

# “Economics for Future” from Different Perspectives—Critical Reflections on SDG 8 with a Special Focus on Economic Growth and Some Suggestions for Alternatives Pathways



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**Abstract** This chapter scrutinizes the UN’s commitment to economic growth as described in SDG 8 whilst providing a critique of its neoliberal understanding of development. It presents various alternatives for “economics for future” from post-growth economies whilst considering different scales and perspectives. The young are considered central to the implementation of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Selected findings from an empirical survey of young people’s views from Germany are therefore presented and discussed in relation to post-growth economies and sustainability. The findings suggest that, whilst the younger generation is interested in concepts of diverse economies, it has little knowledge about them. Some recommendations are provided for further research and for integrating these ideas into the subject of geography in secondary and higher education.

**Keywords** SDG 8 · Economic growth · (Post-)Neoliberalism · Post-growth economies · Sustainability · Young people’s perspectives

## Introduction

The overarching aspiration of SDG 8 is to “[p]romote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all” (UN 2015, 14). The explicit goal of maintaining economic growth pervades the entire agenda. Target 8.1 sets the goal of sustaining “capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances” (ibid., 19). Target 8.4 specifically calls for

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economic growth to be decoupled from environmental degradation by improving “global resource efficiency in consumption and production [...] with developed countries taking the lead” (ibid). The aim is to balance “higher levels of economic productivity” (Target 8.2, ibid.) within the boundaries of available resources although it remains unclear how the twin goals of growth and a healthy environment will be achieved. SDG 8 attempts to incorporate the current status quo and current economic paradigms (i.e. at least 7% annual GDP growth in the least developed countries) into a more sustainable frame without stating clear new visions and economic models. The agenda focusses on the tourism sector as a global growth market (Target 8.9, ibid., 20) without critically reflecting on issues of over-tourism at some destinations (e.g. the European cities of Barcelona, Dubrovnik and Venice; Pechlaner et al. 2019). Targets 8.3 and 8.a express a clear orientation towards the development paradigm without discussing the issue of development itself (UN 2015, 19–20).

The discrepancy between economic growth and sustainability is ignored by SDG 8 and needs to be confronted.

This chapter scrutinizes SDG 8 in relation to neoliberalism and the economic growth paradigm and makes some suggestions for post-growth economies as economies of the future from different scales and perspectives. These considerations are supplemented by selected views from young Germans on post-growth and sustainability. As young people are seen as playing a crucial role in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, some implications are derived for further research and geographical education.

## Critical Reflections on SDG 8

SDG 8 pursues an agenda reflecting economic growth and development paradigms which is at odds with current geographical debates (e.g. Harvey 2020; Lange et al. 2021; Ziai 2015). “Geographers, sociologists and anthropologists have been active in critiquing neoliberal models as well as documenting the work done by neoliberal discourse and the cultivation of new practises and meanings associated with development” (Wolford 2016, 583). A Western understanding of development and the goals that need to be pursued in order to achieve this state have been imposed on countries of the Global South. A debate exists as to whether the term “underdevelopment” was invented in order to facilitate the spread of capitalism and neoliberal structures across the globe (Escobar 2012, 3f.; 55ff.). Despite seeking to initiate a change in thinking, the continuing application of the term “developing countries” means that SDG 8 fails to break with the underlying assumptions of the development paradigm.

From a geographical perspective, the following aspects listed in the SDGs are particularly relevant: The focus on economic growth in SDG 8 reveals a Western capitalist development paradigm linked to prosperity. It is necessary to present a range of critiques of the growth paradigm, which is closely related to the influence of neoliberalism. “First and foremost in this deliberation on sustainable development’s ambiguous nature is the mismatch between the power and consequential political

economic authority of neoliberal capitalism’s free-market messages and the eco-development messages that sustainable development promotes” (Potter et al. 2012, 103). This perspective is supported by Maja Göpel who views “[...] the most critical aspect for turning the wheel towards fulfilling the SDGs is changing the economic paradigm” (2016, 3).

