

1 Introduction

Climate change is one of the most pressing issues of our time. The science is clear: human activities

also exacerbate the distributional implications of decarbonisation that will arise regardless (see for example Markkanen and Anger-Kraavi, 2019).

Yet, the sharp contrast in the theoretical positions of scholars is a way to conceptualise the magnitude of the challenge. Striving for growth is an imperative, but no one can be certain that such a path is possible. What is certain is that it happen without some prerequisites. It will require massive investment in existing technologies and in the advancement of new breakthrough technologies, including for negative emissions, will also require changed behaviour from everyone, and our economies will have to be adapted to deal with the consequences of climate change that can no longer be avoided.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the numbers that make clear how significant the problem of decoupling is. Section 3 reviews the literature on degrowth and explains why degrowth proposals are not viable. Section 4 summarises the literature on green growth. Section 5 discusses essential steps for the realisation of green growth. Section 6 concludes with recommendations for policymakers.

2 The challenge of decoupling: the hard numbers

Pursuing deep decarbonisation will be challenging. Annual global emissions keep rising and show no sign of peaking. In 2019, they were 62 percent higher than in 1990, the year of the first Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, and 40 percent higher than in 2015 when the Paris Agreement was signed (Friedlingstein et al., 2020). Even unprecedented circumstances such as the massive restrictions introduced to contain COVID-19 led to a 6 percent drop in emissions in 2020, from which a quick rebound to pre-pandemic levels followed (IEA, 2021a).

Historically, economic growth ... by which we mean real GDP growth ... has long been associated with increasing GHG emissions. Empirically, the causal chain is straightforward: higher levels of economic activity tend to go hand in hand with additional energy use and consumption of natural resources. Fossil fuels still account for 80 percent of the global energy supply (IEA, 2020), so energy consumption is closely related to GHG emissions and hence to climate forcing. Expansion of industrial processes, livestock rearing and other agricultural emissions, and deforestation reduces carbon sinks.

A far-reaching transformation of the global economy is needed to reduce emissions. As 73 percent of global GHG emissions come from energy production (mostly as CO₂), cost reductions will need to happen in that area. An interesting way to look at this is formulating the problem as a simple identity, as done by Kaya and Yokoyama (1991) on the basis of Holdren and Ehrlich (1974):

$$E = P \cdot Y \cdot I \cdot E$$

E = Total GHG emissions
 P = World population
 Y = World GDP
 I = Energy intensity of GDP
 E = GHG emissions intensity of energy production

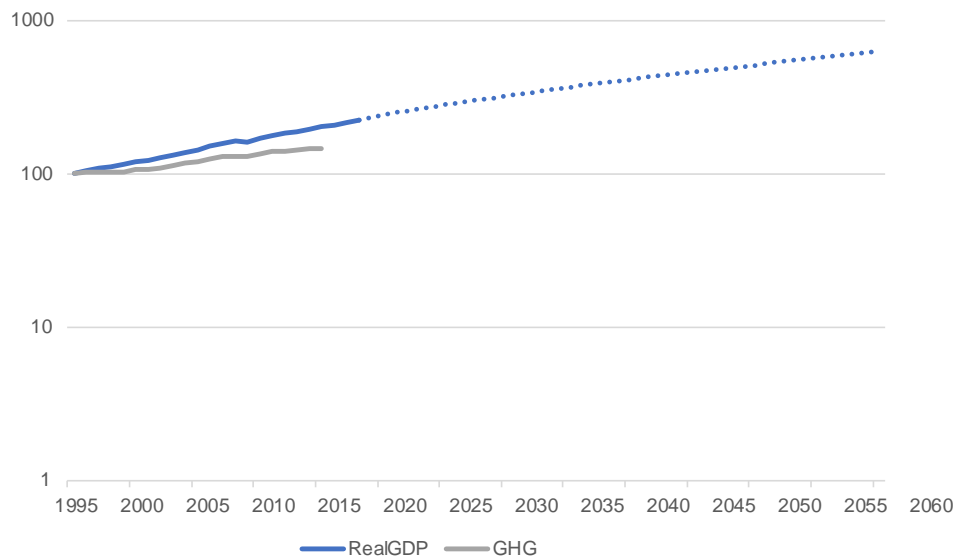
This identity permits GHG emissions (from energy) to be decomposed into a product of the world's population size, GDP, the energy intensity of GDP, and the GHG emissions intensity of energy production.

