

Challenging inequalities and unsustainabilities: the politics of transformative pathways

Melissa Leach

Dies Natalis lecture

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Reframing development

- From a poverty focus to also navigating complex inequality, unsustainability and insecurity challenges;
- From incremental change to transformation;
- Shocks, stresses, uncertainties, surprises – need resilience;
- From north-south aid framings to universality;
- From knowledge transfer to mutual, multi-way learning

Three defining challenges



**Reducing
inequalities**



**Accelerating
sustainability**



**Building inclusive
and secure societies**

The SDGs – a transformative agenda to meet the challenges?



An ambitious agenda, different from the MDGs

- Developed through broad, inclusive consultation
- Tackle underlying causes, not just symptoms
- Integrate people and planet
- Universal framing

Major **opportunities** to shape transformative, sustainable development pathways – locally, nationally, globally

Means avoiding **risks** – silo-ed approaches, failures of implementation and accountability

Challenges for understanding and action towards transformation

Inequality - looming large in the minds of governments, businesses and civil society



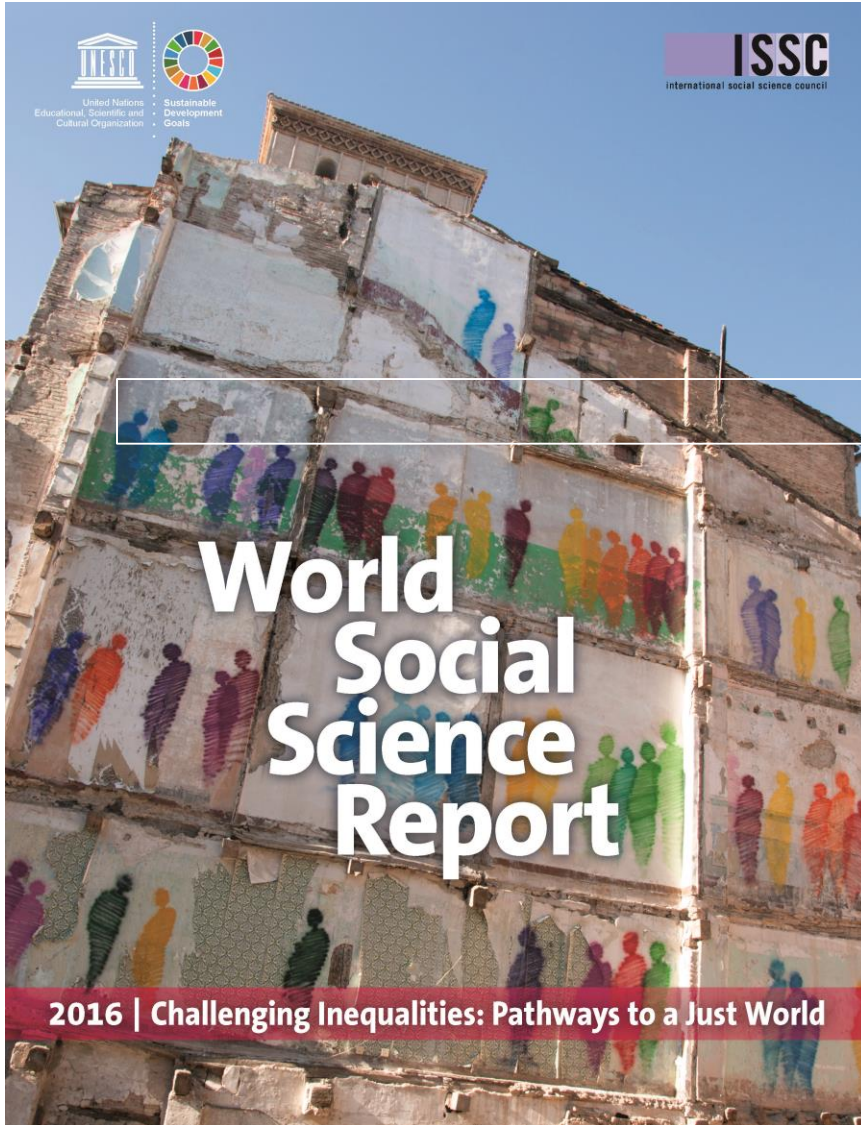
Photo: Magharebia via Flickr

Adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals commits governments worldwide to take action