An orientation towards neoliberalism has shaped the economic system since the second half of the twentieth century, replacing post-war Keynesian models and promoting privatized and competitive free markets (Potter et al. 2012, 82; Tickell and Peck 2003). “Both globalization and neoliberalism have risen to prominence in about the same period and are associated with changes to the state and the market, and the shift to internationalized, export-oriented economies, and a *laissez-faire* capitalism that depends on deregulation” (Gilbert 2016, 300). This has been accompanied by increasing socio-economic inequalities and divisions on local and global scales (Dicken 2015, 381). “Neoliberal capitalism’s particular feat since its emergence in the 1980s has been to increase social divisions, widen the economic gap between the very rich and the very poor, and centralize authority for the management of corporate and financial capital” (Potter et al. 2012, 85). David Harvey lists four driving elements that ensure power resides with capitalist elites worldwide. These are privatization, financialization, the management and manipulation of crises as well as state redistributions (Harvey 2019, 44ff.) The process of what he refers to as “accumulation by dispossession” rose to prominence quickly and continues to this day (2019, 41; 2020, 121ff.) and there is no clear end to neoliberalism despite the massive impact of the global financial crisis in 2007–08. It is seen as a logical manifestation of globalized capitalism rather than an aberration (Hilary 2013, 138). Even though the underlying economic system has not changed, neoliberalism has forfeited much of its political legitimacy. People are more discontent and feel alienated by the economic system (Harvey 2020, 18f.). However, it is apparent that, even if acceptance has waned, a global crisis is not the decisive factor for overcoming neoliberal capitalism. “Capitalism will continue to lurch from crisis to crisis as a result of its own internal contradictions, creating the objective conditions for its eventual demise and replacement by systems that are not predicated upon the continuing immiseration of classes, peoples and communities or the destruction of the planet on which we live” (Hilary 2013, 160). Capitalism will therefore destroy itself and, due to its destructive nature, it is also at odds with the goals of climate protection (Klein 2014). While climate protection aims to preserve the environment, neoliberal capitalism strives for short-term profitability and maximum benefits from unregulated resource exploitation, wasteful production and market-driven objectives (Potter et al. 2012, 103). As the aims of climate protection and neoliberalism are at odds to each other, sustainable development is not possible under the current economic regime. The short-term focus of neoliberalism contradicts the long-term ecological focus of sustainability and the objective of people-centred development in relation to the preservation and conservation of the earth’s biomass resources (*ibid.*).

Closely intertwined with neoliberal capitalism is the notion that steady economic growth is needed to enable and secure prosperity. Economic growth can be understood as “a sustained increase in the production of goods and services, usually measured at

the national level as the change in the gross domestic product (GDP) of a country's economy" (Peck 2009, 181). However, the fact that growth can also exacerbate social inequality is often overlooked (Harvey 2020, 99f.). In addition to social inequality, the devastating consequences on the environment and the intensification of climate change also need to be taken into consideration (ibid., 104; 144). "The endless and compounding growth syndrome of contemporary consumerism which parallels the endless accumulation of capital needs critical evaluation and response. We should, for example, be thinking more creatively of decreasing and controlling the mass of resources we are extracting from the bowls of the earth to feed the contemporary compensatory consumerism that is so critical to the endless accumulation of capital" (ibid., 111). The recognition that social and environmental growth is limited is gaining widespread acceptance (Peck 2009, 182). The current way of doing business is not compatible with ideas of sustainability, thus, sustainability and growth are mutually exclusive (Daly 2010). "Sustainable development as global objective is replete with ambiguities because it has to reconcile two very different growth trajectories, short-term hard growth and long-term environmental sustainability. Neoliberalism's persistence as a dominant global economic faith prevents environmental sustainability from being pursued" (Potter et al. 2012, 108). Tim Jackson concludes that the "myth of growth has failed us. [...] It has failed the fragile ecological systems on which we depend for survival" (Jackson 2009, 15). He questions the growth paradigm and advocates a system change for post-capitalist era (Jackson 2021). In order to achieve this, different economic values are required to replace neoliberal capitalism with a fairer social, economic, environmental, political and cultural system (Harvey 2019, 68). Initial attempts to find alternative business models that consider these values are being made. These experimental spaces are emerging parallel to neoliberal economic system (Peck 2009, 182). SDG 8 mirrors the continuing antagonism between growth and environmental protection. Instead of promoting a new way of thinking about the economy, it merely incorporates a green economy within the current neoliberal framework, and thus represents a missed opportunity (Target 8.4). It is time to look beyond neoliberalism towards an economic system oriented on democratic commitment to the common good and climate protection rather than profit (Elwood et al. 2017, 692). Table 1 provides an overview of some selected characteristics of the mainstream economy and the orientation of alternative economies (referred to here as the community economy).

