

# An Unquenchable Thirst for More Faith and Economic Growth

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Christian Aid is a Christian organisation that insists the world can and must be swiftly changed to one where everyone can live a full life, free from poverty.

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**Cover:** Beatrice (8) stands in a crop field in Mwea, Kenya, where her father works. Our partner, the SALI Project (Sustainable Agriculture Livelihood Innovation) works with farmers' groups in Embu County, training members in farming techniques and advising on how best to grow crops.

Photograph: Christian Aid/Matthew Gonzalez-Noda

## List of acronyms

<b>APPG</b>	All Party Parliamentary Group
<b>CPI</b>	Comissão Pro-Indio of Sao Paulo
<b>CIG</b>	Common interest group
<b>DfID</b>	Department for International Development
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>GDP</b>	Gross domestic product
<b>IMF</b>	International Monetary Fund
<b>LEAP</b>	Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty
<b>SKA</b>	Safai Karmachari Andolan
<b>SME</b>	Small-to-medium enterprise
<b>WCC</b>	World Council of Churches

## Foreword

### Rowan Williams, Chair of the Christian Aid Board of Trustees

One of the great philosophers of the 20th century wrote about how we are ‘held prisoner’ by certain pictures. Without realising it, we filter our perception of what is actual and possible through the lens of a specific model that seems so obvious we don’t stop to examine it; and so we end up ignoring more and more.

What this report argues, compellingly and constructively, is that most of our language about economic ‘growth’ is just such an imprisoning picture. We have taught ourselves to assume that the expansion of our economy in certain ways is both natural and beneficial for everyone; and so we have stopped looking at the actual effects of the system we inhabit, repeating the mantra that the kind of growth we have been used to is the best or only engine for lifting populations out of poverty, or that the massive inequality of the global system is just a minor malfunction in a generally benign story.

Most importantly of all, though, we have stopped asking what wealth is *for*. Lacking a coherent picture of what a good human life looks like, we have filled the gap with quantified measures that tell us little or nothing about how far flesh-and-blood human beings are flourishing in all aspects of their experience.

For Christians, in particular, this is a serious failure: we are in danger of not thinking about what is involved in our belief that we are made in God’s image, made for creative engagement in the lives of others that will build them up as they build us up. Wealth is instrumental to this, never an end-in-itself. And we live, so our faith tells us, in an indivisible world, where everyone’s wellbeing is everyone’s business. The challenge we face is how to embody that conviction in economic practices that do not – like our present ‘default setting’ – widen gaps and exhaust what should be common resources.

So, this document sharpens up for us the basic questions we need to be putting to ourselves in the ‘developed’ societies of the world.

There are no glib answers. But these pages give us, with great clarity, a sense of where we should be pressing

those questions and some of the alternative options that are being thought through; thought through, it must be said, with growing sophistication and credibility, as more and more people come to recognise the nature of the prison in which they have been held.

Pictures can hold us prisoner; but good and hopeful pictures can liberate us. This report offers such hopeful models and invites us to think much harder about what would be needed to make them a reality in a world economy where the lasting wellbeing of the human family shaped our actions and policies.

## Executive summary

Our current economic system seems rooted in a pursuit of an unquenchable thirst for economic growth. National growth rates make news headlines. In most parts of the world, including the global South, the need for growth, alongside the assumption of its inherent value, dominates policy making. For poorer nations, growth is often seen as the single most important factor for economic development and poverty reduction.

In more than 70 years of working alongside some of the world's poorest people, Christian Aid has witnessed how the health of an economy – including the extent to which it is growing – has an enormous impact on our ability to transform lives; but is never the full story. Many of the countries in which we work have experienced high levels of economic growth and falling poverty rates. Yet, notional economic success can mask severe pockets of poverty, growing levels of inequality or the destruction of the natural world. And although market mechanisms, fundamental to economic growth, have been vital for lifting some people out of poverty, they are rarely able to address the needs of the hardest to reach.

Perhaps even more challenging, for some in the global South, far from being part of the solution, the dogmatic pursuit of economic growth is part of the problem: a form of neoliberal globalisation which “has already cost the lives of millions and destroyed much of God’s creation.”<sup>1</sup>

There is a body of Christian reflection that suggests an urgent need to step back and question some of the fundamental assumptions of today’s dominant economic narratives. While, particularly for people living in poverty, material standards of living cannot be ignored, a truly good life cannot only (or even at all) be counted in goods or wealth. People should never be reduced to mere instruments of an economic system.

By asking the question ‘what enables a truly human life?’ we can see the economy as a tool that should exist to facilitate human and planetary flourishing. Our economic system should be judged by its potential for sustaining life, both of people and planet, in ways that support the common good.

These reflections have encouraged us to look for new expressions of economic life. One possible approach is to modify the nature of our economic relationships to be

more inclusive and so more effective in tackling poverty and inequality. Another is to find ways of ‘decoupling’ our economies so they can continue to grow without exacting such a heavy toll on the natural world. More radically, we suggest that it could be time to abandon the goal of endless growth and increasing consumption – at least for those who are already prosperous by global standards – and seek to be more just and efficient at sharing existing resources and wealth.

While it is not yet clear for us which – if any – of these pathways, or a combination of them, will enable us to build an economy that will truly support ‘human and planetary flourishing’, we are heartened by what seems to be a growing movement dedicated to developing alternative models for economic progress, as well as those simply getting on with ‘doing economics differently’.

There are also things we can do now, through our consumption and investment practices, as well as how we engage in public conversation and debate, that are important growing points from which we might build a true ‘economy of life’. Our conviction is that the church also has a key role to play in developing a new vision and fostering the kind of radical imagination, shaped by faith, that we believe can help create the world anew.

## Introduction

This paper sets out to contribute to a wide conversation about economic growth from our experience as a faith-based development agency working alongside the poor for more than seven decades, and to provide a space to explore and share some alternative economic models.

Encouraged by our Chair, Dr Rowan Williams, we reflect on economic growth within the context of the whole 'economy of life', outlining questions, identifying some particularly salient issues and making suggestions for the future.

Our paper engages in a conversation between theology and economics and invites a diverse readership to join the debate.

For much of the past 50 years or so, the world has seen high rates of economic growth, a focus on attaining economic growth, and a prevailing discourse that assumes the inherent value of economic growth. Our paper examines the language of economic growth that dominates much of our public discourse, places it within a broader context, and identifies what might be positive about it, as well as what might be difficult or misleading.

Our starting point is what we see around us, both here in the UK and in the global South. We are also alert to the recent shaping and dissemination of the Sustainable Development Goals which have, at their heart, a commitment to the wellbeing of all the world's people and to development, investment and trading decisions that 'leave no-one behind'. This commitment by the entire international community could be seen as a helpful perspective from which to consider the issues in this paper.

We live in a time of unprecedented wealth, but poverty is still a reality for billions. We have been profoundly struck by the fact that, while economic growth is simply an 'unexamined good'<sup>2</sup> for some in the world, for others the 'thirst for more' associated with this economic orthodoxy is identified as the very thing creating poverty. How you understand economic growth, and how you measure its worth, inevitably depends very much on your experience and your perspective. There are vast gaps between these different views, gaps that require both understanding and remedying.

The assumption that economic growth is always good has worked to reinforce the idea that if only we could increase national – and by extension – individual people's incomes, we could end poverty. But in our experience, an increase in national income does not always result in enhanced income for those who need it most. Furthermore, we have found that many economists, many people living in poverty, and the reflections of Christian tradition, are unified in believing that human life has a much broader purpose than merely the pursuit of increasing income. Our approach is framed by a belief that God promises life in abundance and invites humanity to live fruitfully in relationship with God, with each other and with the natural world.

Economic growth has, without doubt, brought many people out of basic income poverty, and we want those currently living in poverty to have the financial resources and material improvements they need for life to become good and filled with hope. But an impoverished human life is not only about financial poverty and a flourishing human life does not revolve entirely around national financial wealth.