*'We pledge that
no one will be left
behind'*

Preamble to the 2030 Agenda for
Sustainable Development





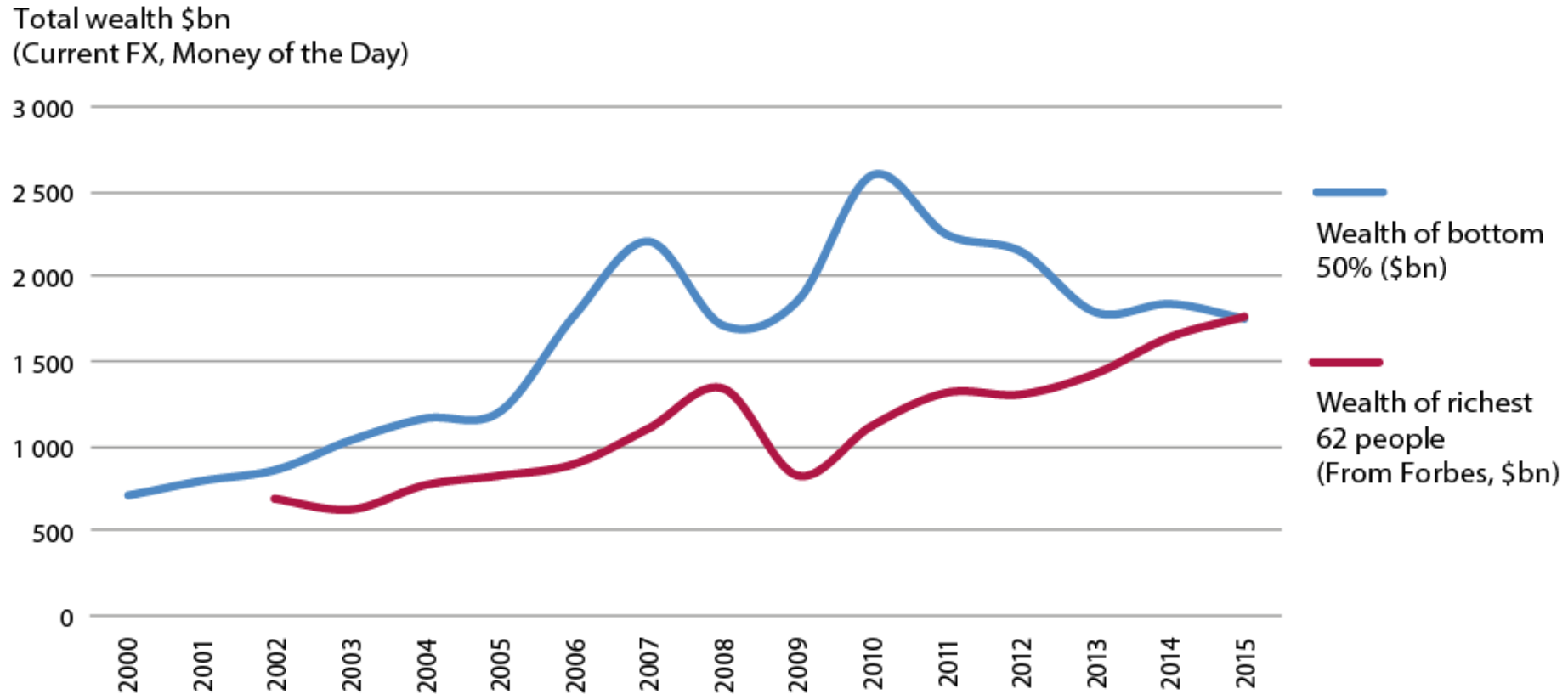
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en.unesco.org/wssr2016

www.worldsocialscience.org | #ChallengingInequalities

- To look beyond economic inequality into the interactions between multiple dimensions of inequality
- To document the trends in inequality in all world regions, especially less well-researched and low-income countries in Africa and Asia
- To analyse the consequences of inequalities in different countries and regions, and for different groups of people
- To identify strategies to reduce inequalities
- To provide a multidisciplinary contribution to the study of inequality, with inputs from across the social sciences, as well as from outside academia
- To identify critical knowledge gaps and propose a global research agenda on inequality.

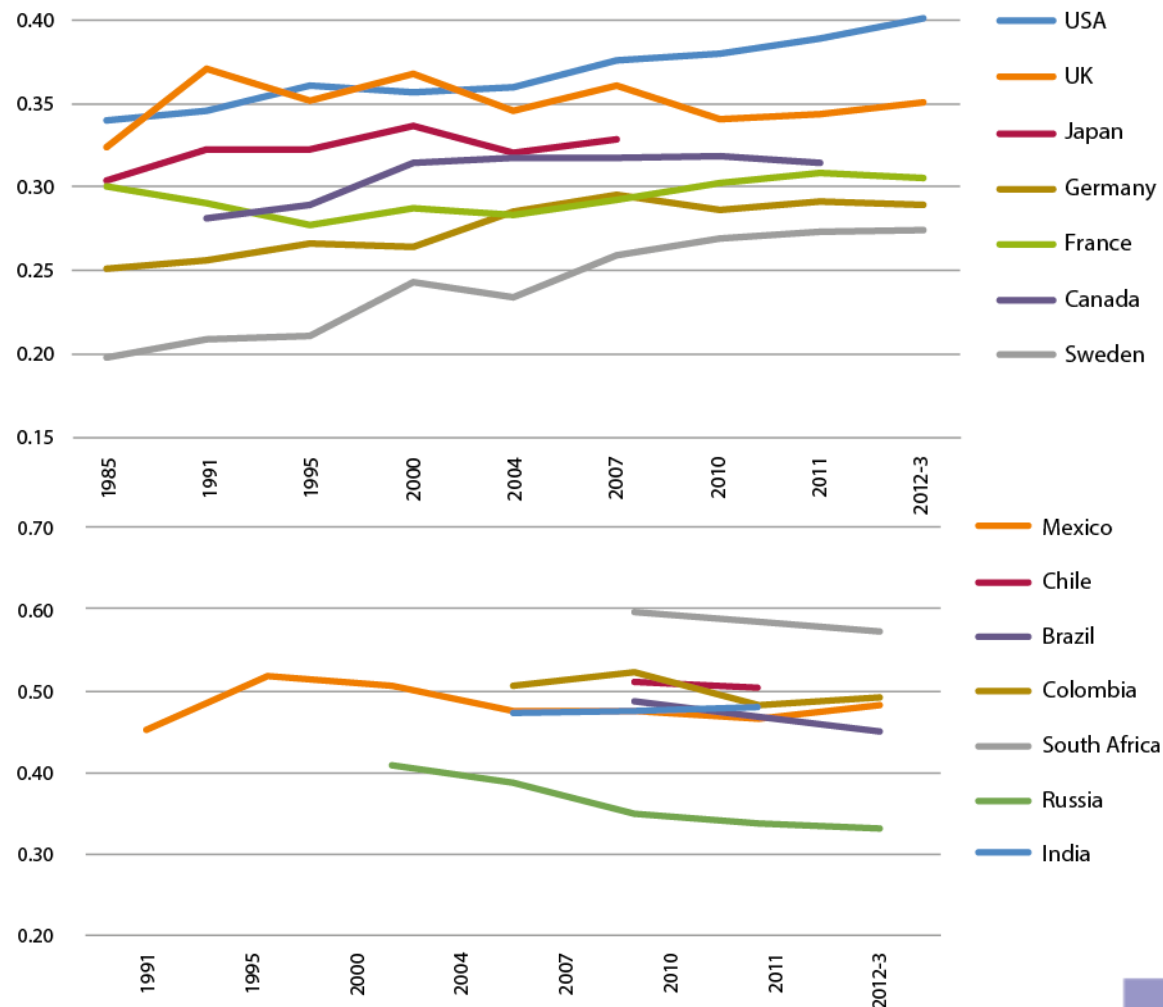
Economic and political power are increasingly concentrated in the hands of a small number of people



