

Beyond Growth: Advancing Global Sustainability through Inclusion and Innovation at the G20

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Executive Summary

This policy brief critically examines the G20's response to the climate crisis, highlighting the ambitious yet insubstantial agenda led by Brazilian President Lula. It argues for the adoption of bold, transformative policies, including degrowth — a radical shift away from profit-driven growth toward sustainable development. By analysing Lula's initiatives, such as the wealth tax and bioeconomy efforts, and examining alternative measures, the report underscores the urgency of global accountability and unified action. As the climate emergency escalates into an unparalleled global catastrophe, this paper emphasises that symbolic gestures are insufficient; the G20 must lead with concrete commitments to spearhead transformative action or risk condemning the planet to irreversible devastation.

Lula's Climate Vision: Bold Promises or Empty Performance?

The climate crisis is not a distant threat — it is an unfolding catastrophe. By 2100, up to [three-quarters of the global population](#) could face life-threatening climate conditions, with record-breaking heatwaves, catastrophic wildfires, severe droughts, and devastating floods becoming the norm. These events are already driving food insecurity, mass displacement, and health crises on an unprecedented scale. As the UN warns, '[climate change is the single biggest health threat facing humanity](#)'. Addressing this crisis demands urgent, coordinated action, and the G20 nations — representing [80%](#) of global carbon emissions — must lead the charge.

Brazil stands at the forefront of global climate action, shouldering a significant responsibility to enact change. Under President Lula's leadership, the nation has demonstrated bold environmental

ambitions for the G20 Summit. Among these is the proposal for a [Global Alliance of Actions to Combat Climate Change](#) aimed at fostering international collaboration, Lula pushed for [90%](#) of energy derived from new renewable forces, employing global leaders to bring climate neutrality targets forward to 2040. Additionally, Brazil has launched the billion-dollar [Tropical Forest Finance Facility](#), revolutionising forest protection efforts worldwide, which aligns with Lula's proclaimed mandate to end deforestation in the Amazon rainforest by 2030. Most notably, the [Bioeconomy Initiative](#) has brought nations together as it centres around prioritising the concept of biodiversity for sustainable economic growth.

Lula has masterfully framed his G20 agenda as a vision of environmental prosperity, painting it as a green prosperity agenda for the planet. Yet, beneath the vibrant brushstrokes of ambition lies a blank canvas still waiting to be filled with detail. These transformative promises remain just that — promises. Without tangible commitments and actionable frameworks, this bold narrative risks fading into a collection of lofty ideals rather than a roadmap to real change. The G20 lacks the authoritative power to enforce its policies, and any pledges made by global leaders are framed as simply voluntary — there still remain no decisive checks on national sustainability outcomes. There was, of

course, the [2015 Paris Agreement](#) — the most significant legally binding climate treaty, holding nations to account by setting clear targets, including a 43% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and limiting temperature increases to 1.5°C. This should have been a wake-up call for nations to transform their economies to be clean and green, yet few are on track to meet that critical deadline, with temperatures predicted to soar. The G20 appears to be falling into a similar pattern — becoming little more than a performative exercise, allowing countries to claim progress without any substantial pressure or accountability for their inaction.

Towards Degrowth: Why is Bold Action Needed?

We are in the midst of a crisis, and it demands nothing short of transformational action. As António Guterres emphasised during a press briefing at the G20, the call for an 'ambitious' policy is not just a suggestion — it is a mandate for an aggressive, international, and inclusive approach. This ambition must manifest as a comprehensive strategy that fully and rapidly decouples our economies from fossil fuels, with developed nations leveraging their vast resources to support the Global South in transitioning to a sustainable future. Such a policy must align with the principles of degrowth, prioritising the planet over unchecked economic expansion.

Degrowth is the solution to the climate emergency. It challenges the destructive logic of corporate greed and exposes the obsession of the Global North with endless economic growth - more profits and more resource extraction. In his book *How Degrowth Will Save the World*, Jason Hickel dubs this mindset '[growthism](#)', highlighting how the relentless pursuit of ever-increasing profits has morphed into an ideology. Yet this so-called economic utopia, driven by the need for higher labour productivity to meet insatiable demand, only breeds instability. As labour needs decrease, unemployment rises, and citizens are forced to work more to afford products they don't actually need. Growthism is a vicious cycle of demand and consumption that is plaguing the Global North and accelerating the climate crisis. Degrowth, in the words of Hickel, looks at bringing '[the economy back into balance with the living world in a way that reduces inequality and improves human well-being](#)'. The G20 must, therefore, recentre policies away from corporate profit and power and towards prioritising the environment.

Understandably, this policy would be met with resistance from global leaders, as it calls for a radical departure away from traditional development norms. While such a shift may seem extreme, it is ultimately the only viable path forward. Policies that prioritise corporate profit and power only serve to exacerbate the climate crisis,

making transformative change not just necessary but urgent. This would likely provoke opposition from G20 leaders, particularly from nations that advocate for minimal economic intervention. Argentina has been anything but reserved in its criticism of what it perceives as excessive regulation by the G20. Following the first day of the summit, Argentina's President, Javier Milei, released an [official statement](#) declaring that an increased 'presence of the State in the economy... [will result in] the exodus of both the population and capital, in addition to millions of deaths of human lives'.