This report necessarily includes reflection from two perspectives: we cannot ignore the material needs of the poorest billion of our brothers and sisters on our planet, but hesitate to offer our model of growing national wealth to them unquestioningly because we are not convinced that it has produced wellbeing for all, even in what is called the 'developed world'. Their fullness of life needs to result from a wider understanding of what real wealth is, in terms beyond the monetary, and including enjoyment of security, participation in the community, experience of justice in work and trade and the possibility to exercise rights and responsibilities in wider society.

Our challenge in the UK and other parts of the richer global North of our world is to acknowledge that for all to grow as we have grown is impossible on a finite planet. We must critically examine the focus on ever-increasing material standards of living and the commitment to unbridled consumption which we are told are necessary for our economy to function and for human beings to enjoy fullness of life.

## Christian Aid's understanding of poverty

In our strategy, *Partnership for Change*, we define poverty as an **injustice** that robs people 'of their dignity, denies them access to their rights of shelter, food, healthcare, education, safety and a life of fulfilment. [Extreme poverty] renders them powerless, unrepresented, oppressed and vulnerable to harm and abuse, often on the grounds of gender, ethnicity or other aspects of their identity'.

Crucially, Christian Aid's understanding of poverty rests on **power imbalances**, which are 'created and perpetuated by human systems and structures, [so] poverty can be ended by human action. This belief is founded on our understanding of scripture and the work of a creative and loving God who calls all people into partnership to bring about a new creation'.

Many people tend to reduce the idea of poverty to a narrow understanding of **income poverty**, equating low income with poverty. But while measuring poverty by looking at income levels is reasonably easy, and to a large extent intuitive, doing so neglects many of the factors which combine in the concept of poverty as powerlessness. Although it is an integral element of poverty, income poverty is not synonymous with poverty. Even if everyone, everywhere received a decent income, there may well be individuals and groups experiencing other aspects of poverty.

## 1. The testimony of those living in poverty

In a book that has been remarkably influential among church communities around the world, and particularly in the global South, Douglas Meeks, Professor of Theology and Wesleyan Studies at Vanderbilt University in the US, characterises economics as the life of the ‘whole household’ of the world. (The word ‘economics’ comes from the Greek *oikos* meaning ‘household’.) He says that:

‘The starting point for economic thinking should be the suffering caused by the present household arrangements. Why can we not see what is before our eyes?’<sup>3</sup>

When reflecting on the ‘unexamined good’ of economic growth we need, of course, to listen to the models and the reflections of economists. But here, we begin by listening first to those in the global South who are living in poverty, those with whom Christian Aid works, whose experience might challenge the assumptions of those for whom economic growth has brought many good things. This is the experience of those for whom ‘the shoe pinches’ and it has the power to help us all to see the world more clearly.

It is a strong imperative in Christian tradition that those who seek wisdom should listen for the voices of those who are suffering, believing that, if we want to know where Jesus Christ is present in the world, we need to look in that place. A theology that gives human experience a particular kind of authority will take seriously those who ‘cry out’, and who challenge ‘what prevails’ in the world as it is. It will not necessarily agree with all that is said, or all the conclusions and challenges that might be drawn from it, but it is compelled to listen and to hear.

Christian Aid has been working alongside the poor in some 40 countries for more than 70 years. In that time we – and our many partners – have witnessed how the health of an economy, including the extent to which an economy is (or is not) growing, has an enormous impact on our ability to transform lives. But it is never the full story. Many of the countries in which we work have experienced high levels of economic growth in recent decades. Yet, this can often mask severe pockets of

poverty, destruction of environments or growing levels of inequality.

Climate change also means that communities are experiencing challenges to livelihoods as a result of the greenhouse gas emissions largely associated with historical economic growth of richer nations. We have seen how discrimination based on gender or other forms of identity can prevent large numbers of people from sharing in broader prosperity despite economic growth. And we have seen how – irrespective of growth rates – policy decisions and initiatives designed to target the most vulnerable directly are vital in addressing the hardest to reach.

### **Discrimination in India**

India is often held up as a prime example of how economic growth can help to overcome poverty. The country has enjoyed more than two decades of positive growth with rates averaging almost 7.4% for the past 10 years.<sup>4</sup> According to the International Monetary Fund, India is now the seventh-richest country in the world.<sup>5</sup>

Such economic progress has been widely credited with helping to lift some 140 million people over the nationally defined poverty line since 2008.<sup>6</sup> Yet economic development and investment has been highly concentrated in a handful of states and India remains home to the world's largest number of poor people.

Furthermore, India's headline economic success masks considerable geographical and social inequality. Caste-based discrimination intensifies poverty and inequality with 42% of the Dalit community in rural areas living below the poverty line compared with 30% of the wider population.<sup>7</sup>

Employment is a major concern with India experiencing the paradoxical 'jobless growth' phenomenon where technological advance drives people out of sectors such as agriculture and insufficient investment is made into alternative job creation.

So people are competing on very unequal terms to access any emerging employment opportunities, not only because of inequalities in education and skills but also because of this caste-based discrimination. Affected communities often have very little choice but to work in low-status jobs, and for Dalits, this includes the contested occupations of scavenging and manual

cleaning of human waste which are traditionally seen as their role.

Christian Aid's partner Safai Karmachari Andolan (SKA) pursues the elimination of this practice and the entry of Dalits into more dignified and economically beneficial employment. Despite being forbidden by the Indian Government in 1993, manual cleaning continues because of the prevalence in India of dry latrines. The same 1993 law decreed that they should be phased out as a challenge to effective communal sanitation, but dry latrines remain, and in 2011 more than 1.3 million Dalits, most of whom are women, were engaged in their cleaning.<sup>8</sup> Their biggest employer is the Indian Railways, who have outsourced the work and deny the charge.<sup>9</sup>

A three-year campaign by an alliance of Dalit organisations saw Dalit women marching across the country, staging the demolition of dry latrines and knocking on politicians' doors to demand an end to the practice of manual scavenging. It resulted in the legislation being reinforced and extended in 2013, but suffering and even deaths continue. In response to the suffocation of a worker in Delhi, killed by the toxic fumes of the sewer he was cleaning, Bezwada Wilson, founder of SKA declared: 'This is a crime. A murder that has been committed by the government and they need to take responsibility.'<sup>10</sup>

### **Inequality hampers poverty reduction in Ghana**

Ghana is often seen as one of the best-performing economies in Africa. The country has had more than two decades of consistent growth, with rates regularly over 5% since 2000.

Now classed as a 'middle-income country', Ghana has seen a significant reduction in overall income poverty rates, achieving the Millennium Development Goal target of halving poverty rates between 1990 and 2005 and with rates declining further since.<sup>11</sup> Such progress should be celebrated. Yet, inequality continues to widen and substantial pockets of poverty remain, particularly in the north of the country.

With rising inequality hampering further progress on poverty reduction, the Ghanaian government has introduced a number of social protection policies. The LEAP programme (Livelihood Empowerment Against

Poverty), provides cash payments to very poor people so they can meet their basic needs, in return for abiding by certain conditions such as enrolling children in school. The programme has strong potential to address some of Ghana's socio-economic challenges but it has been held back by poor implementation.

In the northern Mion District, Christian Aid and its partner, NORSAAC, have been working to ensure that LEAP is delivered in a way that better meets the needs of poor people. A key part of their work has been to facilitate dialogue between communities, local government and officials responsible for LEAP implementation. These dialogues have helped to identify challenges and gaps in programme provision, leading to transfers being disbursed in a more timely fashion; people who previously had to travel to distant communities for their cash transfers are now receiving them closer to home, which increases the amount of money at their disposal for food and other basic needs.

Better follow-up with recipient households has boosted school enrolment rates. NORSAAC is now working to ensure that an additional 300 LEAP households are also eligible for healthcare services under the National Health Insurance Scheme.

Economic growth does appear to have made a difference in Ghana, but has certainly not been experienced by all parts of the population to the same degree and has not addressed the myriad of development challenges faced by the country. So social protection policies providing a basic safety net for extremely poor people are vital; as is ensuring that those programmes are designed with their voices and their needs in mind.