## Going Beyond: Designing the Post-growth Era

"If the main achievements of neoliberalism have been redistributive rather than generative, then ways had to be found to transfer assets and redistribute wealth and income either from the mass of the population towards the upper classes or from vulnerable to richer countries" (Harvey 2019, 43). The guiding principles of 2030 Agenda are defined as "the five p's": people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership (UN 2015). It is important to consider how other ideas promoted by SDG 8, such as "prosperity

**Table 1** Contrasting characteristics of mainstream and community economies

Mainstream economy	Community economy
Aspatial/global	Place-attached
Specialized	Diversified
Singular	Multiple
Large scale	Small scale
Competitive	Cooperative
Centred	Decentred
Acultural	Culturally distinctive
Socially disembodied	Socially embedded
Non-local ownership	Local ownership
Agglomerative	Dispersed
Integrated	Autonomous
Export-oriented	Oriented to local market
Privileges short-term return	Values long-term investment
Growth oriented	Vitality oriented
Outflow of extracted value	Recirculates value locally
Privately owned	Community owned
Management led	Community led
Controlled by private board	Community controlled
Private appropriation and distribution of surplus	Communal appropriation and distribution of surplus
Environmentally unsustainable	Environmentally sustainable
Fragmented	Whole
Amoral	Ethical
Crisis-ridden	Harmonious
Participates in a spatial division of labour	Locally self-reliant

Dicken (2015, 382), based on Gibson-Graham (2006, Fig. 23)

without growth”, can be realized (Jackson 2009). Answers can be found in various alternative pathways discussed using the terms *degrowth* and *post-growth*.

Post-growth is not synonymous with shrinkage (e.g. of the population) or recession (e.g. of economic output). Rather, it is about abandoning the illusory notion that technological innovations and improved efficiency can ensure the long-term global growth of current production systems and consumption patterns, thereby improving living conditions for all. [...] In essence, it is about adjusting understandings of growth and re-evaluating it, examining the long-term meaningfulness of certain developments and, if necessary, looking for possible alternatives within free social conditions. Meaningfulness refers here not only to the environment but also to individual and social needs, i.e. a focus on the common good rather than individual economic profitability (Schulz et al. 2021, 20).