Limiting population growth is one way to limit GHG emissions, but the debate on this topic goes far beyond the scope of our paper. We instead consider population growth as a given, and base our analysis on OECD demographic forecasts. Emissions would therefore need to happen by lowering some or all of the other factors. Lowering the second factor (GDP) implies compromising economic and social welfare, the question is whether the third and fourth factors (energy and emissions intensity) can decline at a sufficient rate to allow the first and the second to remain on their current paths. This would imply absolute decoupling of economic growth and GHG emissions (ie a situation in which GHG emissions go down while GDP continues to grow, see Figure 1) through a 'dematerialisation' of the economy (eg through a shift from manufacturing to services, altered consumption behaviour, more efficient technology and the decarbonisation of the energy sector).

² The remaining emissions arise from agriculture (11.2 percent), land use (7.2 percent), industrial processes (5.2 percent) and waste (3.2 percent) (<https://www.climatewatchdata.org/ghg-emissions>). While this paper focusses mostly on GHG emissions from energy, the difficult part of emissions reduction to sustainability in general may in fact be making the necessary changes in how we use natural resources and dress ourselves. More on this in section 5.

³ Energy production is what causes emissions, but the variable impacted by policy is energy demand. We assume that production is exogenous to the model. (Fridolf, IWA) 017853 Tw -22.215 -1.15 Tddefin (m)3.2 (i81.5 on (m

Figure 1: Global real GDP (2010 prices, PPP) and total GHG emissions

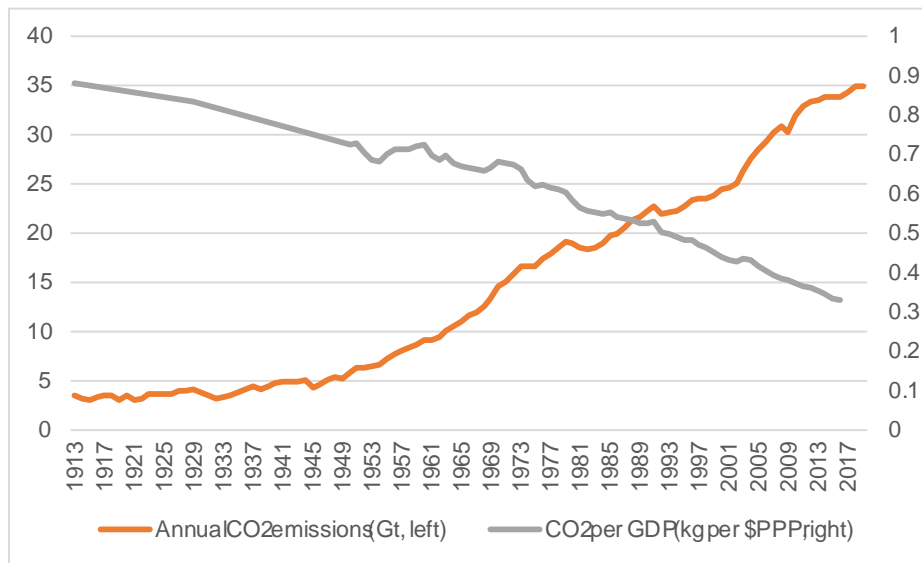


Source: Bruegel, based on OECD, Economic Outlook No. 108 baseline projection, accessed in July 2021 and on UNEP, World Environment Situation Report (<https://www.unep.org/download>), accessed in July 2021. Note: 1995 = 100. Logarithmic scale. Full lines are historical data, dashed lines are projections, dashes are a stylised representation of absolute decoupling.