### **Structural inequality in Brazil**

Brazil remains a nation with high levels of inequality by global standards, despite experiencing high economic growth rates for most of the past two decades, which increased both employment and wage levels. Some inroads were made into this inequality over the same time period, through political decisions to spend more on social security and introduce redistributive policies such as the *Bolsa Familia* cash payments to poor families, to keep their children in school and attend preventive health appointments.

However, certain sections of the population have remained marginalised and seen little benefit from the economic success story that is told about their nation. Just 3% of the population own two-thirds of all the arable land, rural populations often struggle to achieve security of place and livelihood and since they also experience discrimination because of gender or race, they can be disproportionately poor.<sup>12</sup> This is the experience of 3,000 Quilombola communities who are the descendants of escaped slaves. They are struggling to acquire the rights to their lands, even though they are legally entitled to them.

Only 258 have achieved this so far, the remainder face challenges, not only of livelihood, low incomes and lack of access to transport, health and education services, but of withstanding the effects of the economic development policies of the Brazilian Government, which encourage logging and mining enterprises on their lands. With degradation of their environment, many have found it impossible to continue traditional subsistence and income generation strategies such as hunting and fishing.

Quilombola leader Dominginhos Printes contrasts the slowness of the process to grant land rights with the speedy permission granted to mining companies, eager to explore for minerals and extract them on Quilomba territories. 'It's sad to see that my government seems to prioritise big business instead of poor people,' he says. 'It's an open door for big business to exploit our natural resources – and it's a constant threat to our lives.' No right to title has been granted in Dominginhos' municipality since 2003, so in the face of the cuts to the government department responsible for the promotion of their land rights, Christian Aid's partner the Comissão Pro-Índio of Sao Paulo (CPI) supports their struggle for land, works on more equal gender relationships and combats racial and ethnic discrimination.

These stories give rise to a different way of reflecting on economic growth, which begins with the raw experience of those who live in poverty, which for us must be the starting place. This has sometimes proved difficult for those whose instinct is to begin, instead, with economic models and analysis. There was a defining moment in 2004 when it became clear for one global family of churches that an internal divide had opened up, largely

between members from the global North and those from the global South. The World Communion of Reformed Churches, meeting in Accra, had intense debates about economics, because those from the global South, living in poverty, bore witness to the suffering that the unrestrained quest for economic growth brings.

These witnesses were so convincing that the conference, in its now famous Accra confession, declared that a call for economic justice was a matter of *status confessionis*: thus defining it as something that is essential to how faith is understood and on which there can be no disagreement. Despite resistance from some of those living in parts of the world that have benefited most from economic growth, they called for alternatives to growth, and an 'economics of enough'. They affirmed their hope that a just global economy might be built on the alternative models that may be glimpsed in some communities.<sup>13</sup>

The confession they affirmed says:

'We believe that any economy of the household of life, given to us by God's covenant to sustain life, is accountable to God. We believe the economy exists to serve the dignity and wellbeing of people in the community, within the bounds of the sustainability of creation. We believe that human beings are called to choose God over Mammon and that confessing our faith is an act of obedience. Therefore, we reject the unregulated accumulation of wealth and limitless growth that has already cost the lives of millions and destroyed much of God's creation.'<sup>14</sup>

The World Council of Churches (WCC) has also, for some years, been calling together people from churches around the world to reflect on economic structures, seeking to offer a theological and spiritual basis for combined action for economic justice. The language and tone of this ongoing project is profoundly challenging to those who might want to think only of moderating a model grounded on economic growth. In 2005, one WCC report concluded that:

'The unquenchable thirst for more power, more profits and more possessions, which motivates corporate entities, and some individuals and social groups, is unsustainable and deprives many communities of the ability to meet their own needs in harmony with the environment.'<sup>15</sup>

From these voices, from those living in poverty and primarily from the global South, we hear that economic growth is part of a form of neoliberal globalisation which they experience as a systematically plundering of the Earth, rendering national governments powerless to protect their citizens, excluding those without property, and as death-dealing to those who are weakened by it. They bear witness, with searing clarity, that 'people's concrete experience shows that market-driven economic growth is inequitable, unsustainable and irreconcilable with economic justice and a caring economy.'

It should give anyone pause for thought that the voices most fiercely protesting against a dominant paradigm based on maximising economic growth are often of those in poverty. The key question for them is not so much whether it is more right to talk of moderating growth (by making sure, for example, that it is inclusive, sustainable and equitable) but to seek alternatives to growth. A theology that begins from experience, and particularly from the experience of those who are poorest and suffering, needs to listen to this.

## 2. The evidence from economists

The view that economic growth is inherently good and the best way to reduce poverty was increasingly emphasised by influential economists in global financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund throughout the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>16</sup> The result was a largely unchallenged paradigm, which emphasised the need for poorer countries to become more market orientated. Policies such as privatisation, the reduction of trade barriers and austerity programmes were particularly imposed on highly indebted nations. The aim was to stimulate long-term economic growth, rather than focusing on initiatives directly aimed at improving the lives of the poorest people.

Although the view that growth is the most significant factor in reducing poverty remains influential, it is being increasingly challenged by a growing body of economic thought which emphasises the limits to the impact of growth both in terms of poverty reduction and in the context of a finite planet. There is also increasing evidence that institutions and social structures beyond 'the market' can create wealth, and in turn, reduce poverty. This is recognised in the Sustainable Development Goals; although these have a target focusing on 'decent work and economic growth', they will not be judged to have been fulfilled until no-one is left behind, across all social groups.

There is growing recognition that 'more' does not necessarily equate to 'more for those who most need it'. As such, growth alone is not enough to eradicate poverty. Nor is it enough to guarantee a better *quality* of life or that human life can 'flourish' in the fuller sense. The result is that economic growth as an objective in itself is being increasingly questioned. All of this resonates with the practical development experience of Christian Aid and its partners around the world.

### Economic growth and poverty reduction

In its latest *Economic Development Strategy* the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) asserts

### What growth statistics can and can't tell us

Economic growth is measured by movements in gross domestic product (GDP). GDP measures the value of all the monetary transactions that happen within an economy over a given period. It is a measure of national income and a good indicator of whether economic activity is rising or falling. But in and of itself, GDP tells us nothing about who gains from that activity, whether it translates into higher living standards or human flourishing in the wider sense.

The statistics also tell us nothing about the environmental consequences of economic activity. Growth created as a result of low-carbon, renewable energy generation is for example, treated in exactly the same way as that resulting from the construction of a coal-fired power station producing highly carbon intensive electricity. In a world where we urgently need to reduce carbon emissions this is a major limitation

Quite quickly, therefore, we can lose the thread of how a headline growth in GDP translates into real changes for communities or the natural environment. This makes it all the more important that we hear voices from people and places that economic growth might leave behind.

### **‘Economic growth is essential for overcoming poverty and for allowing human potential to flourish.**

No country can prosper or move beyond reliance on aid without it’.<sup>17</sup>

Undoubtedly, recent decades have witnessed both periods of reasonably consistent economic growth and a significant decline in the numbers of people living in poverty. Much economic analysis appears to confirm a generally positive relationship between growth and poverty reduction, with one often-quoted World Bank study, finding that, on average, each percentage increase in national income per capita reduces poverty by 1.7%.<sup>18</sup> High growth rates in China, and to a lesser extent, in India, are widely seen as responsible for rapidly declining poverty rates and for ‘pulling’ millions of people above income poverty lines.

But there is ongoing debate as to whether growth will *always* reduce poverty and whether the numbers raised above any given poverty level still remain poor by international standards, but are just not as deeply impoverished.

Development economist Andy Sumner has, for example, cited studies that show that while growth may increase income for the poorest, their gains are relatively small when compared to wealthier groups in the same society. He also notes the dangers of relying on statistical averages, which he says ‘hide large variations across countries and across measures of poverty, both questioning the relevance of the global average and whether growth responds differently to different kinds of... income poverty’.<sup>19</sup>

Questions are also being asked about the extent to which economic growth is an efficient vehicle for eradicating poverty over time. Development economist David Woodward showed that, with recent trends of average growth, it would take more than 100 years – and on some measures more than 200 years – to abolish extreme income poverty (based on the \$1.25 and \$5 per day poverty lines). In principle, these timeframes could be bought forward significantly by increasing the rate of global growth. However, given the disastrous impacts this would likely have on the climate (see below), Woodward rejects that path as unviable. Instead he advocates a change of approach based on ‘shifting our attention from global economic growth itself, and towards

## **Millennium Development Goals**

The Millennium Development Goals aimed to halve the number of people in the world living on less than \$1.25 per day. There has been much celebration that that target has been achieved. But how useful was such a monetary target?

