Decoupling Well-Being from Resource Use





Reconciling economic competitiveness with societal well-being and planetary boundaries

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A story in four parts

A. Universal high well-being is possible at very low resource use.

B. Inequality plays a major role in ecological and social bads.

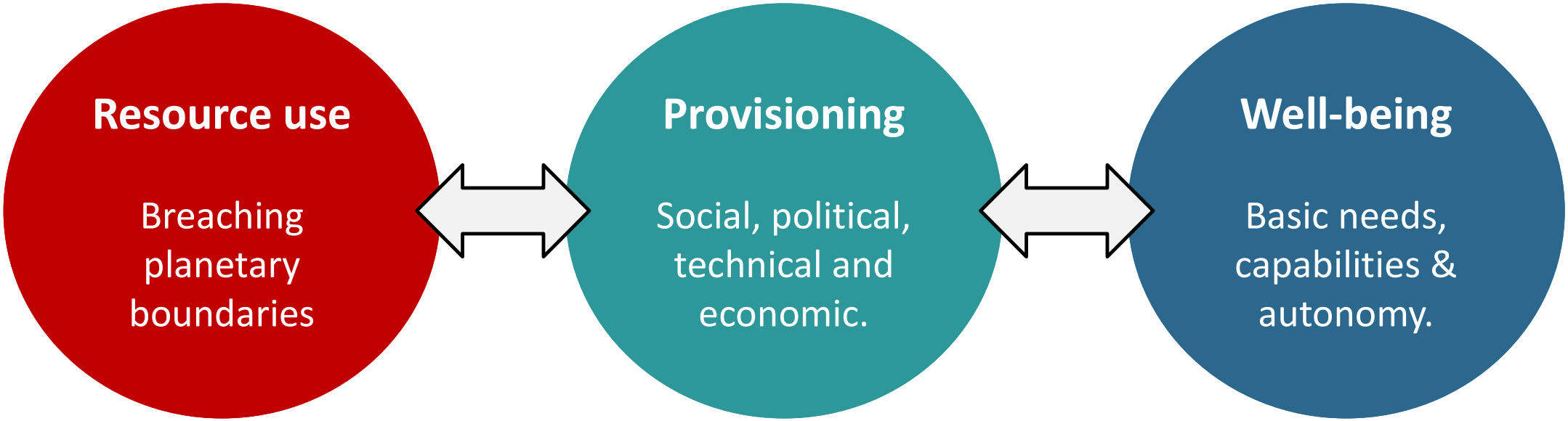
C. For decoupling, we need to focus on needs.