Globally, there is no sign of absolute decoupling, but only of relative decoupling (ie a situation in which total GHG emissions grow less than proportionally to GDP). Explained in terms of the Kaya identity, while energy related GHG emissions per GDP are falling (the third and fourth factors combined), the fall is slower than the increase in real GDP (the first and second factors) so that overall emissions continue to rise. Figure 2 shows that in the last 100 years, annual emissions from energy production have risen tenfold, even though emissions per unit of GDP have been slashed by almost two thirds (1.8 percent per year on average since 1990). This is simply because the global economy has grown at a much faster pace (2 percent per year on average since 1990).

⁴ From here on we switch from showing total GHG emissions to data emissions for reasons of data availability and comparability to theoretical emission pathways. Since we focus on emission mitigation in the energy sector, this is not an oversimplification. Energy represented 91 percent of global GHG emissions from energy in 2018 (CH₄ 8.6 percent and CO₂ 0.8 percent), and the energy sector accounts for 93 percent of global GHG emissions (industry: 4.1 percent and LULUCF: 3.3 percent) (see <https://www.climatewatchdata.org/ghg-emissions>). LULUCF = land use, land-use change and forestry.

Figure 2: Global annual CO₂ emissions from burning of fossil fuels for energy production (in gigatonnes) and CO₂ emissions per unit of GDP (in kg per \$PPP)



Source: Our World in Data (OWID) Explorer (based on Global Project, BP; Maddison; UNWPP), accessed in July 2021; see <https://ourworldindata.org/co2-emissions>

Thus, progress on decoupling GDP growth from CO₂ emissions has been hindered, but the continued expansion of the global economy has proven to stop annual emissions from increasing, let alone to allow them to decrease, as is clear from Figure 2. A rough calculation (disregarding interactions between the factors in the Kaya identity) makes clear how far the world is still falling short:

- x Gross emissions of CO₂ in 2018 at around 35 billion Gt (Our World in Data, OWID; <https://ourworldindata.org/co2-emissions>). This needs to decrease to approximately 5 Gt in 2050 according to a technologically conservative emissions pathway⁵ (the only pathway in the IPCC (2018)), or by 86 percent.
- x The global population is projected to increase from 7.63 billion in 2018 to 9.77 billion people in 2050 (x1.28), and global real GDP (2010 prices) is projected to increase from \$19,896 to \$41,099 or by 107 percent (OECD).
- x CO₂ emissions per unit of GDP therefore have to decline around 95 percent or approximately 9 percent per year on average from 2019 until 2050. Between 1990 and 2016, the world only

⁵ Loosely based on the LED/P1 pathway of the IPCC (2018), which causes neither and storage technology (CCS) nor bioenergy with CCS (BECCS), technologies currently under development and that degrowth scholars deem unfit for climate change mitigation.

achieved an average so-called •decoupling rate• of 1.8 percent per year (based on OWID).
differently, the average speed of decoupling during the next three decades will have to be almost
five times greater. The later this acceleration happens, the greater it will have to be.

Decoupling trends are not even fast enough in developed economies. Since 1990 the European
Union's (EU) gross emissions have decreased by 25 percent (OWID), while real GDP grew by 62
percent (European Commission, 2020). Emissions in the United States started to decline
more recently. This suggests that decoupling is possible. But it is happening too slowly to
match the globally required decoupling

Such pessimistic views about our planet's capacity in economic growth are not new. They have been around in some form at least since the 18th century, notably in the Essay on Population by Thomas Malthus (1798). He postulated that famine and economic collapse were inevitable unless birth rates decreased, based on the belief that population growth is exponential and that of food production merely linear. This argument was repeated throughout the twentieth century in environmentally inspired works by, for example, Osborn (1948) and, most notably, by Paul Ehrlich (1968). Meadows (1972) predicted in The Limits to Growth (hereafter: LTG) that global population and economic activity would peak in the twenty-first century, and advocated an economic and demographic "plan" to avoid an uncontrolled collapse when humanity's need for resources finally exceeds the earth's capacity.