The \$1.25 figure was set by the World Bank in 1990 as the average of several different national poverty lines. The figure was recently increased to \$1.90. But even in many of the world’s poorest nations \$1.90 barely – if at all – covers the cost of daily necessities. Children living on \$1.90 in India still have a 60% chance of being malnourished. In Niger it still means an infant mortality rate three times higher than the global average. These realities may explain why one of Christian Aid’s partners regarded this goal as ‘an insult’

Moreover, as poverty is multi-dimensional a simple income target takes no account of other, non-financial, things that are necessary for a full life.

By drawing an arbitrary line, have the institutions been more concerned about what they can measure positively, than the complex reality of life marked by poverty? What is the human value of the difference in quality of life between someone on \$1.90 per day and someone else on \$2 per day?

improving the distribution of the benefits of global production and consumption'.<sup>20</sup>

This resonates with further comment from DFID following the quote above:

'Greater economic inclusion of the poorest is an essential ingredient of sustained growth. Stimulating growth that generates more and better jobs is the most effective and lasting way of ending poverty. But even when better jobs and opportunities are available, girls and women, people with disabilities, people living with HIV and other groups are routinely excluded. They experience multiple barriers including social discrimination, unfair laws and violence. This blights lives and leads to poorer health and education outcomes that reinforce exclusion. At the national level there is an economic cost through the loss of skills and talent...'.<sup>21</sup>

### **For growth to make a positive difference we must tackle inequalities**

There is increasing evidence that inequality does, indeed, make a difference.

This is a complex area, with multiple variables. However recent studies have tended to confirm Christian Aid's practical experience that high levels of income inequality limit the potential of growth to 'deliver' reductions in poverty.<sup>22</sup>

One recent study has, for example, suggested that even in countries where growth has been the main driver of poverty reduction, greater progress would have been made had income been distributed more equally.<sup>23</sup>

Another study found that income inequality is more powerful at increasing poverty than economic growth is at reducing it. The implication is that high or increasing levels of inequality could effectively 'cancel out' any reductions in poverty brought about by economic growth.<sup>24</sup> For growth to be an 'efficient' tool in reducing poverty, income inequality should be addressed as a matter of priority.

As Andy Sumner concludes: 'The problem isn't insufficient growth (there's been plenty); it's how the benefits of growth are shared.'<sup>25</sup>

If we are serious about 'leaving no one behind' it's also important to look beyond income and consider other forms of inequality such as gender and social status.

Christian Aid's partners around the world have borne witness to the fact that there are often multiple faces of inequality – connected for example with gender, ethnicity, sexuality, geography and so on, and that those faces often intersect.<sup>26</sup> A focus on economic growth, without also seeking to address those multiple inequalities, risks leaving them to worsen.

For example, while there is increasing evidence to show that gender equality helps spur economic growth,<sup>27</sup> economic growth does not necessarily enhance gender equality. In many contexts, women have been left behind during periods of economic growth: if, for example, they do not have a job, cannot access free public services, or cannot inherit when a family member dies. Greater inclusion of girls in education has improved equality of qualifications, but this has not translated into wider equality of opportunity or outcomes in the labour market or wider economy.<sup>28</sup> We therefore need to be very careful in assuming the effects of economic growth are distributed evenly across a community or society.

These findings about the importance of multiple dimensions of poverty are, gradually, starting to be reflected at a global policy level. A recent World Bank study acknowledged that, in order to achieve its own extreme poverty target of virtually eliminating \$1.25/day or equivalent income poverty by 2030, 'it is essential to attain more shared growth by accelerating growth among the less well-off countries and among the less well-off in those countries'.<sup>29</sup>

One way in which governments can work towards this is by ensuring that their fiscal systems (the mechanisms through which governments raise and spend tax and other revenue) redistribute the gains from growth and actively seek to address gender and other discriminatory social norms rather than (perhaps inadvertently) compounding existing inequalities.

### **Economic growth and the sustainability of the planet**

Perhaps nothing challenges assumptions about economic growth as 'inherently good' as much as the facts that the planet's resources are finite and that so many of the things that generate economic growth also damage the Earth.

### **Is the concept of economic growth inherently gendered?**

Feminist economists argue that mainstream economic theories focus on 'money, machines and men', artificially separating 'reproductive' activities such as childcare, fetching water and cleaning from 'productive' activities, for example, working in a factory or building a bridge. Most 'reproductive activities' are excluded when calculating GDP statistics.

Due to assigned gender roles, women undertake the bulk of reproductive activities. But reproductive and productive activities are inextricably linked, with the former actually underpinning the latter. However, traditionally, economics has ignored unpaid reproductive activities. This means that the main indicator currently used to measure 'economic' success actually ignores important activities that contribute both to the financial health of economies and are vital for wider health of any society and for human flourishing.

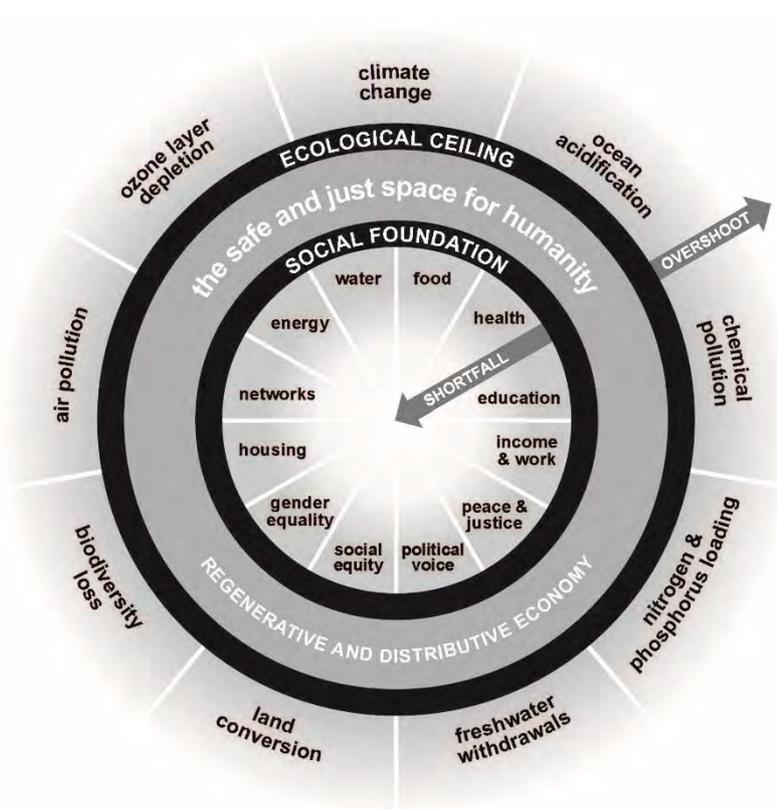
Historically most of the global economy has been highly dependent on fossil fuels and so economic growth has been through highly carbon-intensive means. Economic 'progress' has also often been at the expense of land, air and water pollution, the destruction of natural habitats and loss of biodiversity. In 2009, Tim Jackson, in his report for the Sustainable Development Commission, reported that in the previous 50 years the global economy had grown five times and 60% of the world's ecosystems had been degraded.

These wider environmental effects – often referred to as 'externalities' by economists – are not reflected in economic growth statistics. Yet, as our understanding of them increases, it seems evident that these 'by-products' are becoming so overwhelmingly serious that we cannot continue to treat them as side issues.