A stronger orientation towards *degrowth* and *post-growth* would be a desirable aim for societies of the Global North (Lange et al. 2021). Postcolonial and indigenous perspectives should also be considered (Dengler and Seebacher 2019; McGregor 2004; Struckmann 2018) to counterbalance the destructive forces of accumulation by dispossession and land grab as well as dumping wages and bank bailouts with taxpayer's money (Santos 2015). Placing the common good and common resources under the laws of capitalism results in the displacement of indigenous communities and low-income farming while exacerbating ecological crisis, colonialism and racism and the desire for appropriation and various forms of violence perpetrated against those considered inferior (Santos 2015, 74). Regionally differentiated solutions (see Target 8.1) and a differently accentuated interpretation of SDG 8 is necessary. There is a discussion that some countries require a temporary phase of adequate economic growth. "Degrowth places a strong emphasis on the issue of distributive justice in growth and wealth, both at the level of international and development policies and within individual national economies [...]. Degrowth is thus more than a simple "ecological limits" or erstwhile "limits to growth" debate; rather, it represents a re-framing of the very definition of economic prosperity towards enhancing well-being and human happiness" (Krueger et al. 2018, 578; see also Whitehead 2013). Escobar (2018, 140) emphasizes the geopolitical differences in the transformation discourses in the Global North and the Global South while noting important overlaps and commonalities in the critiques of capitalism and neoliberalism. "While the age to come is described in the North as being post-growth, postmaterialist, post-economic, post-capitalist and post-human, for the South it is expressed in terms of being post-development, non-liberal, post-capitalist/non-capitalist, biocentric and post-extractivist" (ibid.). A spatially differentiated approach towards the meaning and necessity of growth is required and alternative economic models, such as the Doughnut Economics according to Raworth (2017) or Niko Paech's Post-growth Economy (2012), the degrowth or post-growth movements (Lange et al. 2021; Escobar 2018, 137ff.), Utopias (e.g. Haraway 2016) as well as a multitude of local initiatives around the world that are being tried out (for an overview see e.g. Burkhart et al. 2020; Fig. 1). "The diversity of alternative economies is growing and offers significant possibilities for creating fulfilling and fair communities" (Dicken 2015, 382). Degrowth initiatives closely related to the idea of the commons are well known in the Global North (Bollier and Helfrich 2019; Bollier 2014; Thompson 2019). The Transition Town Movement (Hopkins and Heinberg 2008; Hopkins 2011), which has its origins in the United Kingdom, is being adapted by groups working creatively on transition pathways on a local scale in cities all over Europe. Macy and Johnstone (2012) provide general orientation with their remarks on "the Great Turning" which involves three dimensions, "holding actions", "life-sustaining systems and practises" and a "shift in consciousness". The second dimension can be brought about by pioneers of change. These change agents are "single individuals and small groups [...]. They propagate innovations by questioning "business as usual" policies and creating alternative practises, thereby challenging the established world views and paths, attitudinal and behavioural patterns, as well as providing others who think

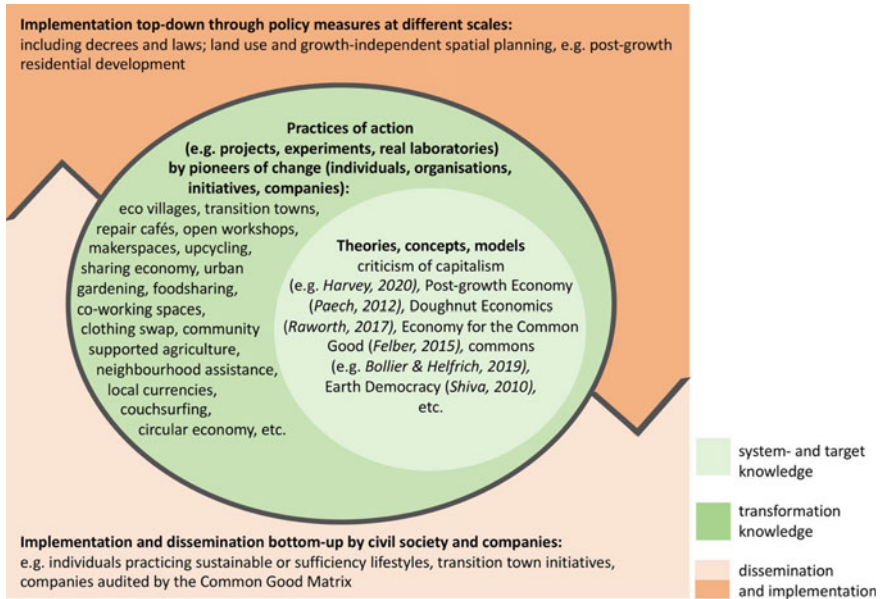


Fig. 1 Overview of different approaches in the field of post-growth economies (own illustration)

as they do (followers, early adopters) with a constant motivation for a self-sustaining change” (WBGU 2011, 243).