These authors all proved to be too pessimistic (so far) because they failed to predict the significant advances in agricultural yields, technological innovation, and declines in population growth rates. Advances in resource efficiency have often been driven by market forces, such as for oil in the 1970s, when scarcity drove up prices, creating incentives for innovation. However, technological progress is highly unpredictable, and since the atmosphere as a deposit of CO₂ is a rival but non-excludable good, purely market-driven innovation and substitution will not solve the problem of climate change (Easton, 2010).

Like LTG, modern degrowth advocates subscribe to the idea that humanity must achieve a lower economic steady state to avoid environmental catastrophe. The term "degrowth" was probably first used in the writings of French philosopher André Gorz in 1972, and in the work of economist Georgescu-Roegen (1971). Gorz wrote that economic activity in the long run is limited to a level supported by solar flows due to the laws of thermodynamics. The term was popularised in the 1990s and 2000s by Serge Latouche (for example, 2009) who criticised economic development as a goal. In the early 2000s "degrowth" was used as a slogan by social and environmental activists in France, Italy and Spain. Finally, it emerged as an international research area in 2008 at the first Degrowth Conference in Paris (Demaria et al, 2013a, 2013b), with many publications being produced, particularly in the first half of the 2010s, in the context of the global financial crisis and the sovereign debt crisis in Europe. Authors including

There is no exact definition of what •degrowth• means. Authors are not always clear on exactly what should •degrow•. There are at least five interpretations: degrowth of GDP, consumption, worktime, the economy's physical size, or •radical• degrowth which refers to a complete transformation of the economic system (van den Bergh, 2011). It is perhaps better to say that degrowth covers all these interpretations. Material and energy consumption and the economy's physical size need to degrow, out of a concern for resource depletion and climate change. Worktime degrowth is one tool to do so, GDP degrowth is an inevitable consequence (not a goal), and radical degrowth a necessary condition to make a post-growth world socially sustainable (Kallis, 2011).

In terms of GDP and GHG emissions, degrowth scholars do not see a credible scenario in which the

common proposal is to limit the supply of production factors, notably labour. Reductions in working hours are seen as a way to reduce emissions while increasing social welfare through more free time and achieving high levels of employment. The latter must also be supported by shifting employment towards labour-intensive sectors and innovation to increase resource productivity rather than labour productivity, using taxes and 'cap-and-share' schemes (Kallis, 2011; Kallis et al., 2018). Another element is to reduce aggregate investment by firms to net zero, which does not exclude that some (clean) sectors grow at the expense of other (dirty) sectors (Kallis et al., 2018).

Other ideas found in the literature are the re-localisation of economic activities to shorten the distance between consumers and producers, and encouragement of the economy (Paech, 2012), as well as new forms of (regional) monetary limitations to property rights (Kallis et al., 2012; van Griethuysen, 2012). Some advocate for zero interest rates to avoid the growth imperative created by having to pay back interest (Binswanger, 2013), caps on savings to reduce wealth inequality and doing away with the logic of accumulation by firms and owners of capital. The aim is to arrive at a steady state in which the whole economy is consumed, without end growth (Loehr, 2012).

Importantly, many of the proposals are considered by authors themselves to be incompatible with capitalism and unlikely to be implemented in liberal representative democracies. Kallis (2018) therefore argued that in the absence of democratic degrowth policies, involuntary economic stagnation caused by climate change might usher in an authoritarian version of capitalism, unless more democratic alternatives are put forward.