In 2009, scientists from the Stockholm Resilience Centre first suggested that there were nine environmental thresholds or tipping points, the crossing of which risked causing major and abrupt environmental change with potentially 'disastrous consequences for humans'<sup>30</sup> suggesting that these 'planetary boundaries' represented a 'safe operating space for humanity'. However, with the planetary boundaries analysis showing that several thresholds (on genetic diversity, biochemical flows, land use, ocean acidification and climate change) had already been, or were in danger of being, exceeded,<sup>31</sup> the planetary framework begs obvious questions about the current path of that development.

Recently, the economist Kate Raworth has offered a visual model integrating this notion of planetary limits with the imperative to meet the requirements of social justice. She describes it as a doughnut and her approach as 'doughnut economics'(see figure1) It is helpful, because in its representation through concentric circles, it reminds us that attention to both challenges is vital to ensure 'flourishing' of both human and natural systems.

Figure 1: Kate Raworth's doughnut model



Source: Kate Raworth 'Doughnut Economics', 2017

If economic growth is predicated on the virtues of 'more', these ecological limits reveal that, in many areas, humankind must learn to live with 'less'. While economic development for poor people remains imperative, economic growth as a goal everywhere, for everyone, needs to be questioned. Tim Jackson suggests, for example that we need to recognise that beyond a certain point, economic growth does not increase human wellbeing.<sup>32</sup> We need to redefine what we mean by 'prosperity' and build an economic system around this rather than the narrowly defined concept of economic growth.

Christian Aid contends from practical experience and theological reflection that these observations directly challenge us and others in the global North in our understanding of what makes a 'good life'. As Chair of the Board of Trustees Rowan Williams comments: 'A goal of growth simply as an indefinite expansion of purchasing power is either vacuous or malign – malign to the extent that it inevitably implies the diminution of the capacity of others in a world of limited resources.'<sup>33</sup>

### 3. Stepping back to reflect

In the light of the practical experience of our partners in their work with some of the poorest communities of the global South and the questions then raised about the dominant economic thinking which underpins our international relations, we need to ask not 'is economic growth the right goal?' but rather, 'What enables a truly human life?'

A theology that gives human experience a particular kind of authority will take seriously those who 'cry out', and who challenge 'what prevails' in the world as it is. It will not necessarily agree with all that is said, or all the conclusions and challenges that might be drawn from it, but it is compelled to listen and to hear. Only then will we be able to pose the question: 'What economic practices might best serve that purpose?'

Our responsibility to discern what makes a really human life is not only to ourselves, but to the whole community of humankind. We must consider how we access and share the resources we need for life in order to meet this responsibility. Economic transactions and relationships merit consideration here as they often affect people who are not directly involved in the immediate interaction and have no power in the decision making that sets the prices or the terms of the engagement, but see the results in their lives when they lose land or employment, when they must decide to take low-paid jobs for a livelihood or move to a city or further afield for work.

We have also seen that economic practices impact the Earth through the climate change they cause or mitigate. We need to frame our thinking about economics in a way that takes account of these other contexts to understand the part it plays in the wider 'economy of life'.

As recognised earlier by Douglas Meeks, 'economics' has been understood much more widely in the past. The word has its roots in Greek, *oikos* and *nomos*, meaning the 'law of the house' or 'housekeeping', relating it to running the household of the *whole* human family. This is not to say we should run our national and international economies using domestic models, but it broadens and humanises the purpose that financial economics should serve.

To view economics as simply what we do with our money and finance is to neglect important concerns about how

we sustain the life of all people on Earth. We need to leave no one behind, to moderate the inequalities between individuals and communities, so that the 'household' can go on to support good life for generations to come. The discipline that we have come to call 'economics' has become separated from this wider concern about the real purpose of life and how from the conversation about how it might be of service here.

### **What does a truly human life look like?**

The mystery and purpose of human life is frequently described as 'human flourishing' and, particularly, the flourishing of the whole community *together*. From a Christian perspective, a human life, well lived, is a life that reaches out in love towards others, echoing the loving purpose which God has in creation. In the gospel of John (10:10) we hear Jesus saying: 'I am come that they may have life and have it abundantly.' Human life is intended to be experienced as a gift and a joy, within loving relationships shaped by justice, so that it nourishes virtues of generosity and kindness.

A good human life might be one in which there is 'enough', but not in a minimal sense. A life without basic goods, shelter, freedom and peace would certainly be an impoverished life, but the traditions of the Christian faith and others do not measure life in the possession of material goods alone, nor by GDP, nor even by pleasure and happiness, but by the sharing of love in community.

In his position as Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams wrote:

'What makes humanity human is completely independent of anyone's judgement of failure or success, profit or loss. It is sheer gift – sheer love, in Christian terms. And if the universe itself is founded on this, there will be no sustainable human society for long if this goes unrecognised.'<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, there has been a renewed understanding, in the Christian community and more widely, that the purpose and meaning of human life should not be understood separately from our place within the 'community of creation'. A good human life does not exploit creation for its own ends, but contributes to the wellbeing of the whole community; not only people, but creatures and our planet too. Our 'growth' and flourishing

as humankind can never be at the expense of creation, but as part of its sustainable life.<sup>35</sup>

If love is the purpose of human life, mending what is broken and transforming the world for the good of all, it could perhaps be argued that economic growth is one way of achieving this purpose, that it could be a *means* to this good end. But many voices warn of the dangers of forgetting that the truly good life may too easily be displaced by a life that can be counted in goods or wealth.

The current Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, argues that we must never lose sight of these wider purposes of human life, or ignore the theological questions about the purpose of life, which lie behind what we sometimes express as economic questions. He writes:

‘This is the fundamental sin of our economic rescue missions. We have convinced ourselves that economic problems can be solved with economic solutions alone.’<sup>36</sup>

And this is emphasised by Timothy Gorringer, Emeritus Professor of Theology at Exeter University, who argues that concentrating on economic growth as a goal in itself misses the real ‘point’. He contends forcefully that ‘an unconditional belief in the generation of wealth as the answer to all our problems ‘is actually a form of idolatry’.<sup>37</sup>

People should never be reduced to instruments of an economic system nor to what might tempt them most readily; the restless acquisition of more, or the desire to have ‘more than’ someone else. Life should never be reduced to economic purposes, just as human flourishing cannot be measured only, or even fully, by economic measures. Not all of life, neither its pleasures nor its responsibilities, is subject to ‘the market’. We do need growth in terms of *life* (more kindness, more maturity, more skill, more ‘fruitfulness’ in virtue), but not only economic growth. What human communities need, and what human life demands, is the kind of growth that deepens the human capacity to service human flourishing within communities, within creation, for the good of all, for the common good.

Economic growth is, of course, simpler to measure than the fullness of human life, and it can often appear beguiling and promising as a goal; many of us take for granted that it is a good thing. But unless it is

contemplated within the context of a much broader landscape, we can be blind to its pitfalls.

### **Economics in our Christian tradition**

It is sometimes surprising to learn that more of the Bible than is commonly recognised is profoundly related to questions of economic life, to questions about how we are to create, use and share resources with, and for, one another. Biblical traditions are pervaded by a sense of gratitude for what is generously provided, and there is a presumption that the world, as God intended it, is filled with abundance, joy and delight. Human beings are created to 'be fruitful and multiply' (Genesis 1:28) beyond sexual reproduction, and creativity is, from a biblical perspective, at the core of being a human being.

We are given the task of working the Earth, 'to till it and keep it' (Genesis 2:15), not as a punishment, but as a privilege, to participate in the fruitfulness of earth and in the stewarding of Earth's resources so that they can be sustained for the good of all. The Bible does not present us with an austere creation. Ours is a world created to 'flourish' in a growth that is natural, God-given and a blessing. Jesus reminds his disciples of God's care for every small creature and his provision for all and not just for some: "Consider the lilies of the field." (Matthew 6:28)

There are also many stories and texts within the scriptures that warn of the dangers of times during which economic resources increase for some, while being taken from others. The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) places the pain of inequality starkly before us, but also its profound and primary scandal, in the face of which we should expect both judgement and change. Warning of the dangers of acquisitiveness and greed is central to The Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21) where a man hoards his possessions only to find that his life is demanded of him and his wealth is of no consequence.

