

Green Recovery Dialogues

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See the video at <https://youtu.be/7Jhq6C5IPUw>

Hello Glasgow, it's a great privilege to be part of this dialogue with you. I've been asked to speak about our need to rethink consumption and to envision a transition to a caring economy that is inclusive, localised and just, and one that puts wellbeing at its heart. That's something that I've been focused on for a long time in my own writing and research and I am so pleased to be able to talk about these issues with you today. So let's start with inclusion. I think the most important feature of inclusion is fairness and a certain level of equality. That's where we need to really look at where we are in the global system today as well as within our own countries. So if we look across the globe we see increasing levels of inequality of wealth and income. Levels that have gotten to a historically unprecedented gap. Today the richest 10% of the globe's population has 85% of the wealth, and by this, we're not talking about income but wealth, actually assets or net worth. The bottom half of the world's population has only 1%. We can also look at this by particular countries - the UK, which has 4% of the world's wealth, has less than 1% of the global population; India, which has just a bit less than the UK and in terms of total wealth - 3½% - has nearly 20% of the world's population. So big divergence in terms of population share versus wealth share. But also within countries there's tremendous inequality that we need to address. In the United Kingdom, for example, 20% of people are currently below the poverty line, and the top 10% of the population has seven times the income of the bottom 10%. The UK is the fifth most unequal country in Europe. Of course, you may be wondering why I, an American, is talking to you about inequality when my country is far more unequal and has currently gotten to levels of extreme inequality that we've never seen before. And this is really important because those levels of extreme inequality are a big part of what keep us from transitioning to a caring economy, to a just, an inclusive economy, as a small number of people - now multi-billionaires - are able to exercise a stranglehold over not just our economy but also our political system. So creating more equal economies is the absolute foundation of getting to a caring economy, a sustainable economy, addressing the climate crisis, and transforming into a smaller scale, more localised economy. Well, the second characteristic is justice. And here we can think about justice toward each other - specifically I'm on the consumption side, I'm thinking about labour conditions - but also justice towards other species, the impacts of our consumption system on the planet. So starting with each other, well, we can take a, you know, a famous example, probably the most well-known, and that are the injustices in our apparel system where we have developed a system of sweatshops around the globe in which mobile capital seeks always the lowest labour costs. So, beginning in the 1980s, investment from the wealthy countries of the world started moving to the poor countries to find cheap sweated labour to make our garments and our apparel, our footwear. And, as workers in those countries - this process started in South Korea, for example - as they began to organise and get higher wages, the capital moves to China, to Vietnam, and now to forced labour in China with the development of, basically, concentration camps for Uyghurs. And that sort of forced, or enslaved, labour is at the basis of the global apparel system. It's in virtually all of the major fashion brands and retailers. Forced labour in agriculture as well; some of the best-known work has been done on enforced child labour in chocolate markets in sub-Saharan Africa. So we need an apparel system and a consumption system that is based on fair working conditions and fair wages for people all around the world and also fair treatment of the environment. This global sweatshop is based on toxic chemicals, excessive water use, high levels of CO2. Our industrialised agriculture system. - another key dimension of the consumption system - is responsible for an

outsized portion of greenhouse gas emissions, livestock being the most egregious area here, where we have industrialised farming that leads to very high levels of methane emissions for example. So we need a consumption system that reduces eco and carbon footprints, reduces toxics and is closed loop. And I think that to get that we really need to start thinking about scale. That the expansion to a global consumption system has brought with it these abuses on the labour and environment side and that part of how we have addressed 'just transition' is to shrink the scale for most of our consumption needs. We call this a local economy. It really means a regional economy and if we shrink the scale for where we produce and consume, and bringing that production and consumption closer together spatially, it's easier to know the impacts of what we're doing. We have the possibility of having more empowered consumers who demand fair and safe conditions of production is there. And it's much easier for smaller size groups to be democratic and accountable. Of course, there are some drawbacks to localised economies. We don't want to just solidify the inequalities in the global system I just talked about, in which rich regions stay rich and poor regions stay poor so we also need some equalising mechanisms as we localise. And we should remember also that local economies or regional economies don't mean autarky, they don't mean a totally closed-off system, we do need some trade but we need the right kind of trade. It can enhance wellbeing where there are true differences in ability to produce, for example agricultural conditions, but trade needs to be put in its place not too much of it. It needs to be fair and it needs to be managed it shouldn't be the engine that's driving the global economy as it has been in recent decades. So finally what about wellbeing? What yields wellbeing? Early in my career I wrote about something I called the 'work and spend cycle' in which you had long hours of work which led to a continual ratcheting up in terms of standards of living that people felt they needed to keep up with. That ended up putting us into a self-defeating rat race in which nobody was really getting that much better off. We were all just running harder and harder to stay in place. To get out of that rat race we really need to focus on what yields true wellbeing and we have a lot of evidence about this from social science now that's come to be done over the last few decades. We know that social connection, tight bonds with family and friends are absolutely central to wellbeing, health is central, meaning in life is really important for wellbeing, and giving people time, and we also know that inequality - whether it's class inequality so inequalities of income, racialised inequalities, gender inequalities, inequalities of ability - all of those inequalities are very corrosive of people's wellbeing. So in order to have wellbeing we not only need social connection, meaning and time, we also need fairness and we need an end to oppressive inequalities of race, class, gender, and so forth. Getting those things is very hard in a highly consumerist hyper-capitalist economy and I think that a transition to an economy which is less consumerist and more focused on wellbeing, more focused on fairness and equality, actually is the path that can give us mental, physical, social, and planetary health. If we slow down, if we work a bit less, if we focus on what we really need - on food, shelter, health care, and education being the primary needs - we'll be happier and we'll also have a more peaceful world. If COVID-19 has taught us anything, it's to see that we need more of what really matters and less of what in the end feels superficial or problematic. Climate chaos is going to force us to reckon with this reality over and over again. The kind of reality that we've been forced to focus on with COVID-19. And the lessons that we learn, whether it's from a pandemic or a climate emergency, are to teach us the importance of solidarity and fairness, of making sure we have everyone's basic needs met, of opting for security rather than dying with the most toys, and of looking out for one another rather than looking out for number one. Those are the priorities we should be bringing to COP26 and if we can get the governments of the world to focus on those, we have a fighting chance of getting a robust response to the climate emergency. Good luck with your dialogues and many thanks to you Glaswegians for hosting this important gathering. I'm privileged to be a part of it.