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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Sikh Human Rights Group, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[27 May 2024]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Tackling Poverty through “Degrowth”

The Special Rapporteur’s report is encouraging. It is of interest that the Special Rapporteur emphasises a drive away from GDP growth model and looks at a rights-based approach to poverty. There is also the needs-based approach to development which perhaps introduces a wider dimension in addition to a rights-based approach. A third approach is based on ‘moral responsibility’ towards our common humanity. In an institution such as HRC where the words human rights are a necessary linguistic currency, we can suggest an approach to poverty based on human rights, needs and moral responsibility.

The needs and responsibility approaches are embedded in some civilisations that emphasise a common humanity rather than economic pursuits. The economic model is speculative and may or may not result in the intended benefit of reducing poverty. In fact, the current GDP obsession has shown that in many States and regions, the gap between those benefitting from economic growth and those left behind has widened. The Sikh Human Rights Group is inspired by the Sikh worldview which emphasises ‘wand shak’ or ‘share what you get’. A practice of the Sikhs known to most people is the institution of the ‘langar’. Gurdwaras across the world have free food from early morning to late evening. It is not only people in need who eat there, but to remove stigma of inequality, the rich and poor sit together to eat. Sri Harmandir Sahib (the Golden Temple,) langar feeds around a 100000 people everyday irrespective of their belief.

Perhaps the theories of post-growth economics, better known as “Degrowth”, that emphasise sustainability, social well-being and ecological balance representing a shift away from Gross Domestic Product, would appear better to meet the expectations from the State and international institutions. Theories of “Degrowth” challenge entrenched economic orthodoxy that continue on the path that economic growth is inherently positive and necessary for societal prosperity. “Degrowth” instead focusses on reducing production and consumption, especially in affluent countries, to prioritize human and ecological health over mere economic expansion. “Degrowth” aims to create a society where the economy serves the well being of all citizens and the health of the planet instead of pursuing GDP growth.

The arguments for continued economic growth on environmental grounds have also not produced the desired results either in poverty reduction or in improving environment. Proponents of green growth argue that it is possible to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation through technological innovations, efficiency improvements, and the transition to service-based economies. They cite the Environmental Kuznets Curve (EKC) hypothesis, which suggests that while environmental degradation initially increases with economic growth, it eventually decreases as societies become wealthier and can afford cleaner technologies and stricter regulations. However, this hypothesis has significant limitations. The EKC does not take into account many critical environmental impacts, such as carbon emissions and biodiversity loss, and often overlooks the shifting of environmental burdens to poorer countries through outsourcing pollution-intensive industries. Moreover, empirical evidence shows that decoupling economic growth from resource use and environmental impacts has been limited and largely insufficient to address the scale of ecological crises we face.

The notion of "green capitalism" — that market mechanisms alone can drive sustainable development and hence reduce poverty— is also problematic. Without addressing root causes, such as excessive consumption, over production and capitalisms inherent drive for profit and continuous expansion usually results in temporary benefits. It leads to resource depletion and the damage to environment often becomes irreversible making recovery difficult and expansion unsustainable. The system collapses after a brief period of success. It ultimately contributes to larger systemic problems and poverty. The limitations of green capitalism highlight the need for a more fundamental transformation of economic systems to align with ecological realities and sustainable approach to poverty reduction.

The argument that short-term economic growth is necessary to meet human needs, particularly in the context of poverty reduction assumes that economic growth is essential for creating jobs and improving living standards. However, as the Special Rapporteur has noted, this growth-centric approach has not necessarily translated into reduced poverty or inequality. Studies have shown that while growth can generate employment and improve access to basic services, it is not a guarantee of functional equitable distribution of wealth or social benefits. For instance, periods of high economic growth in various regions have not always correlated with significant reductions in poverty or improvements in fair incomes. Instead, the benefits of growth often accrue disproportionately to the wealthy, exacerbating social inequities. Relying on growth to address poverty often leads to policies that prioritise economic expansion over social welfare, resulting in inadequate support for those most in need.

“Degrowth” can be compatible with reducing poverty and inequality if approached with appropriate policies focused on redistribution and meeting basic human needs.

Examples of successful “degrowth” strategies include reducing unnecessary production, scaling down industries that contribute significantly to environmental degradation, such as fossil fuels, fast fashion, and single-use plastics, which can free up resources for more sustainable and socially beneficial uses. Improving public services ensures universal access to high-quality healthcare, education, housing, transportation, and renewable energy, which can improve quality of life without requiring high levels of resource consumption. Public services can be funded through progressive taxation and the redirection of subsidies from environmentally harmful industries. Implementing a green jobs guarantee can create employment opportunities focused on ecological and social objectives, such as renewable energy installation, ecosystem restoration, and social care, providing meaningful work while contributing to sustainability goals.

Reducing working hours through policies such as shorter workweeks or earlier retirement can reduce unemployment and provide people with more time for personal well-being and community engagement, which can lead to lower overall consumption. Localised production and consumption, promoting local economies through support for small-scale agriculture, local markets, and community-based enterprises, can reduce the environmental footprint associated with global supply chains and enhance local resilience.

The Cuban example of “degrowth” is particularly instructive. Despite severe economic challenges, Cuba has managed to maintain high human development indicators through a focus on social policies and sustainable practices. The country's emphasis on local food production, organic farming, and extensive public services has enabled it to meet the basic needs of its population with a minimal ecological footprint.

At the international level, the United Nations can play a crucial role by taking a wider approach and consider options other than economic orthodoxy of GDP and incorporate “degrowth” through instruments and policies. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a framework that aligns with “degrowth” principles, particularly those focused on reducing inequality, promoting sustainable cities and communities, and ensuring responsible consumption and production. The UN's Green Climate Fund can be expanded to support “degrowth” initiatives, particularly in developing countries. Furthermore, international agreements on trade and investment can be restructured to prioritise environmental sustainability and social equity, ensuring that economic activities do not undermine global ecological and social goals. By leveraging its global influence and resources, the United Nations can help pave the way for a just and sustainable future that transcends the limitations of the growth paradigm.