And new understandings rooted in our modern context are constantly offered. Communities in the poorer parts of the world have often had critical interpretation to offer of texts that we, in richer nations, have believed we understood perfectly. The Parable of the Talents seems to illustrate for us the wastefulness of not using what God has given us in his service, but exploited people reading,

in the description of the ruler, that he is a harsh and unjust man, have been reluctant to identify him with our benevolent and gracious God. They have looked at the sums of money involved and their multiplication as evidence that speculation on an enormous, perhaps even, unjust scale is going on in the efforts of the first two servants to multiply their assets. The third then, becomes a sort of anti-hero as one who resists, not just the personal demand upon him of his master, but participation in an unjust system (Matthew 25:14-30).

Joseph's service to Pharaoh in Egypt building up reserves in the good harvest years to fall back on in the time of famine is also critiqued as a process of accumulation and dispossession as the narrative tells of how people sold their land, their animals and eventually their children and themselves to access the food they needed. The contrast with the system in Egypt could not be clearer when, in the years of wandering in the wilderness, the freed Hebrew slaves are fed by God with manna, occurring frequently enough to be sustaining, but resistant to accumulation and storage. And once in the Promised Land, the Code of Law adopted as part of the Covenant prescribed a Sabbath rest from production and acquisition, for people and for their environment; a restitution of property lost, restoration of the capacity to earn livelihood, and an open-handed approach to those who were vulnerable to impoverishment – the orphaned, the widowed, the stranger.

In the stories of the early church in the New Testament, there is also a strong theme of 'holding lightly' to possessions, of letting go or sharing resources for the good of all, and of trusting that there will be enough without restlessly acquiring. And, perhaps most significantly, the instituting narrative of the shared meal of Christian disciples, the Lord's Supper, is framed, in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, within an exhortation not to let economic inequality shape Christian practice. Rich and poor are to eat together, to share the same food, and to wait for one another, in the name of Christ (1 Corinthians 11).

In the traditions of the church, over centuries, there have been voices that have called on Christians not to forget these key witnesses, to trust in the abundance and generosity of God in creation and to live 'in common',

with enough for each, and proper limits set for what might be acquired by any one person.

Oscar Romero, the Archbishop of El Salvador, who, in 1980, was murdered while standing at the altar, urged his people:

‘Aspire not to have more, but to *be* more.’

Concurrently, within the growing corpus of Catholic Social Teaching, there has been a strong voice calling for a shared economic life that gives everyone, absolutely everyone, the chance to lead a full and flourishing life. In the recent papal encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis calls again for us to remember the imperative of the ‘preferential option for the poorest’, as an essential way for us to attain the common good.<sup>38</sup>

It would be naïve to think that we could simply take such stories, traditions and testimonies and readily construct from them an economic system for our world today. But it would be equally foolish to ignore the wisdom to which they testify. They invite us to reconsider the world in which we now live, to which some have become happily accustomed, and within which others are suffering deeply. They reveal to us something of the human tragedy from which we may all suffer, the tragedy of desire unrestrained, and of people ignorant or oblivious to the consequences. They help us to imagine a different kind of world, in which life is shared in joy and in common, for the good of all.

## 4. What kind of economics can support the good life of the whole household of humankind?

How do these empirical analyses, theological reflections and personal testimonies aid our understanding of economic growth and its power to overcome poverty and what questions do they raise for us?

The hallmarks of a good economic system were defined by Archbishop Justin Welby in his speech to the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG)<sup>99</sup> on inclusive growth, as creativity, gratuity, solidarity and subsidiarity, using language echoing that of Catholic Social Teaching.

Gratuity, he defines as the generosity that does not seek always to make the highest-possible return in every circumstance, but which recognises that there are values more fundamental than profit.

Solidarity and subsidiarity are the means by which the risks of creativity are 'managed', so that no one is left out or left behind and everyone, at the lowest 'level' possible, has a role to play.

If this is our objective and these are the elements we look for in an economic system that works for all, we have three fundamental questions to face.

As one possible approach, should we seek to modify how we encourage and measure economic growth so that it can be more effective in ending poverty and inequality? If this is not enough to address the challenge that economic growth places on the environment, is the possibility of 'decoupling' growth from resource consumption a promising line of development? More radically, in the presence of the inequality we see and the persistence of life-denying poverty, should we suggest that the time has come to abandon the goal of endless growth and increasing consumption – at least for those who are already prosperous by global standards and seek to be more just and efficient at sharing existing resources and wealth.

### Modifying what exists

An essential fact about economic growth is that it does not occur in a vacuum, but is the product of transactions and investments great and small. One approach to ensuring that gains from economic growth are more

equally shared is by finding ways to ensure that those transactions empower and include more individuals and communities across the global South.

Christian Aid's inclusive market development work, which works alongside the private sector to help people out of poverty, recognises this. Our aim is to impact poverty through inclusive business practice and the creation of enterprising local markets. These projects, which often would not have happened left to market forces alone, contribute to economic growth, though it is not their primary aim.

An example from Bangladesh illustrates how our support can play a significant role in providing resources for businesses to develop using the products and skills of a community in a way that enhances participation and encourages co-operation, especially when mainstream finance is not available.

Bagerhat is an area in a particularly disaster-prone part of Bangladesh where livelihood options are shrinking. Cattle rearing is one of the traditional forms of livelihood, producing milk for consumption and a very small amount for sale locally. Christian Aid's partner organisation, INCIDIN identified that there was potential here for improved income generation and better nutrition. However, although current national production of milk only meets one-fifth of consumer demand, Government finance is not available for dairy producers and private loans come with interest rates of 25%. A new commercial approach was needed.

INCIDIN first brought the producers together and formed Common Interest Groups (CIGs) through which increased production could be achieved and issues of quality addressed efficiently and co-operatively.

New cattle breeds were introduced, better fodder promoted, veterinary skills disseminated and payment linked to the fat content of the milk to encourage producers to pay attention to quality. Quality improvement in the milk increased the sale price by 40%.

INCIDIN supported the farmers to buy motorised vehicles for milk transport and invested in a chilling plant to enable better hygiene standards and the possibility to sell in bulk to national dairy companies such as Milk Vita. As confidence in the product grew, Milk Vita also

invested in another chilling plant in a neighbouring district.

The CIGs have been able to diversify into the production of ghee and curd and have created a new company called Udaypur Dairy Products which involves some of the poorest women in the membership.

Member Bulu Baroi says: 'Conditions are quite different now compared to past years. Now, not only am I capable of facing economic challenges which fall on our family, but I spend additional amounts earned on nutritious food, books and clothes for the children. I also have been able to save a significant amount of money for future predicaments and buy assets for our house.'

Working within Udaypur Dairy Products has increased the average income of the women by 25%. This product diversification and the achievement of the first sales to the capital, Dhaka, has increased turnover (nine-fold over an 18-month period) for all parts of the enterprise. But without the social investment and commitment to co-operative working of INCIDIN, the private sector alone would not have generated this growth in prosperity and accountable enterprise.

Christian Aid believes that attention to the practice and values of enterprise is not a matter only for poorest of us. The present orthodoxy often seems to imply that those who own and consume a lot have already fulfilled a kind of responsibility (to 'promote growth') by being economically successful – particularly if that success enables them to give away or share parts of their wealth with those in greater material need. But it may be that there are other ways, beyond traditional philanthropy, in which we can re-envisage the responsibilities of those who benefit from growth, towards those without enough. There is a need to re-imagine the roles of individuals, and also our collective obligations to shape and organise our economic systems, so that 'flourishing life' becomes more possible for all.

Recently we have paralleled our engagement with the private sector in the global South with the creation of the Salt Business Network in the UK.

The network offers support to Christian business leaders in their commitment to eradicating poverty within their own practice and through their capacity to influence others, and as they link those actions with financial

support for entrepreneurs and small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) in the global South. The network begins from the premise that the world is more connected than it has ever been and that means that every UK business, big or small, has the power to transform lives, both near and far, using the parameters outlined by Archbishop Justin Welby: creativity, gratuity, subsidiarity and solidarity.