Wealth of bottom 50 per cent versus wealth of richest sixty-two people (Source: Oxfam, 2016)

Inequalities within countries are rising

Evolution of Gini coefficients, high-income and middle income countries (Source: OECD Income Distribution Database, Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) Database).



Inequalities should not be understood and addressed only in relation to income and wealth. They interact across seven key dimensions:

- **economic inequality:** differences between levels of incomes, assets, wealth and capital, living standards and employment;
- **social inequality:** differences between the social status of different population groups and imbalances in the functioning of education, health, justice and social protection systems;
- **cultural inequality:** discriminations based on gender, ethnicity and race, religion, disability and other group identities;
- **political inequality:** the differentiated capacity for individuals and groups to influence political decision-making processes and to benefit from those decisions, and to enter into political action;
- **spatial inequality:** spatial and regional disparities between centres and peripheries, urban and rural areas, and regions with more or less diverse resources;
- **environmental inequality:** unevenness in access to natural resources and benefits from their exploitation; exposure to pollution and risks; and differences in the agency needed to adapt to such threats;
- **knowledge-based inequality:** differences in access and contribution to different sources and types of knowledge, as well as the consequences of these disparities.

Intersecting, compounding effects – on groups, on issues and goals

Inequalities are a matter of fairness and justice, but also a practical matter – threatening capacity to address other priorities.

- **High and rising inequality can act as an impediment to economic growth**, and dissipates the impact of growth on poverty reduction (Kanbur, 24).
- **Inequalities can limit our ability to respond to crises.** The effective management of the Ebola crisis was hindered by visible inequalities between local and expatriate medical staff, and between communities and elites, which undermined trust (Wilkinson and Brima, 31).
- **Inequalities are producing new manifestations related to nutrition and health:** the ‘stuffed and starved’ phenomenon of chronic undernourishment alongside rising obesity (Hossain, 33).
- There is a growing consensus that **systemic inequality between identity groups may spur conflict**, and evidence that countries with high levels of group-based inequalities are more likely to experience civil war (Østby, 25).

Interaction of Inequality Goal 10 and the other SDGs

(Source: Gaventa, 22)



Interactions between inequalities and environmental unsustainability

- Inequality and environmental unsustainability are deeply interlinked; tackling one without addressing the other is unlikely to succeed (Leach, 27; Narain, 29).
- Environmental shocks and stresses contribute to inequalities
- Inequality contributes to environmental degradation – those at the bottom forced to degrade, those at the top can pollute with impunity
- Inequalities compromise collective action to address environmental problems
- Common structures and processes are producing both inequalities and environmental unsustainability (less equal societies have greater carbon emissions per dollar of GNP - Power, Wilkinson and Pickett, 37).

There is a politics and a politics of knowledge to how such interactions are understood, addressed and prioritised in different contexts

So political inequalities, knowledge inequalities are also relevant

Pathways

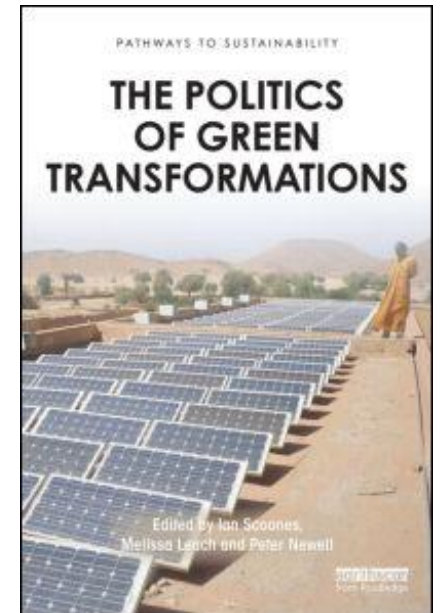
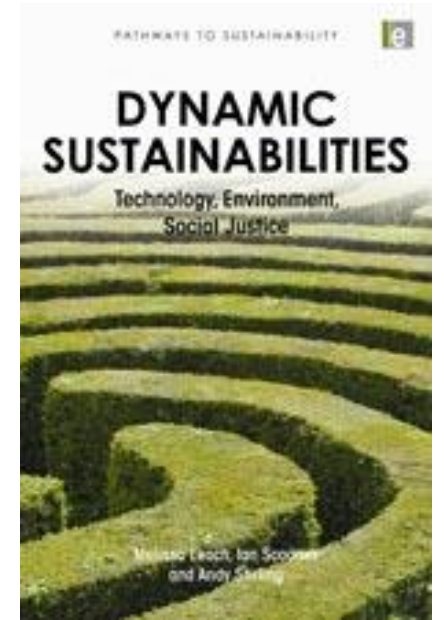
Human and environmental change are co-constructed and mutually entwined

(in the Anthropocene, human forces as major drivers of earth system change)

Pathways – alternative trajectories of intervention and change, supported by narratives, entwined with politics and power

Identifying and building transformative pathways towards sustainability and equality/social justice

Critical attention to dominant narratives and discourses and what they occlude....