D. We have already mapped out political/policy pathways – confronting power is key.

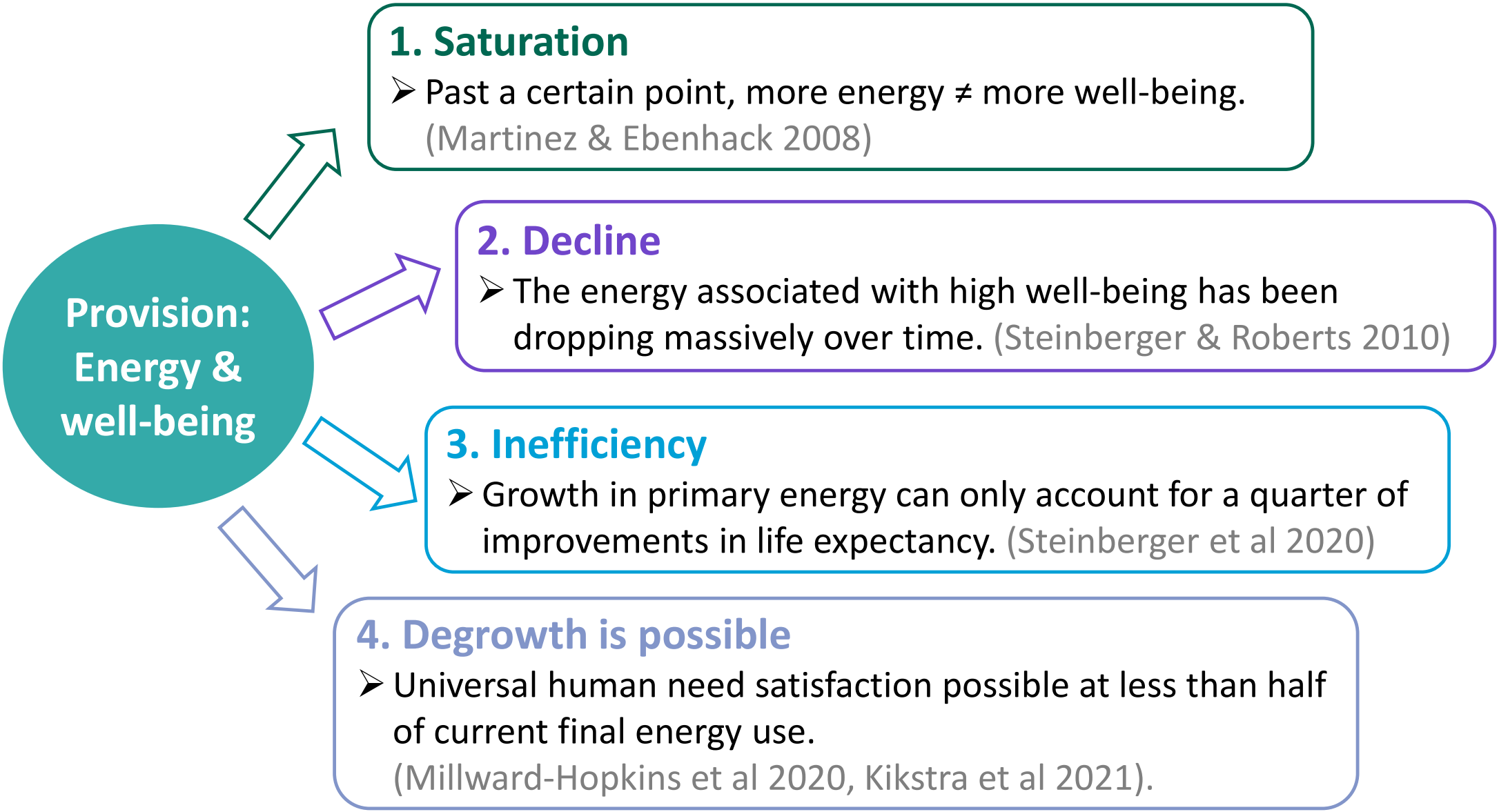
PART A

UNIVERSAL HIGH WELL-BEING IS POSSIBLE AT VERY LOW RESOURCE USE

PROVISIONING
IS THE LYNCHPIN BETWEEN PLANETARY BOUNDARIES AND WELLBEING.