In 2016, the network focused on business and human rights with a particular exploration of the ramifications of modern day slavery. A workshop held on the topic gave members space and time to identify real, tangible actions they could take to improve their business practice and influence others.

Modern day slavery is one of the most-discussed human rights issues of our time. An estimated 21 million people are living in forced labour conditions, of which 14.2 million are in the private sector.

Members took on pledges to assess the risk of this being part of their relations with sub-contractors, to raise awareness of the issue with their own staff, reviewing procurement processes and purchases. The Salt Network shares best practice but can also assist in finding pro bono legal support to draft supplier statements.

These are small initiatives, but they are looking to create seeds of alternative practice within the system we already have; the bigger challenge is to ask whether continued economic growth as currently understood is desirable or even possible within the environmental boundaries we have identified.

There are many who recognise that economic growth has limitations as a way of delivering poverty reduction including some within major institutional bodies such as the IMF. A number of refinements or qualifications have been promoted with the purpose of furthering growth's usefulness for reducing poverty. These variations have been called 'inclusive growth', 'sustainable growth' or 'equitable growth'. However, they all include the word 'growth' and the headline economic growth figure remains the most recognised benchmark for success. At a global level, the Sustainable Development Goals are premised on achieving development through a framework that seeks to mitigate the negative impacts of existing economic models rather than challenging them

directly. We see examples of attempts to ensure that countries seek inclusive and sustainable practices, but without challenging the dominant orthodoxy of the economic model. Can this work or are the challenges too great?

### Green growth and decoupling

There are those who argue that we can have both economic growth *and* a low carbon future, that building a green economy will actually create jobs, and at a much higher rate than simply maintaining the present fossil fuel-based model. Could it be that instead of a 'trade off' between a greener future and economic growth, we could actually have both?<sup>40</sup>

The 'green growth' scenario in which economic growth continues, but in a way that respects the planetary boundaries (described in section 2), depends on major absolute and not just relative 'decoupling' of our GDP from its environmental consequences. In recent years, evidence has been offered to show that relative decoupling is already happening. Some nations do seem to have reduced their 'material footprint' by more efficient production processes using less raw material and producing less waste. They have used fossil fuel energy more efficiently and are increasingly turning to more benevolent renewables. There has also been greater use of recycled waste in production cycles rather than relying on new extraction; think recycled paper and board, waste plastic getting a new life as clothing. The digital explosion in products and services has also generated a 'weightless' economy which is light on material use, while contributing to growing GDP. This is only 'relative' decoupling, however, because overall production and consumption continues to grow and the material footprint as measured does not take account of the fact that a great deal of what is consumed in richer nations is made elsewhere where it becomes part of another nation's footprint. Overall, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions continue to grow.

It is unlikely that as long as economies are still intent on maximising economic growth, relative decoupling alone will have enough of an impact because so many of us live in societies that have already exceeded the boundaries of sustainable resource use and disposal. What is needed, according to this train of thought is for the most profligate nations on our planet to engage in 'absolute decoupling', a real and not a proportionate

reduction of resource consumption and corresponding carbon emissions. As Tim Jackson illustrates in *Prosperity Without Growth*, this is asking much more of our technology than has been achieved so far in human history. There is also no guarantee that 'green' growth will be 'just' growth, reducing inequality.

Is the 'green growth' scenario, then, just a comforting argument to avoid the challenge that climate change constitutes to lifestyles that are predicated on acquiring 'more'? Are we really just looking to find a 'green way' of continuing as we are? Or does the size of the challenge require a much more profound rethinking of what has become a bedrock of prevailing economic models? Is the logic of economic growth linked inextricably to a way of thinking, longing and living that will inevitably lead to the destruction of the Earth and to the diminishment of the real quality of the life of humankind?

The acknowledged difficulty of achieving absolute decoupling within the timescale needed to avoid calamitous climate change drives us to look for another option and is particularly pertinent for those of us living in the wealthier communities in richer nations. Should we be really looking to cap our consumption and change our expectations of increasing material prosperity? Can we continue to expect infinite growth within our developed economies? Should we instead ask what is sufficient for a decent life and work back from there – rather than simply encouraging all parts of the economy to grow? How would the world look if we made that question our starting point?

### **Restraint and just sharing**

There is a need to recognise that the wellbeing of all demands different policies and understandings from different nations and from different sectors within society. While some look to grow materially, albeit in a sustainable and just way, others, including most of us in the richer global North, need to examine our assumptions about the pursuit of economic growth and our desire to consume more both for our own future and that of the planet. We are looking at a model of convergence and contraction, which might demand that we who already have much actually retrench to create space for others to experience living and not just surviving

For some, this will be a hugely radical and challenging suggestion. However, we may come to consider it more positively if we examine our assumptions about what economic growth actually does for us. Research seems to show that beyond a certain income level, happiness does not increase and that in nations with higher income, inequality of economic growth is associated with lower levels of happiness. People in Costa Rica on modest incomes are happier than people in the UK.<sup>41</sup>

June 2017 also saw the publication by Gallup of a poll of 150,000 people over 142 countries generating the *Global Emotions Report*, which seeks to measure positive and negative daily experiences. Surprisingly, Paraguay tops the list, despite its relatively low position in global GDP rankings. The UK is rated 38th alongside Germany and Mali, but the research revealed that in the two years to 2016, despite GDP growing by 2%, there was a 15% drop in the numbers of people in the UK rating their lives as 'thriving.'

"If that had been (a drop) in GDP, it would have been front page news", said Jon Clifton, managing partner at Gallup in Washington.<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps economic growth can never be wholly good in any case if it depends on exploiting human weakness and covetousness, or if it sets human beings one against the other. Robert and Edward Skidelsky, a political economist and philosopher respectively, for example, have shown astonishing insight in recognising that there is something intrinsically dangerous about economic growth as a goal, because it may erode an important source of human purpose and contentedness. They argue, for example, that 'capitalism...has given us wealth beyond measure, but has taken away the chief benefit of wealth; the consciousness of having enough.'<sup>43</sup>

Pope Francis also highlights the dangerous implications of building a whole culture, of making humanity depend, on the imperative to consume.

He writes: 'The emptier a person's heart is, the more he or she needs things to buy, own and consume. It becomes almost impossible to accept the limits imposed by reality. In this horizon, a genuine sense of the common good also disappears.'<sup>44</sup>

It is striking that such a significant voice as the Pope's is joined by that of economists in recognising that the drive

for growth is not only questionable on utilitarian grounds, but also seems to undermine core humane virtues. The narratives and traditions of faith do offer an alternative voice and approach to economic life. Biblical and later traditions suggest ways in which an 'economy of life' that is truly for the good of all must resolutely resist any way of being that feeds or colludes with the kind of greed that can never be satisfied, or with the desire to have 'more than' others. There are ways in which, even in a prosperous society, many would urge us towards 'replacing the mania of more with the wisdom of enough'.<sup>45</sup>

Economic growth could only be truly 'good' if it were about deepening our capacity to serve common life and the whole purpose of life. The traditions of faith can never support an 'economy of life' based on unrestrained desire and an acquisitiveness which fails to trust in the generosity and the gratuity of God's abundance.

It is true, however, that the case for a cap on growth might be difficult to make convincingly in our society, which is often sceptical of churches and faith-based messages and largely unaware of how the 'growth' metaphor has shaped public thinking, especially as inequality increases here in the UK.

### **Imagining alternatives**

It is not yet clear for us which, if any, of these three pathways will enable us to build an economy that will truly support 'the whole household of humankind'. What is clear however is that doing so will require us to draw on many alternative ideas and models for economic progress without the damaging social and environmental consequences. There is no disputing that this is an immensely challenging task. However, many ideas for ways of 'doing economics differently' have been, or are in the process of being, developed and can be growing points from which we might build.