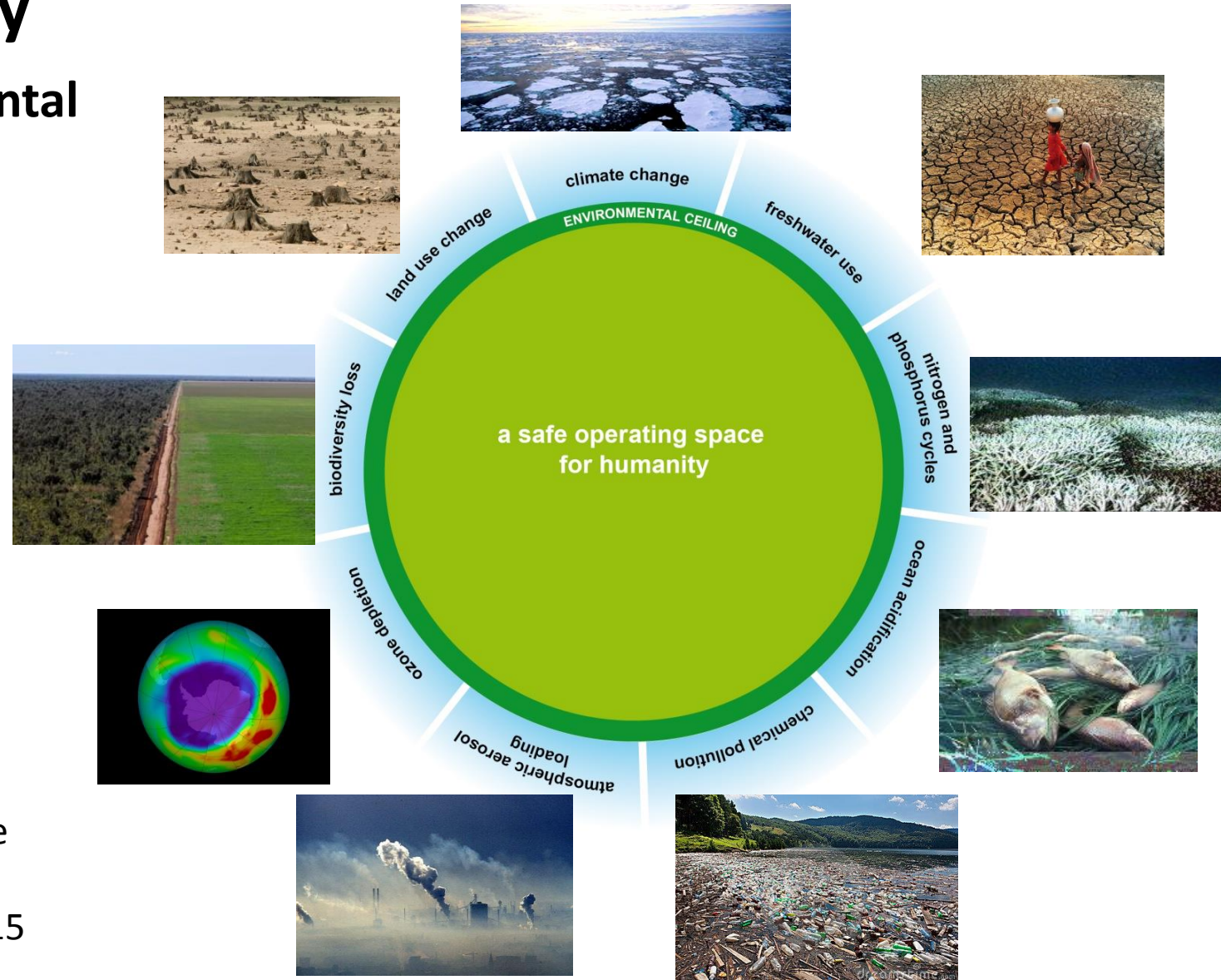


The environment-inequality nexus - narratives of crisis and scarcity

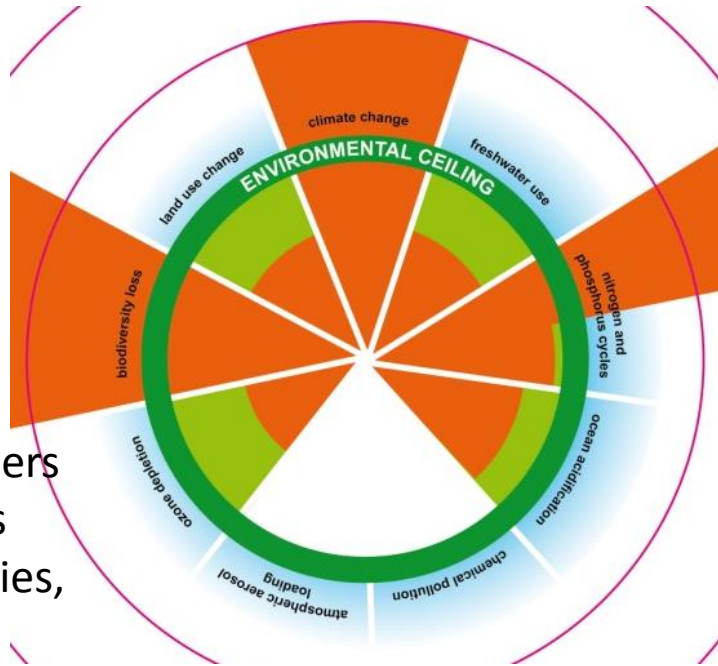
Interacting environmental changes...