Finally, it should be noted that degrowth proponents devote relatively little attention to limiting population growth, which would theoretically offer another ... though contentious ... way to reconcile GDP per capita growth and emission reductions. Where it is discussed, most authors view it as undesirable, especially when voluntary, and point out that the large and growing populations of

4 Green growth

The calculations in section 2 illustrate the scale of the challenge. However, it is also important to note that the low decoupling rate up to now has occurred in a context in which there hasn't been a significant climate effort globally, and developing countries have put in place only modest policies. This pattern need not continue, and there are signs that it might not.

The EU has already managed to cut its territorial emissions. This is of course partly due to lower population and GDP growth than the global average. But data also shows that the decoupling

Figure 3: Levelised cost of energy (LCOE) from selected fossil fuels and renewable energy sources, in USD/MWh

Source: Lazard (2020).

Already in the earlier literature rejecting the pessimism, the central role of technology was highlighted. Stiglitz (1974) and Karnien and Schwartz (1978) did not yet address GHG emissions, but

Nations Sustainable Development Goals to varying degrees different Green (New) Deal proposals (eg European Commission; 2019; US House Representatives, 2019).

No single definition has been developed of what is meant by green growth. For example, the World Bank (2012), OECD (2011) and UNEP (2011) each define green objectives differently (Hickel and Kallis, 2020). Jacobs (2012) states that green GDP growth is understood as either: (1) higher growth than in a scenario without strong environmental policies, both in the short and long run (dubbed the 'strong' version of green growth), or (2) lower in the short and higher in the long run (the 'standard' version).

Whatever the exact interpretation of green growth, publications from international organisations or governments predict both environmental benefits in the form of avoided climate damages and economic benefits resulting from increased investment and innovation. This 'double dividend' forms the heart of the green-growth argument. The green-growth narrative rests on four pillars: (1) subsidies for innovation and investments in renewable energy efficiency to boost GDP; (2) carbon pricing to further stimulate efficiency gains and renewables to avoid rebound effects, combined with recycling of tax revenues to cut corporate taxes to boost employment; (3) assumptions about innovation and negative emission technologies to accelerate the decoupling process; and (4) compensation schemes for the poorest households, displaced workers and disadvantaged regions to make the transition socially feasible (see for example Table 2). Inclusion of such social elements puts current proposals beyond earlier incarnations of Green New Deals (Mastini et al, 2021). In its most extreme form, green growth is believed to come as a result of free markets and does not even require public provision other than carbon pricing (Gale (2019) refer to this as a 'capitalist' solution).

⁹ The SDGs indeed also include 'Decent Work and Economic Growth' as SDG8.

¹⁰ Adding to the confusion is lack of clarity about the baseline which growth is usually compared: is it a trajectory based on historical average growth rates or a no-action scenario that includes serious damage from climate change in the long run? This is not trivial, as in comparison to an economy wrecked by climate change, an economy that avoids global warming by growing more slowly, by shrinking could be on a higher growth path, but this is generally not a scenario considered as 'green growth'.

¹¹ The environmental benefits are sometimes negated by more short-term co-benefits, mostly through improved health; see Karlsson et al (2020) for an overview.

Table 2: Different green growth scenarios, showing targeted emission reductions, estimated GDP impact, key policies, and adversely affected groups (if no compensation)

	IMF (2020)	European Commission (2020b) ¹²	IEA (2021b)
Emission reductions	Reduce gross global emissions by 80% by 2050	Reduce net EU emissions by 55% by 2030	Reduce global net CO ₂ emissions to zero by 2050
GDP impact	Standard version: baseline +0.7% first 15 years, -1% in 2050, +13% in 2100	Standard version: baseline GDP -0.27% / +0.50% by 2030	Strong version: baseline GDP +4% in 2030
Key policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> x green investment push x carbon pricing x compensatory transfers supportive macro policies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> x green investment push x carbon pricing x tax recycling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> x green investment push x carbon pricing
Adversely affected groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> x Low-income households, due to electricity prices and job status x Fossil fuel exporters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> x Fossil fuel industry x Low-income households 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> x Fossil fuel exporters x Fossil fuel industry

Source: Bruegel.

