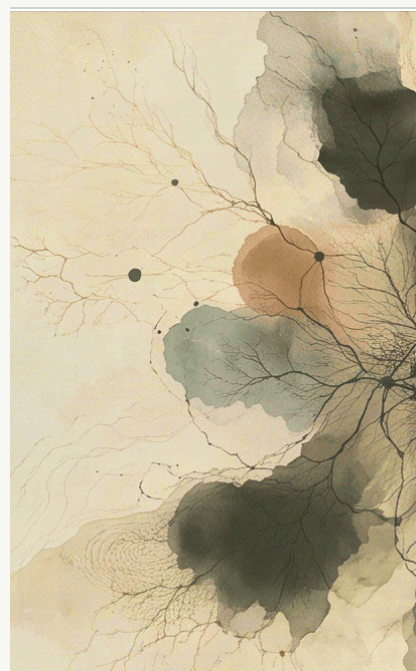


01

BEYOND GROWTH

Modern education systems were built for an era of industrial expansion that is now exceeding planetary limits.



KEY MESSAGES

- Education systems are deeply embedded in prevailing economic and political models, often reproducing the logics and priorities of extractive development.
- Shaped by carbon-intensive growth and resource extraction, the dominant development paradigm increasingly destabilizes Earth's biophysical systems and social foundations.
- Education's continued alignment with growth-oriented development constrains its potential to support more just, regenerative, and ecologically grounded futures, calling for a broader reorientation of what education is for, what it values and measures, and whose knowledge shapes learning.

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INSIGHT

The current trajectory of global development is fundamentally unsustainable. A model historically powered by fossil energy, resource extraction, and the pursuit of economic growth for short-term gain is now destabilizing the very systems that sustain all life. More than fifty years ago, *The Limits to Growth* (1972) warned that continued exponential growth in population and industrial production on a finite planet risked ecological and economic overshoot and decline. The risks it identified are increasingly evident. The 2025 *Planetary Health Check* reports that seven of nine planetary boundaries have now been breached (Planetary Boundaries Science, 2025). The cascading disruption of interconnected systems—climate, biodiversity, water, food, political, and social—exposes the limits of a global architecture increasingly struggling to address the polycrises it has helped produce.

The post-war development architecture—organized through multilateral institutions, foreign aid, modernization agendas, and a growing commitment to economic growth as a measure of progress—is under increasing strain. Official development assistance has fallen sharply, with cuts concentrated among several of the largest donors, while geopolitical tensions, rising defense and security spending, fiscal pressures, and shifting domestic priorities are reshaping development finance. Multilateral channels are also under growing pressure, including substantial reductions in core funding to UN institutions (OECD, 2026). At the same time, long-standing definitions of progress and prosperity are being questioned, including the continued reliance on GDP as a dominant measure of societal progress despite its inability to account adequately for social and ecological wellbeing (Nature, 2025). A development model long presented as a pathway toward global equity and sustainability has not prevented ecological overshoot or persistent social inequities. Humanity is living outside the safe and just corridor for people and the planet (Rockström et al., 2021).

Education became closely entangled with industrial and growth-oriented economies, including through labor-force preparation and the organization of schooling around competition and individual achievement. Influential critiques of capitalist schooling have documented how education can reproduce labor-market hierarchies and prevailing economic relations (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Human-capital theory further strengthened the framing of education as an investment in individual productivity and economic growth (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1964). This framing remains influential in contemporary development policy, where education and skills continue to be positioned as drivers of employment, productivity, and economic growth (World Bank, 2026). In higher education, these connections extend across curriculum, research, institutional operations, governance, and relationships with wider society (McCowan, 2025). Efforts to “green” education can remain within assumptions of petroculture and perpetual growth when innovation, technological solutions, and green growth are pursued without deeper reconsideration of economic expansion, educational purpose, and human–nature relations (for related critiques and alternative framings, see Karsgaard & Shultz, 2025; Kwauk & Casey, 2021; Silova et al., 2025).

Importantly, the development paradigm is not only an economic model; it is also an organizing framework for how education is understood and governed. Sterling (2001, 2024) traces how mechanistic and instrumental assumptions—privileging fragmentation, prediction, control, and measurable outcomes—have become embedded in educational thought and practice. These assumptions resonate with the human–capital and modernization logics through which education has

been positioned in relation to economic growth, productivity, employment, and societal progress (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1964; World Bank, 2026). Together, these logics can narrow educational purpose toward standardized and economically legible outcomes while marginalizing other purposes and pathways, particularly those rooted in care, cultural renewal, land-based practices, relationality, and more-than-human relations. They also leave deeper questions about what education is for—and for whom—less visible.

Education's entanglement with growth-oriented development can reinforce patterns that contribute to ecological overshoot while undermining conditions for human and more-than-human flourishing. To operate within the safe and just space for humanity (Raworth, 2017; Rockström et al., 2021), education must be reconfigured as an essential infrastructure for sustaining life within ecological limits and across biocultural diversity—the interconnected vitality of ecosystems, languages, lifeways, and knowledge systems. Such reorientation also calls for greater epistemic plurality, bringing Earth system science into dialogue with Indigenous, local, land-based, and relational knowledge systems while respecting their distinct foundations and forms of validation. These knowledge systems offer distinct ways of understanding ecological change, socioecological relationships, adaptation, and responsibility to place, while their encounters can expand the possibilities available for responding to planetary change (Tengö et al., 2014; IPCC, 2022).