'human environmental pressures have reached such a pace and intensity that they may cross tipping points, irreversibly altering the state of the Earth system' (Rockström 2015)

Planetary boundaries – Rockstrom et al 2009;
 Climate change and biosphere integrity as threatened core boundaries - Steffen et al 2015



Narratives of crisis and scarcity



Impending dangers
Shrinking spaces
Resource scarcities,
rushes, grabs
Nexus crises

Environmental shocks and stresses

environmental inequalities: unevenness in access to natural resources and benefits from their exploitation; exposure to pollution and risks; and differences in the agency needed to adapt to such threats

Air pollution



Food price crises



Water scarcity



Energy poverty



Worsening poverty,
quality of life, other
forms of inequality

Narratives of redemption and opportunity – the Good Anthropocene

‘humanity has become the dominant force of change on earth’... ‘humanity is in the driving seat’ (Rockström 2015)

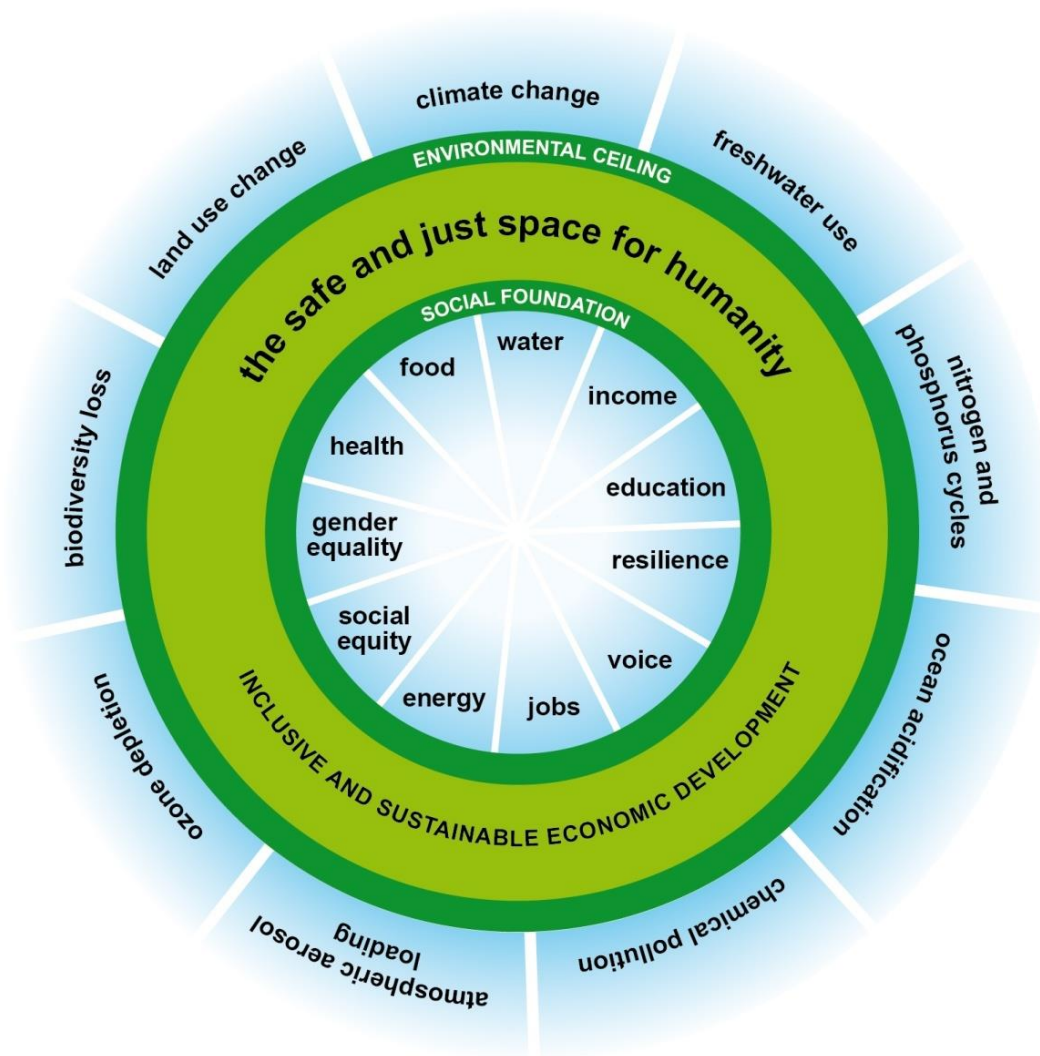
‘the urgency of the challenges ahead demands a **two-prong strategy**: acting within our current obsolete development framework to bend environmental curves as much as possible, while simultaneously fostering the longer-term shift in consciousness to values and institutions that equitably integrate people and planet’ (Rockström 2015)

‘As scholars, scientists, campaigners, and citizens, we write with the conviction that knowledge and technology, applied with wisdom, might allow for a **good, or even great Anthropocene**... to make life better for people, stabilise the climate, and protect the natural world’ (The Breakthrough Institute, 2015 An Ecomodernist Manifesto)

Reduced inequalities as part of the ‘good Anthropocene?’