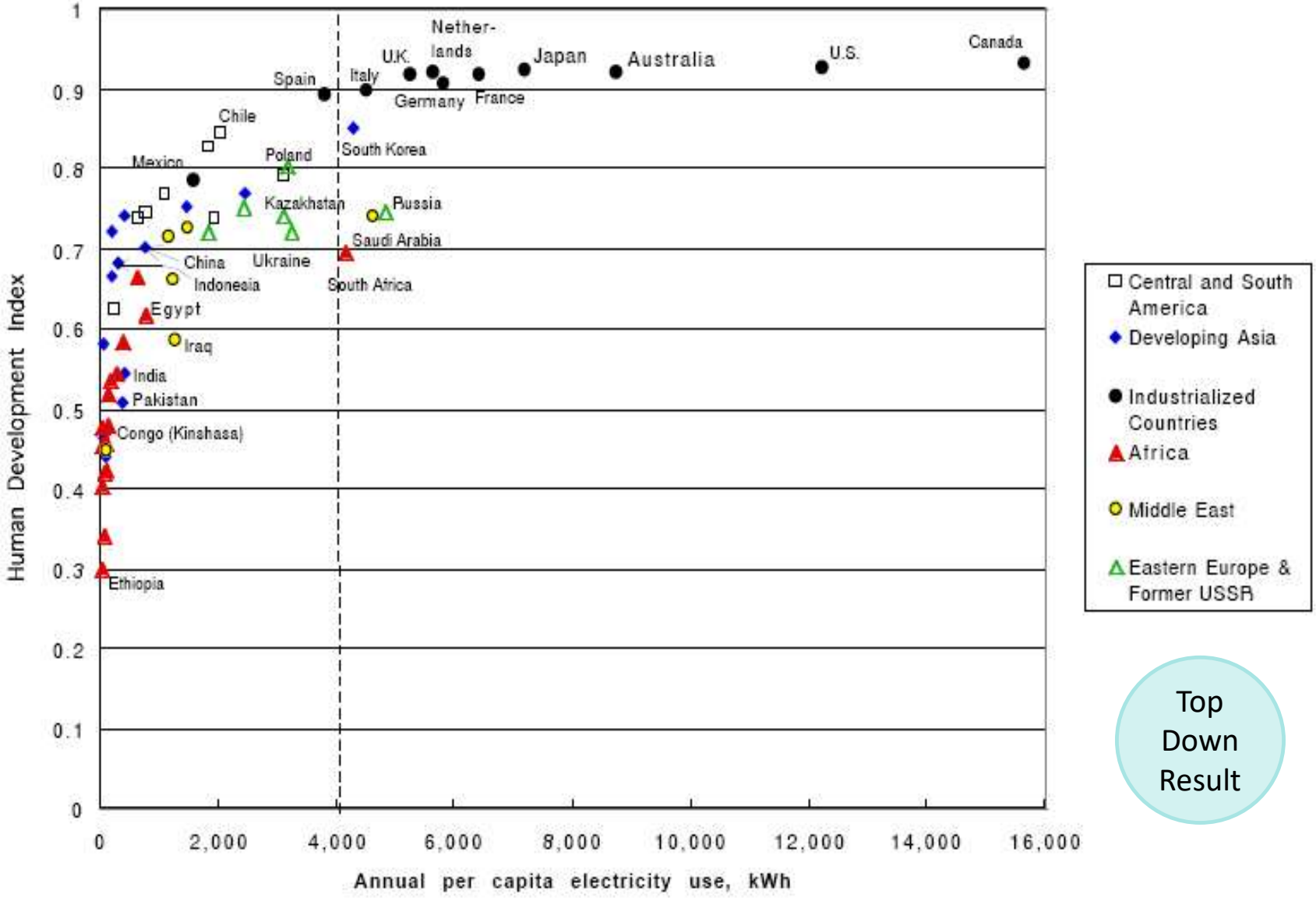


RETHINKING THE ECONOMY MEANS UNDERSTANDING & RETHINKING PROVISIONING.


Provision: Energy & well-being
1. Saturation
➢ Past a certain point, more energy ≠ more well-being. (Martinez & Ebenhack 2008)
2. Decline
➢ The energy associated with high well-being has been dropping massively over time. (Steinberger & Roberts 2010)
3. Inefficiency
➢ Growth in primary energy can only account for a quarter of improvements in life expectancy. (Steinberger et al 2020)
4. Degrowth is possible
➢ Universal human need satisfaction possible at less than half of current final energy use. (Millward-Hopkins et al 2020, Kikstra et al 2021).