Overall, however, the empirical evidence for a ~~double~~ **dividend** looks mixed. In fact, some of the reports by official institutions state that ~~the~~ **double dividend cannot be achieved** only if ~~specific~~ **specific** assumptions are made, while in many scenarios, strong climate ~~action~~ **action** at least in the short-term lower GDP growth.

¹² Includes JRC-GEM-E3, E3ME and E-QUEST model estimates.

5 Techno-optimism: important caveats

The numbers we have given show that the news to decouple GHG emissions and GDP growth much faster than currently. In the following, we set out the key actions necessary to achieve such a faster decoupling.¹³

5.1 Need for massive investment in deployment of existing green technologies

To decouple GHG emissions and GDP, a huge expansion in green investment and a big shift in investment are needed. For instance, IEA's (2021b) net-zero pathway estimates that global energy capital investments must increase from a current average of about \$200 billion (2019 prices) by 2030, after which they must stay at almost the same level until 2050. As a fraction of global GDP, this would be an increase from 2.5 percent today to 4.2 percent, followed by a gradual decline back to 2.5 percent. Encouragingly, most of the technologies to be invested in up to 2030 (for 85 percent of emission reductions; see IEA, 2021b) are already available. Beyond 2030, that will be much less the case: only 54 percent of emission reductions will be accomplished with current technologies. Most of the investment to 2050 (about 65 percent) would be directed to generating low-carbon electricity, upgrading the electricity system for distribution and storage and electrifying new sectors of the economy (CO₂/energy demand), smaller though still significant share (about 15 percent) would be spent on efficiency improvements (energy demand/real GDP).

Governments will have to foot part of the bill, especially large infrastructure projects or technologies still under development (IEA, 2021b). But the private sector will need to cover most of the investments. It is therefore important that governments use policy to create incentives and facilitate investments, for example through carbon pricing, financial regulations and supervisory practices, or cooperation with the private sector through public financial institutions such as the European Investment Bank. Clear and credible policy commitments also help by reducing the uncertainty that can keep firms from investing (Dechezleppre, 2021).

5.2 Need for breakthrough green technologies for decarbonisation

Most emission reduction scenarios that predict economic growth rely on varying degrees on the use of technologies that are not yet available. This is frequently used by degrowth proponents as an argument to question the feasibility of growth. The IEA net-zero pathway (2021b), for

¹³ Because of the nature of renewable energy, global supply chains, and the consequences of climate change, as well as the benefits to be had from cooperation in R&D, each of these points should be addressed with international cooperation.

instance, relies to a great extent on future innovation: 15 percent of the emissions reductions by 2030 and 46 percent of the reductions between 2030 and 2050 are to be achieved with technologies that are currently in a demonstration or prototype phase such as CCS, green hydrogen and advanced batteries.

The breakthroughs achieved in the current decade will be crucial. Unfortunately, none of the technologies needed beyond 2030 are currently on track to being deployed in time (IEA, 2021c), as the road from concept to commercialisation is typically long and winding. To accelerate the development of these innovative technologies, governments and the private sector both need to substantially increase their research and innovation spending. Fostering green innovation and bringing green technologies from the laboratory to the market requires government action, for example via pricing of emissions. Public-private partnerships, adequate risk-taking by public institutions and green industrial policy can help deliver breakthrough innovation (Tagliapietra and Veugelers, 2020). But, of course, there cannot be a guarantee that such breakthrough technologies will materialise in time.

5.3 Need to foster behavioural change

In theory, emissions from energy production could be sufficiently reduced the back of

Figure 4: Impact of behavioural change in the IEA net-zero roadmap, emission reductions and increases from now to 2050 (megatonnes of CO2)

Source: International Energy Agency (2021b).