Politics and pathways

- from safe space to 'safe and just' space for humanity

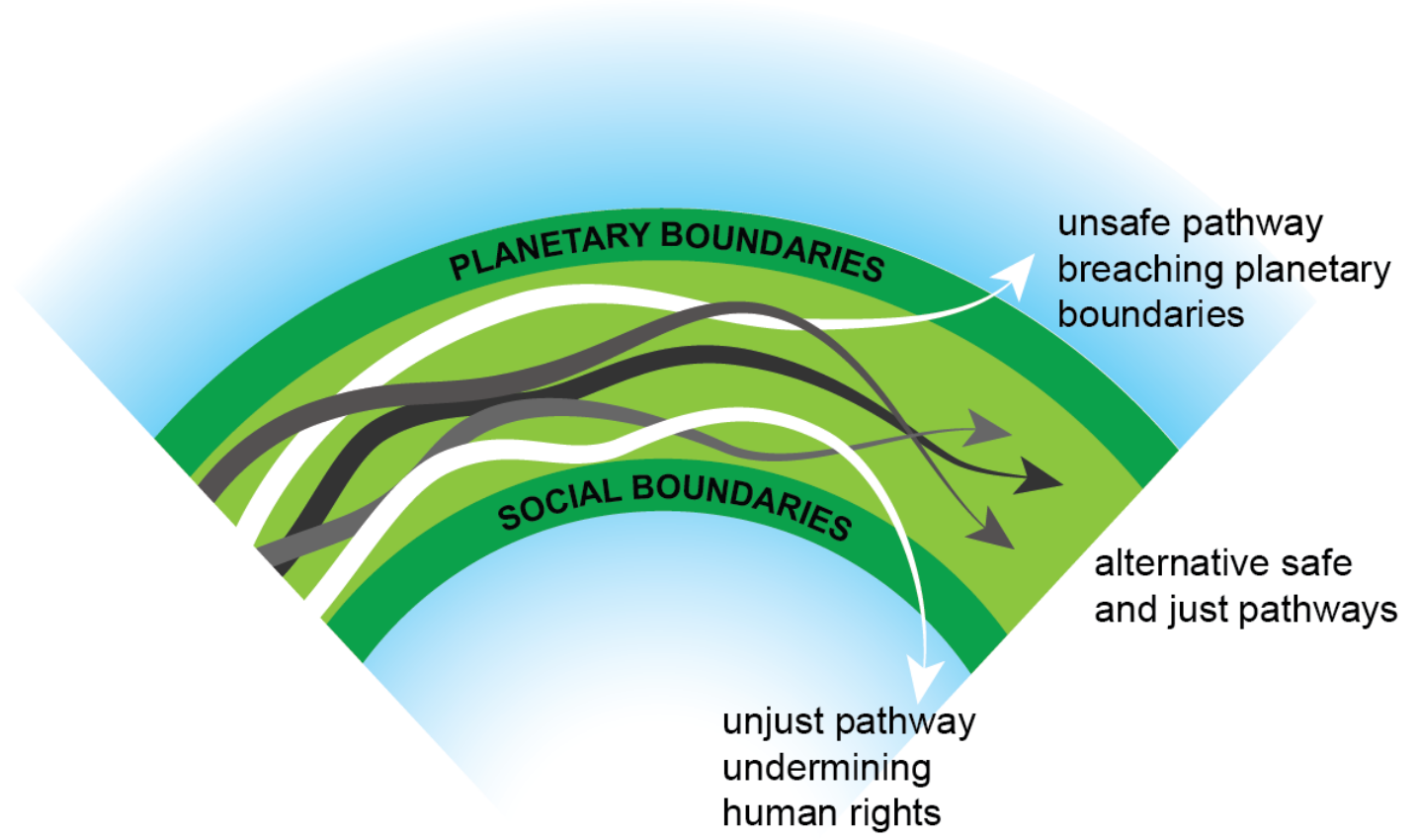


Source: Raworth 2012,
based on Rockström et
al 2009

Politics and pathways

– pathways within a safe and just space

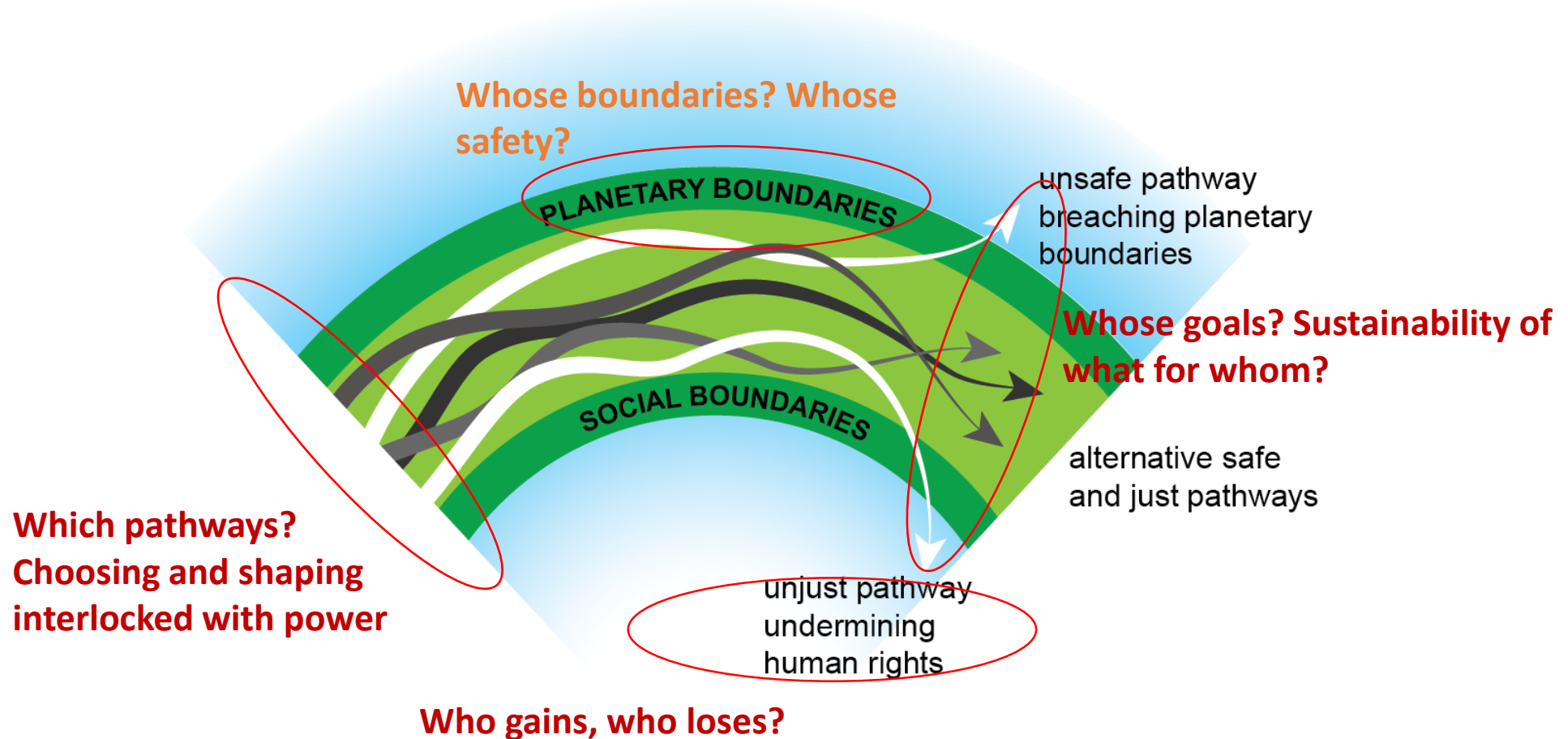
Possibilities within the safe and just space:
diverse pathways, alternative directions and varying distributional outcomes