Some of these alternatives may be able to influence economies dominated by growth, while others may not be able to co-exist at all, but may suggest real alternatives. Here we highlight just a few:

There are many examples of indigenous economies, particularly from Latin America, where attitudes to ownership and the right to consumption are shaped communally and around values that respect the integrity

of the natural world, as well as serving the needs of people. The government of Ecuador, for example, is building the Quechua concept of *Sumak Kawsay* (good living) into its approach to development. These understandings often contain a spiritual dimension with a measure of sacredness being extended to resources of earth, water and air. In this way they parallel the Christian inspiration for an economics based on inspiration from the Bible, such as economies of Jubilee or Sabbath in which rest and restoration are built into the systems of work, economic exchange and moneymaking.

We are also seeing increasing interest in conceptual frameworks that describe how we could structure our economy differently. A steady state economy, for example, describes an economy with a stable or mildly fluctuating size. The term could be used to describe either a global, national, regional or local economy. Crucially, a steady state economy has to operate within the Earth's ecological limits, or 'planetary boundaries'. This means that while the economy can develop qualitatively, it cannot continue to grow quantitatively in the conventional sense of GDP. Proponents of the steady state economy point out that it is not the same as an economy that is designed to but simply fails to grow. It would require a complete transformation of how we judge economic success and how we structure and regulate our economic system – for example, putting strict restrictions on the use of natural resources; reforming our money and banking system; developing different kind of business structures and – controversially – stabilising population.

The steady state economy is not a new idea; it was first conceptualised by classical economists including Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill and later developed in the 1970s by former World Bank economist Herman Daly.<sup>46</sup> However, in recent years, there seems to have been somewhat of a revival in interest in the concept of a steady state economy in both academic, ecological – and (as shown by the fact that the UK parliament now has an APPG on Limits to Growth),<sup>47</sup> in political circles within the UK, albeit to a lesser extent.<sup>48</sup>

Similarly, there are growing discussions around the concept of a circular economy, which rather than treating natural resources as disposable, seeks to minimise waste by keeping natural resources in use for as long as

possible. Products would be designed to be long lasting, reusable and repairable, with the materials recovered and recycled when they finally reach the end of their life cycle.

There are some elements within existing economies that already bear the hallmarks of the circular economy and trends in production and use of products and services imply that the circular economy is growing as a proportion of the total economy. In recent years, the European Union (EU) has, for example, adopted a 'circular economy package' setting mandatory national targets for waste recycling and introducing measures designed to better monitor waste, reduce food waste and product obsolescence. There has been much debate about whether the specific package adopted by the EU is sufficiently strong or ambitious.<sup>49</sup>

Nevertheless, the circular economy model remains both an ambitious as well as practical pathway not just to reduce the impact that our economy has on the planet, but to redesign it in a way that could also be restorative.<sup>50</sup> Could such an approach work not only in economies that have large and diverse pre-existing products and production techniques, but also in less diverse, poorer economies? The 'Doughnut Model' as proposed by Kate Raworth is a good approach to ensure that, as well as existing within planetary boundaries, such an economy would be just in paying attention to the wellbeing of all.

## Conclusions and recommendations

At Christian Aid, we see the economy as a tool which should make possible a much wider human life. Each of us, individually and collectively, should be able to flourish within, and through, God's creation. We do not believe that the objective of our economy should be growth for growth's sake. Rather it should be focused on what we need to ensure human flourishing, the fulfilment of a decent life, of human rights and potential for all in a way that respects and values all of creation and our responsibility to future generations.

This wider goal of human flourishing has to be a primary measure of the success of economic systems.

Fundamentally, any economic system needs to be judged by its potential for sustaining life, both of people and planet, in ways that bring life and not death to the common good and to our 'common home' on Earth. Any economic system that fails to address poverty and inequality must be rigorously challenged.

Recalling the words of Douglas Meeks that economics is the study of the 'life of the whole household', our theological reflection has shown us that what makes for life in fullness for all needs to be at the heart of the shaping of our global economy. Our current economic system, which pushes us to pursue economic growth – almost at any cost – has failed us developmentally; it fails to offer a sustainable future for human life on a finite planet and it fails to reflect the values we hold as a faith-based community.

Given the Sustainable Development Goals pledge made by the international community to 'leave no one behind' it is perhaps more vital than ever that we question the assumptions behind the way we currently structure our economy and grapple with the challenge of transforming our economic system so that it works for all.

Of course, much of Christian Aid's work in the global South is located within the current growth-based system. In the face of that reality, we strive with others to find ways to make growth more inclusive and to support communities who are under threat. We have seen in this document examples of how we support partners in identifying and mobilising the resources of people and

their assets to create more co-operative and accountable commercial enterprises that increase income and choice.

In the UK, as individuals and as part of worshipping communities, many of us also make choices in how we spend, invest or give our money. These actions can play a significant role in moderating the excesses of the current system and positively encourage initiatives where the values of sustainability and equality are on a par with the motive to make profit.

Yet, it's vital that we also seek and articulate a more radical vision for a transformed economic system, holding this as a basis for work challenging the economic systems, structures and rules that keep people poor.

At Christian Aid we find radical alternatives for economic life in the biblical narratives of Jubilee and Sabbath. These narratives offer us the assurance of abundance when the current economic discourse is all about scarcity. They show us the importance of restorative action for those whom the system impoverishes and the need to moderate the demands we make on ourselves and our environment in the relentless pursuit of production.

We need new economic models and we are encouraged by the increasing public conversation and conceptualisation about what these might look like. What seems to be at the heart of this discourse is a commitment to restraint, to the recovery of the concept of 'enough' and an awareness that growing inequality is unjust and destabilising both to people and planet.

It should be stressed that this should not be seen as condemning the global South to a 'growthless' future. On the contrary, we are committed to a more inclusive and ecologically sensitive economic development that enables equality and opportunity to grow: opportunity to access healthcare and education, opportunity to create prosperity through secure sources of income, decent work and enterprise, opportunity to make plans and choices and participate in community and civil society. Economic development that only grows GDP and fails to enable all God's children to flourish is no growth at all.

Creating the space for people currently living in poverty to enjoy a truly 'good' human life requires those of us who have more than enough to ask some potentially uncomfortable questions about our own role in the global

economy. Wherever we live, those who are rich need to recognise that an unquenchable thirst for more has consequences; both for poor people and for the planet. Each of us needs to ask ourselves actively whether we already have 'enough'.

The church has a key role to play in creating a space where these difficult questions can be raised honestly, in discerning and offering hope-filled alternatives and by bearing witness to the fullness of human life that is more than financially defined. The current system is all pervasive, yet alternatives do exist. We must find the means to challenge and change what may look like a dominating system and to support the emergence of as many local variants of the 'economy' as are necessary for the good of all. This will require works of mitigation as much as works of mercy, but also the kind of radical imagination, shaped by faith, that can create the world anew.

Our scripture and the life of Jesus constantly offer us models of life that seem almost impossible to achieve. Yet our faith as Christian people inspires and exhorts us to take them seriously, to take the first faltering steps towards them, because we believe that life has been promised abundantly. And promised to all, with no one left behind.

### **Final reflection**

There is an intriguing story about Jesus in which he refers to the marketplace. It is a passage that reminds us that attention to Jesus' story and witness will offer no easy answers to our questions and our cries, but will always invite us to keep thinking, and to keep listening to those around us who experience the world very differently from us. We should remember that things look different in this world depending on where you stand, or where you sit, where you dance or where you weep, whether you feast or whether you fast.

St Luke writes that Jesus said: 'To what, then, will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another: "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep. For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man

has come eating and drinking, and you say ‘look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’”

Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children.’(Luke 7:31-35)

We are, all of us in this world, those who are ‘sitting in a market place’. Some of us have plenty to eat and drink. Some of us are hungry, and there is weeping among those who live in poverty. Perhaps this text suggests that if we hope to find in Jesus a straightforward denunciation of the evils of any economic system, we shall be disappointed. We will not find a ‘read-off-the-page’ solution to our economic challenges either. But we will find *him*, with us and with all in the market place, inviting us to reflect with knowing wisdom on our own self-deceptions and blind spots and to learn from the wisdom and experience of others. And, even among our questioning and confusion, we may be inspired by Jesus’ apparent and utter confidence that what is right will be vindicated by wisdom, (even) in the market place.

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