Behavioural change can also reduce the cost of the transition. To appreciate this point, it is useful to compare the EU investment requirements to reach net zero by 2050 estimated by the European Commission under two different scenarios: one relying only on technology (1.5 TECH), and one relying on both technology and behavioural changes (1.5 LIFE). Between 2031 and 2050, the 1.5

We have not made much progress in decoupling GHG emissions from food production (1.0 percent per year since 1990, according to FAO data) (FAO, 2020). In fact, the technology “cow” has indeed barely changed over the last millennia. GHG emissions per kilo of meat from cattle have declined mere 0.4 percent per year on average since 1990. They account for 37 percent for all emissions from food production documented by the FAO (FAOSTAT, 2021). A change in diet and the way we use land for producing other goods might become necessary.

Bearing this in mind, it is important to consider the warnings of rebound effects. If policies to reduce emissions through investments in renewables and efficiency gains achieve positive income effects or too optimistic perceptions, a narrow focus on certain sectors could leave room for harmful effects from increased emissions elsewhere. This could offset at least part of the progress made in emission reductions from energy.

5.4 Need to develop and scale-up negative emission technologies

All IPCC emission pathways, including the ones we based our calculations in sections 2 and 3, consider net CO₂ emissions, with reductions from agriculture, land use, reforestation, afforestation, habitat- and soil management can be used to remove CO₂ from the atmosphere, provided that increased efforts are made in these areas. If gross emissions can remain small but positive in a net-zero situation.

Unlike the conservative pathway we used for most IPCC pathways (IPCC, 2018) also rely significantly on human-made negative emission technologies. They allow for greater remaining CO₂ emissions from activities that are hard to decarbonise when reaching climate neutrality by mid-century and beyond, as these are offset by carbon removal. This in turn means that the high required decoupling rate of around 9 percent becomes somewhat lower, which would make a difference in the feasibility of net-zero by mid-century.

This is controversial among climate scientists, however. Negative emission technologies are currently under development or in early small-scale implementation and are not on track to being ready in time (IEA, 2021c). Furthermore, many scientists are sceptical about the feasibility and viability of certain technologies and are even worried that they create numerous other serious environmental problems because of potentially high input requirements.

¹⁵ See FAOSTAT, Agricultural Indicators, <http://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data> accessed on 20 July 2021.

¹⁶ In the absence of a limit or prices on emissions, there can be rebound effects with the energy sector, for example when people start using more energy since it is becoming cheaper or greener. This means increases in energy demand/real GDP offset carbon CO₂/energy demand.

Governments should encourage the development of natural and technological solutions but should be keenly aware that negative emission technologies cannot be a substitute for actual, immediate emission abatement.

5.5 Need to adapt our economies to unavoidable climate change

Global efforts to reduce GHG emissions are aimed at limiting global warming to 1.5°C, thus minimising dangerous climate change. Unfortunately, global average temperatures already more than 1.0°C above pre-industrial levels (IPCC, 2018) climate change is

6 Conclusions

In order to avoid global warming in excess of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, global GHG emissions must be rapidly reduced. Doing so without losses in economic productivity will not be easy: so far, decoupling GHG emissions from GDP growth has been slow or absent. Justification for degrowth scholars to propose a radical overhaul of economic system. Yet this approach seems unrealistic. Asking for lower growth, let alone negative growth, would mean that large parts of the world could not develop, or only at the expense of even harsher degrowth in developed countries. Low income countries will obviously not follow this and the notion of redistributing income from rich to poor countries is also unrealistic.

The real question therefore becomes whether mitigation efforts can be accelerated. While global emissions have not declined, GHG emissions from developed economies such as the EU have, despite continued economic growth. The data shows that the speed of decoupling of emissions and growth has accelerated in the world. The effects of the carbon intensity of energy in many economies have contributed to a decline in the prices of viable energy technology, which has improved the economic case for rapid innovation worldwide. Belief that further innovation and investment will enable the world to successfully reach climate neutrality by 2050 without reducing welfare underlies the green-growth narrative.

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