Source: Leach,
Raworth and
Rockström
2013

Politics and pathways - politicising pathways

Possibilities within the safe and just space:
diverse pathways, alternative directions and varying distributional outcomes



Drivers of transformative pathways

- Technology-led
- Market-led
- State-led
- Citizen-led
- Transformative alliances, hybrid governance

Technology-led

‘Modern technologies, by using natural ecosystem flows and services more efficiently, offer a real chance of reducing the totality of human impacts on the biosphere.’ (The Ecomodernist Manifesto, Breakthrough Institute, 2015)

Energy, transport, waste management, food and agriculture, water management, pollution, intensification, desalinisation...

Questions of technology choice, scale, institutional arrangements, access and control - affect whether inequalities reduced – or increased



Alternative 'sustainable food futures' – who gains and who loses?



small-scale farmer livelihoods



Biochar and climate-smart agriculture



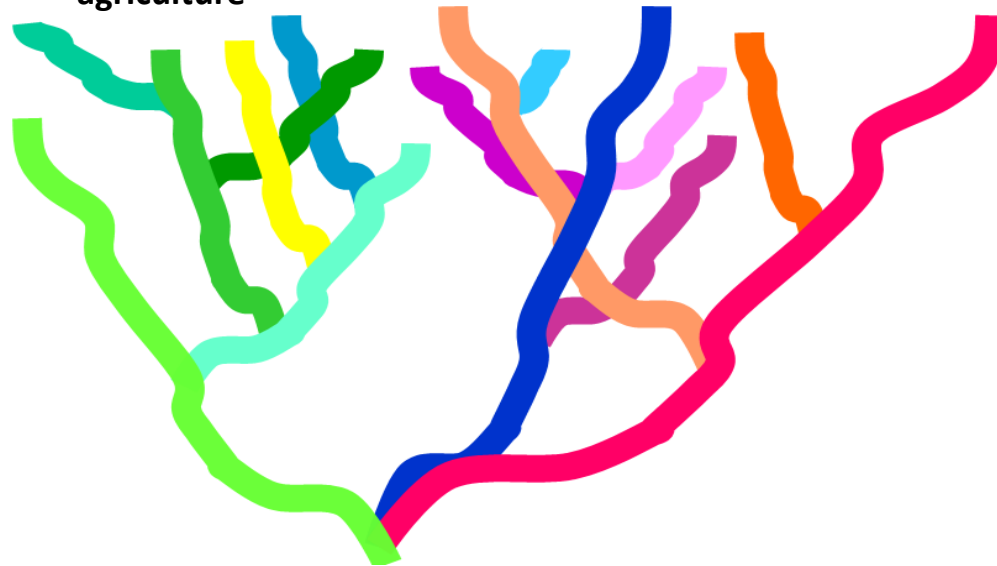
industrial hybrids



transgenics



participatory breeding



Green technology developments can undermine livelihoods and equality

“Waste to Energy Plants in Delhi destroying Waste Picker Livelihoods and harming the environment”

“Waste to Energy is the new craze in waste management in India. Fuelled by the accessibility of carbon credit financing, these plants are not only environmentally unsound but is also competing for waste with the hundreds of thousands of waste pickers who eke out a livelihood from recycling trash.”



Market-led

- Green business initiatives – profit from the new green economy, but also triple bottom-line accounting (environmental, economic, social)
- Business and private sector energy initiatives – eg. [Breakthrough Energy Coalition](#) (supported by Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg, among others)
- Payment schemes for ecosystem services – carbon, water, wildlife.... (*“Selling nature to save it”* - Kathy McAfee 2010)

Ecosystem Marketplace



Green markets can become 'green grabs' that intensify inequalities

Green grabbing –
The appropriation of
resources for
environmental ends



Original artwork (water colour on 20 x 30 illustration board, 2011) by Filipino painter Boy Dominguez
'Green Grabbing', JPS Special Issue 39(2), April 2012. Edited by James Fairhead, Melissa Leach and Ian Scoones

State-led

- Commitments to international agreements – and accountability to deliver
- Policy frameworks
- Planning – including across sectors
- Regulation – of innovation, risks, private sector initiatives
- Entrepreneurial states (Mariana Mazzucato) – setting directions, providing ‘patient’ finance (eg. solar power in China, wind power in Denmark)