There are different transition initiatives in countries and communities in Africa, Asia and South America. In Kenya, for example, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Wangari Maathai has contributed to strengthening women’s rights and mitigating environmental degradation with dedicated initiatives in rural areas such as the Green Belt Movement (Maathai 2009). The careful adaptation of traditional land use systems is another progressive example (Oba 2013; Fratkin 2013). Community-based organizations and youth initiatives in the slums of the capital Nairobi and other urban centres contribute to community development and the common good (Sana 2016; Eberth 2021). These initiatives can be described as change agents for urban transformation (WBGU 2016, 313ff.). Vandana Shiva criticizes the Green Revolution in India (2010a) and demands more justice and environmental protection in times of globalization (2015). Shiva founded the Navdanya initiative to establish sustainable forms of agriculture. The concept of “Earth Democracy” presented in her work involves establishing more justice, sustainability and peace (2010b). In addition to critiques of the onto-epistemic field in the context of postcolonial contours, the concept of Buen Vivir in South America has become widespread (Escobar 2012, 2018; Mignolo 2011). This is understood as promoting the harmonious coexistence of different types of communities within the natural world (Acosta 2019; Roa 2018) rather than striving to attain a single, homogeneous notion of good life.

These ideas help to shape democratic, participatory, inclusive, pluriverse, sustainable societies (Escobar 2018). Three aspects provide guidance for alternative economies: popular sovereignty, common ownership and social production (Hilary 2013, 148ff.). Despite being all different in their design, all these ideas are similarly guided by the belief that “good life beyond growth” is possible (Rosa and Henning 2019).

When looking for alternatives to a capitalistic economy on a meta-level, a closer look at South America is helpful. Certain communities, societies and policies in South America have “led the way in developing real alternatives to the neoliberal capitalist model in the twenty-first century” (Hilary 2013, 139). Taking Bolivia and Venezuela as examples, Doreen Massey focuses on the three areas of democracy, media and space to which she attributes particular importance in connection with transformative potential. Massey argues that these post-neoliberal experiments in South America are “socio-political spaces that are democratic and more egalitarian” (Massey 2012, 136). Such initiatives have “the potential for long-term, structural change” (Hilary 2013, 139) and make it possible to develop “designs for transitions” (Escobar 2018, 137ff.). Established social movements in many societies of the Global South can provide role models for the Global North (Escobar 2018, 149). Global cooperation is also necessary to forge a common and diverse postcolonial future and establish new sense of global togetherness in addition to creative engagement in communities on a local level. Existing global power relations dominated by the West must be questioned and the influence of economic global players needs to be dismantled. The aim of creating a distance from the Eurocentric tradition is to create analytical spaces for realities that are surprising because they are new, have been previously ignored or made invisible, i.e. deemed non-existent by the Eurocentric tradition (Santos 2015, 73). This can be particularly promising if it is about new orientations and not just about forms of green washing. “On the degrowth side, a main risk is the subversion of its meaning through green-economy and post-growth schemes that leave untouched the basic architecture of economism” (Escobar 2018, 149). All the initiatives mentioned here make a significant contribution to the debate on a socio-ecological transformation. “These solutions are inherently relational, not comparative; they highlight the interconnectedness between people, places and politics around the world. It is not clear where exactly the energy from these movements will lead but there is no question that over the past thirty years, they have helped to highlight the conditions of economic injustice. In doing so, they have re-shaped the future of a political economic ideology that once seemed so hegemonic there could “be no alternative” (Wolford 2016, 584).

## **Young People’s Perspectives on Post-growth Economies**

It is necessary to investigate the perspectives of younger generations on 2030 Agenda and the SDGs as their involvement will central to achieving the transition away from the current economic paradigm towards a post-growth economy (UNESCO 2020).



