

"GDP as a real indicator of progress is one of the biggest fallacies in our society"

An interview

Unai Pascual and Gorka Castillo

Humans have been pushing the boundaries of the world for years. The impact of their activity on the Earth's biodiversity is truly profound. The speed of climate change, revealed in all the regular reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), is only evidence of an even more profound crisis: nature is dying. On 7 July in Bonn, a select team of international scientists and experts presented a detailed paper on the multiple values of a healthy forest or ocean and why they are not taken into account in the decisions that determine the world's future. Scientists argue that this is the Gordian knot in the decline of the Earth's ecosystems. The issue deserves an explanation.



Photo by [Felipe Castilla](#) in [Unsplash](#)

The document, commissioned by the UN-sponsored Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), is summarised in 33 overwhelming pages: "If the institutions involved in decision-making continue to see nature only as a place to exploit resources, we are heading for disaster," details Unai Pascual (Vitoria-Gasteiz, 1973), PhD in Ecological Economics and main coordinator of this study, presented and defended by the scientific community before the 139 States that make up this platform and whose approval by consensus was indispensable for the report to see the light of day. "The war in Ukraine is serving as a perfect excuse to delay the structural changes that the global economy needs", he specifies. This is why negotiating the terms in which the criticisms of the economic and political system were exposed proved to be titanic. "It was a diplomatic chess game. One has to learn to think about what the negotiators' next move is and what the critical points and red lines of each country are," adds Pascual.

"GDP as a real indicator of progress is one of the biggest fallacies in our society"

True Democracy and Capitalism

What are these values of nature?

Simply put, we can identify three types of values that are easy to understand. Those that we consider instrumental, i.e. everything that nature provides us with for our individual and collective well-being. For example, raw materials or fertile soil to be cultivated. But nature also has other values not appreciated in the dominant economic system. One is the value of nature in itself, independent of the well-being it brings us. Why do we tell children not to kill a lizard or a bird? Simply because of the importance we attach to the fact that living things live. That is an intrinsic value and is indisputably related to ethics. There is a third type, relational value, which is the value we build from our links with a given natural environment. For example, the personal value of a tree or a forest where we played in childhood or the garden where you planted tomatoes with your grandfather. Its importance is invaluable because it is associated with our cultural identity; we apply it constantly when making decisions, even if we are unaware of it. The problem is that the market system only evaluates those values of nature associated with short-term profit, which is listed on the stock exchange and rejects all other values. This is the problem because the market only sees nature as a factory providing goods and not as a system on which we depend at deeper levels.

What is the point of defining and measuring these values?

What is important is that everyone can understand the overall value of biodiversity beyond those elements that contribute to our material well-being. It should be borne in mind that there are different cultural visions in understanding our relationship with nature. Indigenous peoples, for example, are governed by their social knowledge systems beyond the scientific. This is a reality that the IPBES report incorporates to give it a much broader meaning. It aims to serve as a compass in collective decision-making towards sustainability, accommodating those different cultural approaches and knowledge systems that provide solutions to the current socio-ecological crisis.

But the conflict of interests can be ongoing. Is it possible to make these three values converge?

Indeed, the clash of interests is constant. Every hour, every day, every month and every year. I remember when Ecuador proposed not exploiting the oil wells discovered in the Yasuní Amazon rainforest, following the extractivist

The dominance of the short-sighted view of nature is largely underpinned by the short-sighted neoliberal system.

model promoted by the Global North, in exchange for economic compensation to improve the country's well-being. It was a fair economic compensation for not exploiting oil deposits and thus maintaining the forest's intrinsic values

and all-important relational values. The same happens with thousands of mining or agro-industrial projects, which end up becoming serious socio-environmental conflicts. These are cases that have allowed us to see clearly that market-based governance is so entrenched that intrinsic and relational values always end up losing out. And with them, biodiversity and the sustainability of life.

Is that the conclusion of IPBES?