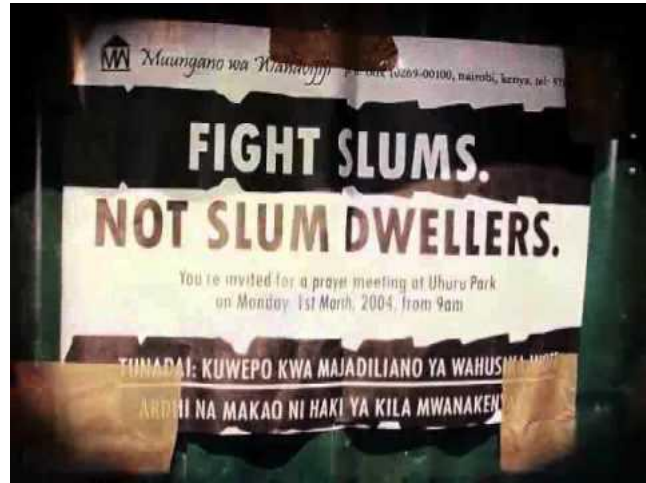


Examples of state policy measures which have helped reduce inequalities

Policy type	Examples of policies and measures that contributed to reducing inequality in specific contexts and settings	Countries/regions where implemented	See article by
Macroeconomic policies	Investment in infrastructure	China	Li (15)
	Reduction of large balance of payments deficits and debt accumulation	Latin America	Comia (46)
	Fiscal policy and better management of public spending leading to reduced budget deficit	Latin America*	Comia (46)
Providing quality education for all; investing in human capital	Increased public expenditure on education and massive increase in secondary education enrolment	Latin America	Comia (46) Medeiros (21)
	Abolishing fees in public primary education; school feeding programmes	Sub-Saharan Africa	Adesina (18)
Regulating the marketplace and strengthening labour market institutions	Minimum wage policy	Latin America	Belser (6) Berg (44) Comia (46) Medeiros (21)
	Reduction of the wage gap between skilled and unskilled labour (linked to massive investment in education) between urban and rural areas	Latin America China	Comia (46) Li (15)
	Active role for labour market institutions (unions, collective bargaining)		Berg (44)
Fiscal redistribution mechanisms	Reforming tax rates to emphasize more progressive taxation, increasing revenue collection, and reducing exemptions for top incomes	Latin America	Comia (46) Gómez et al. (47)
	Changing fiscal policy, with more progressive taxation of farmers in rural areas	China	Li (15)
Social protection policies	Conditional cash transfers	Brazil's Bolsa Familia, Mexico's Oportunidades	Roelen et al. (55) Comia (46) Medeiros (21)
	Unconditional cash transfers	South Africa (Social Grant programme) China 'Dibao programme' (guaranteeing a minimum income for poor households)	Roelen et al. (55) Li (15)
	Social pension schemes	Latin America	Roelen et al. (55) Comia (46)
	Rural pension scheme Rural social protection network and medical scheme	China	Li (15)
	Food security programme	Ethiopia (Productive Safety Net Programme)	Roelen et al. (55)
Anti-discrimination legislation	Civil Rights Acts and antidiscrimination laws	USA	Harris (20)
	Affirmative action in access to education, employment, political positions	Malaysia India USA	Roelen et al. (55) Stewart (7) Nazreen (51)
Improved governance	Clearly identified implementation agencies working as 'learning organizations'	Education programmes implemented by Pratham in the state of Bihar (India)	Woolcock (58)
	Improved accountability and transparency	Scandinavian countries as the model	Rotheim (59)
	Automatic exchange of financial accounts information to reduce tax evasion	Being implemented by OECD and G20	Moore (50) Deacon (45)

Citizen-led

Citizen-based solidarity economies – eg. India, Indonesia, Ethiopia and Brazil; local initiatives empower poor and vulnerable adults, especially women, to diversify their income sources and access microcredit; help develop solidarity and self-help networks (Mathie et al., 64).



Slum and shack dwellers' networks

Food sovereignty and agroecology



Collective action by citizens is opening spaces for additional solutions to inequality that can inspire inclusive policy innovation

Overcoming paradoxes of power:

Those with most influence over the rules often have the least interest in changing them. Economic inequalities change the rules of the game, narrowing spaces and opportunities for decision-making.

‘the wealthy [are able] to shape politics in their own favor against rival arguments that focus on the effects of inequality on citizens’ objective interests’ (Solt 2008)

Grass-roots mobilization and political action can often be effective in breaking down deeply connected economic, social and political inequalities (Gaventa and Runciman, 12).

Public participation can increase the political will to reduce inequality. A high level of public participation in Brazil’s ‘Zero Hunger’ effort was crucial to the country’s turnaround to reduced inequality (Green, 66).

Transformative alliances

Novel relationships between state, market and societal actors that challenge and rework political, economic and social structures

Alliances in/for solar revolutions

- Solar home systems in Kenya – SMEs, innovators, pay-as-you-go providers, NGOs
- Markets interact with social values and habits; home/community solar becomes normal



Alliances in/for universal health coverage

The mobilization of doctors, patient groups and political forces around the design of a Patient's Bill of Rights was a significant contributor to a new Health Insurance Law on universal coverage in Egypt (Bayoumi, 30).

Emergent pathways – involving alignments in diverse bottom-up marginal interests; small changes can add up to big ones



Towards pathways to sustainability and equality

- Challenge unsustainable and unjust pathways, appreciate and seek out alternatives
- Recognise multiple pathways, bottom-up as well as top-down, and across global, national, regional, local settings
- Attend to plurality – to respect and respond to diverse perspectives and contexts
- Seek out synergies, beware of and compensate for trade-offs (sustainability-equity)
- Foster inclusive, democratic debate around goals, and means to get there

Thank you

m.leach@ids.ac.uk