Do young people support “system change, not climate change” as demanded by Fridays for Future, and which alternatives to the current neoliberal economic system are they aware of? To our knowledge perspectives on the problems of economic growth in relation to sustainable development and knowledge about alternative economic models have not yet been empirically surveyed for this age group. The present research project at the Leibniz University Hannover (Institute of Science Education, Geography Education Section) which runs from 2019 to 2022 and is funded by the Lower Saxony Ministry for Science and Culture aims to make up for this deficit.

Young people around Germany aged between 15 and 24 were asked to answer a standardized online questionnaire ( $n = 150$ ; survey period: August to December 2020). Selected findings of the quantitative survey are presented here. The survey posed the following questions:

1. What are respondents’ views on various statements on the connection between economic growth, climate change and post-growth?
2. How do they emphasize the role of secondary education for knowledge about post-growth economies?
3. What kind of selected initiatives from the field of post-growth economies do the respondents know about?

The respondents for the online questionnaire were found through social media, mailing lists of special organizations like Fridays for Future and study courses and special survey portals. Of the 150 individuals questioned, 63.3% were female, 32.7% male and 2.7% non-binary. With a share of 91.2%, the sample was mainly aged 18–24 years. 65.6% of the respondents attended university. 9.4% attended school and were mainly studying for the general qualification for university entrance (Abitur), indicating a high level of education.

The respondents were asked about various aspects of sustainability referred to in the SDGs, including their views on post-growth economies. The part of the questionnaire on post-growth economies asked participants to evaluate statements on a five-tier Likert-Scale ranging from “I fully agree” to “I do not agree at all”. There were also several multiple-choice questions.

The results shown in Fig. 2 reveal that most of the respondents had not heard of post-growth (92.7%). 85.4% agreed that “system change, not climate change” was at least partially necessary. A majority blamed capitalism for the climate crisis (74.7%) and agreed that an alternative to economic growth was necessary in order to achieve sustainable development (82.7%). It is therefore possible to infer that, whilst the respondents think it is necessary to find alternatives to the current economic system, they lack knowledge of specific concepts. A clear desire that post-growth as a topic (83.3%) and specific post-growth initiatives (78%) should be addressed in secondary and higher education was also expressed. The neo-liberalization of markets and politics is reflected in the focus on economic growth in education (Mitchell 2018). A critical approach towards economic growth and an understanding of alternative economic systems needs to be promoted. Educators can introduce eco-centred world-views and successful projects in their lessons to help inform young people about

alternative, non-human-centred economic systems. Geography as a subject taught at universities and schools should therefore cover this field more thoroughly and continue to develop existing approaches to post-growth geographies (Lange et al. 2021).

A second set of questions were designed to assess which post-growth initiatives are familiar to young people and the level of participation (see results in Fig. 3). A similar picture of knowledge of post-growth alternatives to that in the statements in Fig. 1 emerged. The respondents were predominantly aware of low-key initiatives that have become popular amongst students such as clothing swaps or urban gardening. However, initiatives that aim to tackle the economic system more fundamentally, e.g. transition town, were less well known. The respondents appeared neither to know very much about different ways of thinking the economy in a broader sense nor, more specifically, about current grass roots initiatives at a local level. It is also interesting to note that despite awareness of low-key initiatives, the actual level of participation was low. Apart from clothing swaps, participation in post-growth initiatives is low. Knowledge of alternative models to consumption seem not to have yet translated into action amongst the respondents. Further research would aim to provide insight into the factors hindering young people to get involved in post-growth initiatives more actively.

The findings above have been used to design a qualitative research project. We conducted focus groups in order to offer young people the opportunity to present their perspectives on post-growth economies more comprehensively. In contrast to an individual interview, focus groups allow participants to discuss opinions, attitudes and values without being overly influenced by the researcher.

We planned three meetings with each of the seven groups in order to investigate how engagement and transition initiatives at a local scale relate to perspectives at a global scale.