It is one: the dominance of the short-sighted view of nature is largely underpinned by the short-sighted neoliberal system, its free market ideology and the mantra of economic growth. Couple this with GDP, as real indicator of

We are not aware that in addition to living from nature, we also live with it, in it and even like it.

economic progress and the compass of a policy that only considers goods and services that pass through the market, and we have a problem because it is one of the biggest fallacies in our society. Nature has many other well-being values that are not traded on its markets, but that bring us well-being. And if we unbalance these values in our decision-making, we automatically break the

"GDP as a real indicator of progress is one of the biggest fallacies in our society"

True Democracy and Capitalism

balance in our relationship with the environment. We are not aware that in addition to living from nature, we also live with it, in it and even like it. Unfortunately, only the first option takes precedence in economic and political decision-making. For this reason, we consider it essential to focus on institutions and how they influence us when it comes to understanding what progress means. To do so, we had to question the role of the actors who hold the levers of power and impose certain values on others. Thus, we dissected the system in layers as if it were an onion until we reached the core of the issue, the socio-ecological crisis, the underlying causes that provoke the accelerated degradation of nature that we are suffering. It was the only way to say to the representatives of states and civil society in general: "Here lies the problem. So let's discuss values and find fair solutions".

It is a fierce critique of capitalism.

First of all, it should be pointed out that this document does not reflect opinions but rather synthesises the values about nature held by the scientific community and other knowledge systems, including that of indigenous peoples.

Indicators such as GDP, rather than helping us to navigate towards sustainability, accelerate the social metabolism that erodes the relationships between nature and people.

It can be understood as a critical view of approaches deeply rooted in Western culture, its concept of progress, the dogmatic use of tools such as the market or indicators such as GDP, which, rather than helping us to navigate towards sustainability, accelerate the social metabolism that erodes the

relationships between nature and people. By putting this question in the equation, I believe we have arrived at the heart of the problem: the predominant development model is unsustainable.

And yet the states signed up.

Yes, and therefore they accept the conclusions. The report is much more than a scientific study because it also incorporates the political relationships that explain the evidence and its meaning. From now on, they will not be able to say that they do not know the origin of the environmental deterioration we are experiencing. It is another thing if they want to ignore it. My hope is that society at large can use it to push institutions towards a more environmentally sustainable and socially just vision. Here is a tool to do so with accurate data.

How to change decision-making?

We identified different levers for transformation. First, we need to recognise the diversity of values that nature has to include in decision-making at all levels. So we have to measure them quantitatively and qualitatively. And we have the knowledge to do this exceptionally well. I understand that the decision-making process may have limitations according to the different scales, from local to global, because of irreconcilable interests. Still, there are deliberative, democratic and participatory processes that can be very useful. What value should prevail to conserve nature? Instrumental pragmatism only? All over the world, there are clashes of values about nature that often result in conflicts. To take a current example, in Tanzania, there is now a Maasai revolt because a conservation movement supported by the Tanzanian government wants to establish biodiversity protection zones that negatively affect their way of life. Paradoxically, these exclusion zones coincide with the territory where the Maasai have grazed all their lives sustainably. However, they can no longer do so and have been turned into villains.

What differentiates IPBES from other scientific bodies, such as the IPCC?

In some ways, the IPCC and IPBES have very similar structures and functioning. The IPCC brings together scientific knowledge on what is happening with climate change. It regularly brings scientific evidence to the table, feeding into international climate summits and state policies. Similarly, IPBES brings together knowledge on nature through

"GDP as a real indicator of progress is one of the biggest fallacies in our society"

True Democracy and Capitalism

thematic reports such as pollination, the status of biodiversity at regional and global levels, sustainable use of species, etc. In this latest report, for example, we have worked with around 300 scientists for four years in a totally altruistic way, covering different fields of knowledge to understand the biodiversity crisis we are experiencing and to offer options to address it in a sustainable and fair way.