1. Saturation

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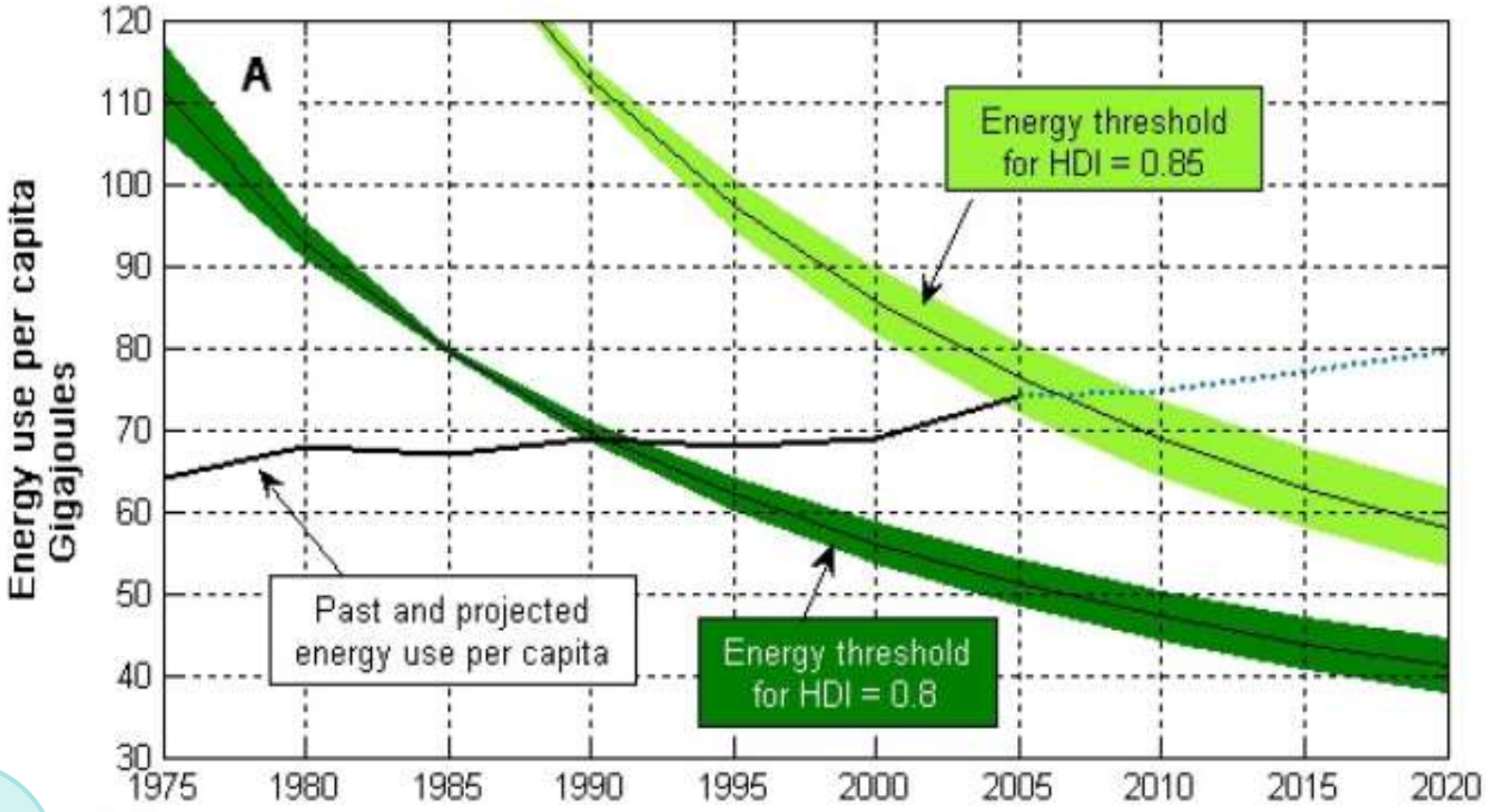