While many global leaders maintain a narrow view of state regulation, a policy of degrowth offers numerous benefits. Transitioning to clean energy, for instance, provides a significant opportunity to expand the labour force by creating new jobs in essential collective projects - such as insulating buildings or regenerating ecosystems. This approach fosters a workforce focused on meeting human needs, rather than accentuating capital accumulation, driving economic stability as workers find greater fulfilment in their roles. Moreover, the long-term advantages of sustainable policies are undeniable, paving the way for a transformative green future. Furthermore, if competition and growth ideology are the driving forces behind change, then policymakers can leverage global cooperation to spark innovation and

ambition, accelerating the achievement of net zero goals.

How can the G20 Deliver Degrowth?

Degrowth is not an unattainable ideal; in fact, there are aspects of it that have already been incorporated into G20 policy. Lula's proposed global 2% wealth tax on billionaires is a bold and practical step towards addressing wealth inequality. Wealth redistribution lies at the heart of degrowth principles, acknowledging that the affluent disproportionately drive excessive emissions and resource consumption. The tax offers the potential to generate [\\$250 billion annually](#). These funds could be channelled directly into climate action, which would have an unprecedented impact on increasing sustainability. The [Leaders' Declaration](#) stated that G20 leaders seek 'to engage cooperatively to ensure that ultra-high-net-worth individuals are effectively taxed', whether or not this international collaboration will be successful is yet to be determined - however, this still marks a huge step in the right direction. It would represent a pivotal shift away from capitalist domination, highlighting the urgent need to focus policies on wealth redistribution and inclusive development.

Degrowth also aligns with COP28's call for a [just, orderly and equitable](#) transition away from fossil fuels, a concept that the G20 has hinted at with its principles for [just and](#)

[inclusive](#) energy transitions yet still fails to fully incorporate into its policy. This framework advocates for a global decoupling of growth from emissions on a global scale. Currently, fossil fuels account for [70%](#) of greenhouse gas emissions, and G20 nations dominate this sector. If these nations commit to shifting toward clean energy — such as Lula's push for a bioeconomy that includes forest regeneration — the climate benefits could be transformative. However, these efforts can only succeed if every G20 nation embraces them fully. They must set an example for other nations, ensuring that no nation can shy away from implementing sustainable policies. By introducing measures like a tax on the ultra-wealthy, billionaires could no longer evade taxation through offshore accounts, creating a more equitable foundation for global climate action.

Although not a member of G20, [Sweden's carbon tax](#) serves as a powerful example of how effectively decoupling economic growth from greenhouse gas emissions can work. As the highest carbon tax in the world, it has successfully reduced carbon emissions while ensuring the economy continues to thrive. This model offers clear benefits, yet Sweden remains the only nation that has implemented carbon restrictions that align with the Paris Agreement. Once again, this highlights a troubling pattern: nations cherry-pick environmental policies, discarding others to

the wind — policies that, fittingly, could be propelled forward by the turbines they have yet to build.

Hickel emphasises that degrowth's success hinges on widespread political support; it cannot remain a top-down or abstract ideology. For degrowth to drive meaningful social and environmental progress, it must be rooted in alliances, solidarity, and collective action. The G20 forum is the place where commitment from global leaders could be achieved, it has the possibility to move forward from conventions like the 2015 Agreement. If the G20 were ever to champion degrowth, it would require unified commitment from global leaders. As the environmental crisis intensifies, continuing to prioritise unchecked economic expansion only deepens the destruction. Leaders like Milei would need to recognise that the only way forward is a shift towards sustainability, where economic models are recalibrated to address the urgent need for environmental preservation and social equity.

More importantly, degrowth must evolve into a substantive and inclusive discourse, amplifying the voices of actors often marginalised in forums like the G20. Lula's policy on Bioeconomy is significant as it incorporates Indigenous activism and knowledge of environmental sustainability into the global sphere. The Brazilian president opened the summit by stating: ['Those who have always been invisible will be at the center of the international](#)

[agenda](#)'. This aligns with the principles of inclusivity within degrowth. The G20, as a platform for shaping international policy, has the potential to champion such approaches, ensuring that sustainability is driven by collective knowledge and equitable participation. Ultimately, for degrowth to succeed, it must transcend policy and become a powerful social movement capable of transforming the world.

The Way Forward

The climate crisis is spiralling out of control, threatening to destabilise ecosystems, economies and communities worldwide. Moreover, [the small](#) and less-developed states most vulnerable to these outcomes are, in general, those that are [neither G20 members nor](#) responsible for the past two centuries of greenhouse gas emissions. So, unless the world applies '[emergency brakes](#)' to capitalism, we risk an uncontrollable descent into irreversible climate chaos. Addressing this crisis requires more than incremental reform; it demands a fundamental rethinking of development.

The G20 represents the global elite and the overwhelming majority of carbon emitters; it is, therefore, uniquely positioned to lead this transformation. A radical shift away from the growth imperative to a climate-first economy is not only necessary but urgent. This new paradigm must prioritise

environmental sustainability, social justice, and equitable resource distribution as core principles of global governance — acting as a systemic overhaul of how we define progress and allocate resources. A binding international framework must replace voluntary agreements with enforceable commitments to drastically reduce emissions, halt deforestation, and phase out fossil fuels. Crucial to this is the enforcement of Lula's proposed tax on the ultra-rich. If G20 leaders were to enforce

this on a global scale, it would symbolise a decisive stand against industrial greed — one bold step by Lula, one monumental leap for a degrowth future.

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