The first meeting was used to discuss the Fridays for Future slogan “system change, not climate change”. We also investigated the extent to which the respondents see the relationship between the economic system, politics and society. The respondents were therefore asked about their views on the growth-oriented economic system and invited to comments on the central theses of Tim Jackson, Naomi Klein, Niko Paech and Vandana Shiva. Each focus group then discussed the approach of post-growth economies and the importance of local initiatives as change agents. The participants then said which change agents they are familiar with in the Hannover region. The group then decided which initiative they would like to discover more about. The participants conducted an interview with the representative of the initiative they have chosen and the aspects of the initiative they show particular interest in have been noted.

In a third meeting, which is planned as a focus group again, the participants finally reconvened to reflect the insights they have gained from the interview and discussed the way in which post-growth economies and the role of change agents raised within the research project could be taught in a school environment.

After the survey phase has been completed, the results will be transcribed and evaluated. This study is still ongoing. At this time, we can notice that the insights

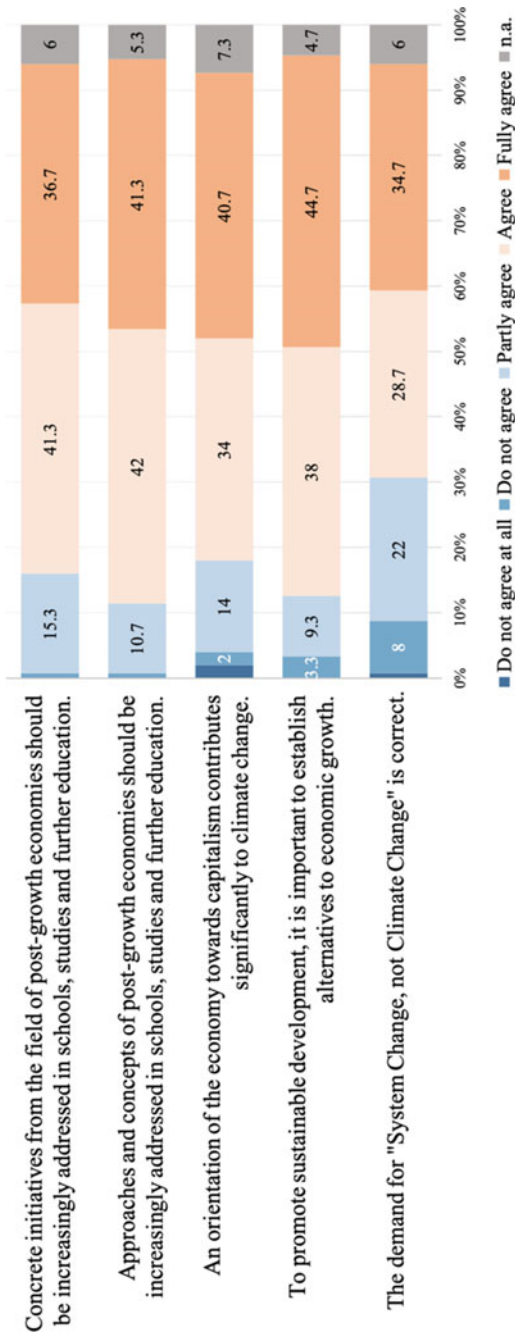
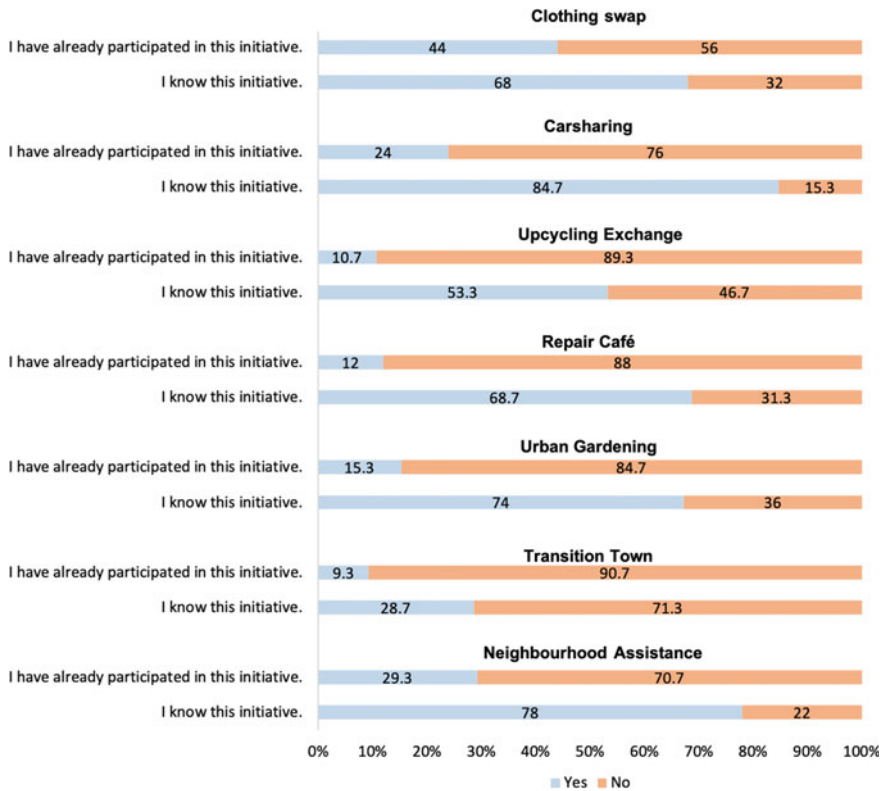


