownership.

Crucially, the presentation argued that a shift in economic models must be accompanied by a corresponding shift in education. It called for a return to the principles of 1970s environmental education, as articulated in the Belgrade Charter and the Tbilisi Declaration (UNESCO, 1976). This earlier form of education was not afraid to confront the concept of limits to growth, aiming to foster a deep understanding of ecological principles and the systemic constraints of a finite planet. The lecture concluded this section with a powerful call to action: to develop a world population that is not just

aware of environmental problems, but has the knowledge, skills, and commitment to work towards their solution, and to create inclusive goals that extend to all planetary citizens, not just humans.

2.4. QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Isn't economic growth necessary to alleviate poverty?

This is the central paradox the lecture confronts. The SDG model assumes that economic growth can be decoupled from environmental impact and that it is the primary vehicle for poverty reduction. However, Dr. Kopnina's critique argues that this is a false promise (Kopnina, 2018, 2020). In practice, growth in the current global system is intrinsically linked to increased resource consumption and environmental degradation. The pursuit of poverty alleviation through export-oriented agriculture, for example, directly causes deforestation and biodiversity loss. The alternative perspective offered is that genuine well-being, both for the world's poorest and for society as a whole, cannot be achieved by simply expanding a fundamentally unsustainable system. Instead, post-growth and degrowth models advocate for a radical redistribution of wealth and resources, a focus on well-being indicators over GDP, and a planned reduction in the material and energy throughput of high-income nations. The solution to poverty, from this perspective, lies not in more growth, but in more justice and a radical reimagining of economic life.

Isn't degrowth primarily a systemic issue beyond individual action?

The presentation acknowledges this tension between individual and systemic change. It offers simple individual actions—"just don't do it"—such as not mowing the lawn, reducing meat consumption, or avoiding air travel. These actions are presented as having real, positive impact. However, it is also recognised that focusing solely on individual responsibility can be disempowering, inducing feelings of guilt or cynicism when faced with the scale of systemic forces. The more profound solutions are indeed systemic: shifting from product-to-service models, implementing consumer choice editing (whereby unsustainable products are removed from the market), and redesigning the economy to prioritise regeneration and refusal of unnecessary consumption. The role of the individual, therefore, is twofold: to make personal consumption choices that align with ecological values, and, more importantly, to act as an engaged citizen advocating for the deeper, structural changes required.

How can education shift from the current ESD model to one based on 'limits to growth'?

This requires a fundamental pedagogical and philosophical reorientation. The lecture advocates for a return to the spirit of the 1970s Belgrade Charter and Tbilisi Declaration, which prioritised the development of an "eco-literate" global population that understands and respects planetary boundaries (UNESCO, 1976). In practice, this involves:

1. Critically Deconstructing the SDGs: Instead of teaching the SDGs as a given, educators should facilitate critical analysis of their internal contradictions and anthropocentric biases, as demonstrated in Dr. Kopnina's own pedagogical research (Kopnina et al., 2024, 2025).
2. Prioritising Eco-literacy: Ensuring all learners have a foundational understanding of ecological principles, including thermodynamics, nutrient cycles, and biodiversity.
3. Confronting Uncomfortable Truths: Directly addressing the root causes of the ecological crisis, including overconsumption and population growth, rather than avoiding them.

4. Fostering Ecocentrism: Moving beyond a purely human-centred ethical framework to cultivate a sense of justice and moral consideration for non-human species and future generations.

This approach, termed "ecopedagogy," aims to empower learners not just to "sustain" the current system of development, but to fundamentally transform it (Kopnina, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The dominant narrative of sustainable development, enshrined in the SDGs, presents a vision of harmonious coexistence between economic growth and environmental integrity. This article, synthesising the work of Dr. Helen Kopnina, challenges this as a dangerous illusion. The SDG framework, with its commitment to perpetual economic growth, exacerbates the planetary crisis by failing to address its root causes (Kopnina, 2016, 2018, 2020). The alternative path requires a profound intellectual and ethical reorientation beyond the anthropocentric, growth-obsessed logic of the SDGs towards models like degrowth that prioritise ecological regeneration and justice. This is a call to reimagine prosperity based on well-being and co-existence with the more-than-human world. Education is central to this transformation. The current ESD model must be challenged in favour of a resurrected spirit of early environmental education, grounded in eco-literacy and confronting planetary limits. By fostering a critical understanding of the ecological crisis and an ecocentric ethic of care, education can empower citizens to build a truly sustainable and just world.

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