These conditions mark a moment of rupture and reorientation. As the limits of growth-centered development become increasingly visible, education is implicated both in reproducing existing systems and in opening possibilities for alternatives. Reorientation reaches beyond improving efficiency within existing arrangements; it involves deeper shifts in educational purposes, relationships, institutions, and measures of success. Education can contribute to collective resilience by strengthening interdependence, sustaining plural ways of knowing and living, and supporting the collective learning and action needed to navigate change within the limits of a shared and finite planet.

This reorientation is already taking shape across diverse contexts through educational practices grounded in reciprocity, resilience, and more-than-human ethics. These are situated responses to changing conditions and vital resources for rethinking education's purposes and possibilities. Read together, they suggest that alternatives to growth-centered education do not follow a single model; they emerge through different histories, relationships, struggles, and ways of knowing. The question is not whether change is possible, but whether we are willing to confront the political, economic, and epistemic forces that keep education tethered to a growth-centered paradigm that is destabilizing the conditions of life itself.

01 Pathways for transformation

These pathways outline the foundational shifts required to move education beyond the development paradigm and toward just, regenerative, and life-sustaining futures.

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- 01 Decouple education from economic growth imperatives.** Education systems must move beyond growth-aligned measures of educational progress toward measures of planetary wellbeing, ecological integrity, and intergenerational equity.

 - 02 Realign education systems with planetary and social boundaries.** Embed these boundaries across curriculum, infrastructure, procurement, governance, and daily operations, reflecting the realities of a finite planet and the conditions for collective survival.

 - 03 Strengthen public investment and participatory, place-based governance.** Provide sustained public financing and shared decision-making arrangements that support educational equity, social and ecological resilience, and long-term collective wellbeing.

 - 04 Reorient education toward relational and regenerative futures.** Center diverse knowledge systems, interdependence, collective wellbeing, and long-term responsibility to people, place, and planet.
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ILLUSTRATIVE PATHWAYS IN PRACTICE

The following examples illuminate different dimensions of moving beyond growth-centered development: redefining prosperity, reorienting educational purpose, and sustaining plural and autonomous ways of learning and living.

Reframing Prosperity: Doughnut Economics in Education

The Doughnut Economics Action Lab (DEAL) is helping schools, universities, and cities rethink education beyond GDP and endless economic growth. Inspired by Kate Raworth's Doughnut Economics framework, participating institutions redesign learning around ecological ceilings, social foundations, and the question of what it means to thrive within planetary limits. Rather than preparing learners primarily for economic productivity, these initiatives reposition education as a foundation for regenerative and distributive futures.

Learn more

<https://doughnuteconomics.org>

Learning Beyond Growth: Education for Degrowth

Degrowth education asks a fundamental question: what might education become if economic growth were no longer its organizing horizon? Initiatives such as Research & Degrowth create learning spaces that connect ecological economics and political ecology with environmental justice, activism, and transformative practice, exploring societies organized around sufficiency, care, equity, ecological regeneration, and collective wellbeing. These approaches invite learners to question growth-centered assumptions while imagining and experimenting with ways of living well within planetary limits. Degrowth does not mean “less education”; it calls for a deeper reorientation of its purposes—from preparing learners for growth-dependent economies toward cultivating the knowledge, relationships, and collective agency needed for just and regenerative futures.

Learn more

Research & Degrowth. *Education*. <https://degrowth.org/projects/education/>

White, R. J. (2024). Imagining education beyond growth: A post-qualitative inquiry into the educational consequences of post-growth economic thought. *Curriculum Perspectives*, 44, 539–549.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s41297-024-00232-3>

Tannock, S. (2025). On education and degrowth. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 46(4), 454–468. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2025.2475957>

Sumak Kawsay (Buen Vivir): Reimagining Development and Its Contradictions

Sumak Kawsay (Buen Vivir) offers an influential challenge to development understood primarily through continuous economic growth. The concept encompasses diverse Andean Indigenous traditions, intellectual currents, and political struggles that foreground collective wellbeing, reciprocity, cultural plurality, and relationships with the living world. In Ecuador, these ideas entered the 2008 Constitution and subsequently shaped debates over educational purpose, intercultural bilingual education, teacher preparation, and relationships among knowledge, community, and nature. Their institutionalization has also exposed deep tensions: scholars and Indigenous movements have questioned whether state interpretations of Buen Vivir transform dominant development logics or accommodate them within continuing extractivism and centralized governance. These tensions make Buen Vivir especially instructive for education. Moving beyond growth reaches beyond adopting new language or frameworks; it raises deeper questions about who defines educational purpose, whose knowledge shapes learning, and whether institutions themselves are transformed in the process.

Learn more

FLACSOAndes — Sumak Kawsay <https://www.flacsoandes.edu.ec/agora/documentos-por-tema/sumak-kawsay>

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