Fig. 2 Statements on post-growth economies, N = 150, answers above 1%



**Fig. 3** Knowledge of and participation in different post-growth initiatives of young people,  $N = 150$

are very interesting and meaningful to make young people’s perspectives visible and derive implications for educational processes.

## Conclusion

This chapter summarizes positions on SDG 8 from different critical perspectives: The economic growth paradigm (Tim Jackson, Kate Raworth), neoliberalism (Rob Potter, David Harvey) and the concept of development (Arturo Escobar, Aram Ziai). As the young are viewed as central to achieving the aims of the 2030 Agenda, we supplemented this summary with a quantitative survey of young people in the Hannover region of Germany. This revealed that young people are also critical of the capitalist economic model and are interested in exploring alternatives from the field of post-growth economies. UNESCO sees young people playing a decisive role in

the implementation of the SDGs, even though the goals they pursue through SDG 8 seem to contradict this. Hence, the perspectives of young people are not represented.

We also discussed contrasting approaches towards degrowth and post-growth in the Global North and South, implemented at the local or regional level where change agents play a key role as initiators e.g. Vandana Shiva, Rob Hopkins and initiatives such as Navdanya and Transition Town. Our survey showed that the respondents were aware of some initiatives (at the local or regional level) and were keen to learn more about them.

It is therefore necessary that the economic growth model at the global level is approached critically within secondary and higher education. The significance of change agents and initiatives at the local level should also be made tangible to young people first hand in order that alternative approaches find wider acceptance and the potential to change the current economic paradigm shift is increased. Geography education can play an important role in introducing initiatives which are perceived and disseminated globally. Key concepts such as space, place and scale offer necessary instruments for understanding socio-economic processes and dynamics in a reconstructive way and actively shaping them through applied research (Eberth 2021). Thinking about alternative forms of socially inclusive economic activity is especially relevant when the economy is understood as an expression of culture. “The economy is not only, or even principally, a material entity. It is above all a cultural production, a way of producing human subjects and social orders of a certain kind” (Escobar 2012, 59). In order to achieve an alternative economic worldview, it is necessary to go beyond the goals of SDG 8. By focussing on growth, consumerism and the term “development” fall short of initiating a true paradigm shift towards a just world. Decoupling growth from environmental impact is not enough to create a fair and sustainable economic system. Rather, new ways must be found which can be integrated into secondary and higher education and ultimately raise awareness in society at large.

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