Do you think the states expected such a critical report?

Honestly, I don't think so. They thought we would remain in the most superficial layers of the problem and not get

The war in Ukraine is the perfect excuse to delay the structural changes the global economy needs.

to the structural reasons behind the global environmental and social justice crisis. I specifically mention social justice because environmental degradation affects some groups differently from others.

But changing the West's perception of its well-being, progress, or profit does not seem easy despite the evidence that either lifestyles change or the world collapses.

It will be hard to change it. That is why I believe it is all the more necessary to open participatory and deliberative processes that use the evidence offered by platforms such as IPBES or IPCC.

Even more so in the current situation where the war in Ukraine has exacerbated the energy crisis and triggered an obsessive demand for fossil fuels.

Just as the crassest and stupidest denialism was beginning to be defeated, the war in Ukraine is the perfect excuse to delay the structural changes the global economy needs. We have been talking about the climate and biodiversity

The omens are not good. We must be vigilant, as a bad agreement or lack of consensus will be disastrous.

crisis for too many years, but there is still no strong reaction. The Paris Agreement is damaged, and we will see what level of agreement on ecosystem conservation comes out of the Convention on Biological Diversity in Montreal in December

under China's presidency. The omens are not good. We must be vigilant, as a bad agreement or lack of consensus will be disastrous. There we will see the impact of the current geopolitical situation. It is a shadow hanging over the heads of all negotiators at the moment.

Related links:

- The Jus Semper Global Alliance
- Alejandro Pedregal and Juan Bordera: [Toward an Ecosocialist Degrowth](#)
- Jason Hickel: [Degrowth is About Global Justice](#)
- Álvaro J. de Regil: [The Deceptive Delusions of Green Capitalism](#)
- Álvaro J. de Regil: [Transitioning to Geocratia the People and Planet and Not the Market Paradigm — First Steps](#)
- The Editors of Monthly Review: [Leaked IPCC Reports](#)
- Juan Bordera and Ferran Puig Vilar: [Lights and Shadows of the IPCC](#)
- Gustavo Duch: [Times of Insurrection?](#)

"GDP as a real indicator of progress is one of the biggest fallacies in our society"

True Democracy and Capitalism

- ❖ **About Jus Semper:** The Jus Semper Global Alliance aims to contribute to achieving a sustainable ethos of social justice in the world, where all communities live in truly democratic environments that provide full enjoyment of human rights and sustainable living standards in accordance with human dignity. To accomplish this, it contributes to the liberalisation of the democratic institutions of society that have been captured by the owners of the market. With that purpose, it is devoted to research and analysis to provoke the awareness and critical thinking to generate ideas for a transformative vision to materialise the truly democratic and sustainable paradigm of People and Planet and NOT of the market.
- ❖ **About the author: Unai Pascual** holds a PhD in Ecological Economics and is coordinator of the IPBES Biodiversity Report. **Gorka Castillo** is a field reporter.
- ❖ **About this Brief:** "GDP as a real indicator of progress is one of the biggest fallacies in our society" was originally published in Spanish by CTXT in October 2022. This paper has been published under Creative Commons, CC-BY-NC 4.0. You are welcome to reproduce the material for non-commercial use, crediting the author and the original publisher.
- ❖ **Quote this paper as:** Unai Pascual and Gorka Castillo: "GDP as a real indicator of progress is one of the biggest fallacies in our society" — The Jus Semper Global Alliance, April 2023.
- ❖ **Tags:** capitalism, neoliberalism, biodiversity, nature, IPCC, IPBES, sustainability.
- ❖ The responsibility for opinions expressed in this work rests only with the author(s), and its publication does not necessarily constitute an endorsement by The Jus Semper Global Alliance.



Under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

© 2023. The Jus Semper Global Alliance
Portal on the net: <https://www.jussemper.org/>
e-mail: informa@jussemper.org