Top Down Result

Source: A. Pasternak, United States Department of Energy, 2000

2. Decline

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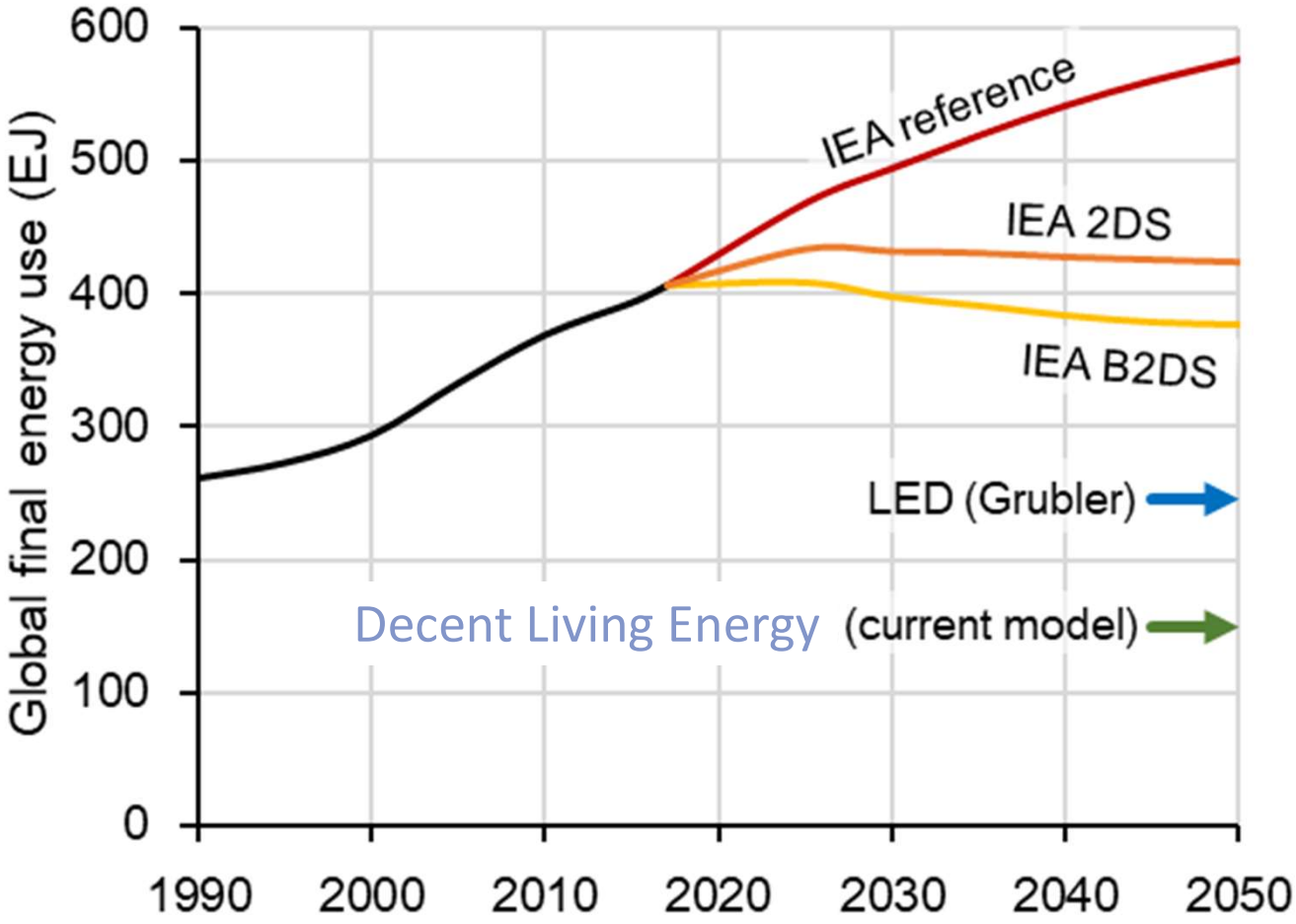
Top Down Result

*Steinberger, J. K. and J. T. Roberts (2010). "From constraint to sufficiency: the decoupling of energy and carbon from human needs, 1975-2005." Ecological Economics **70**(2): 425-433.*

4. Degrowth is possible

- Universal human need satisfaction possible at less than half of current final energy use. (Millward-Hopkins et al 2020, Kikstra et al 2021).

Decent Living Energy for all achievable at 40% of current energy use, despite population growth until 2050.



Bottom -up Result

Millward-Hopkins, Steinberger, Rao & Oswald, 2020, Global Environmental Change

PART B

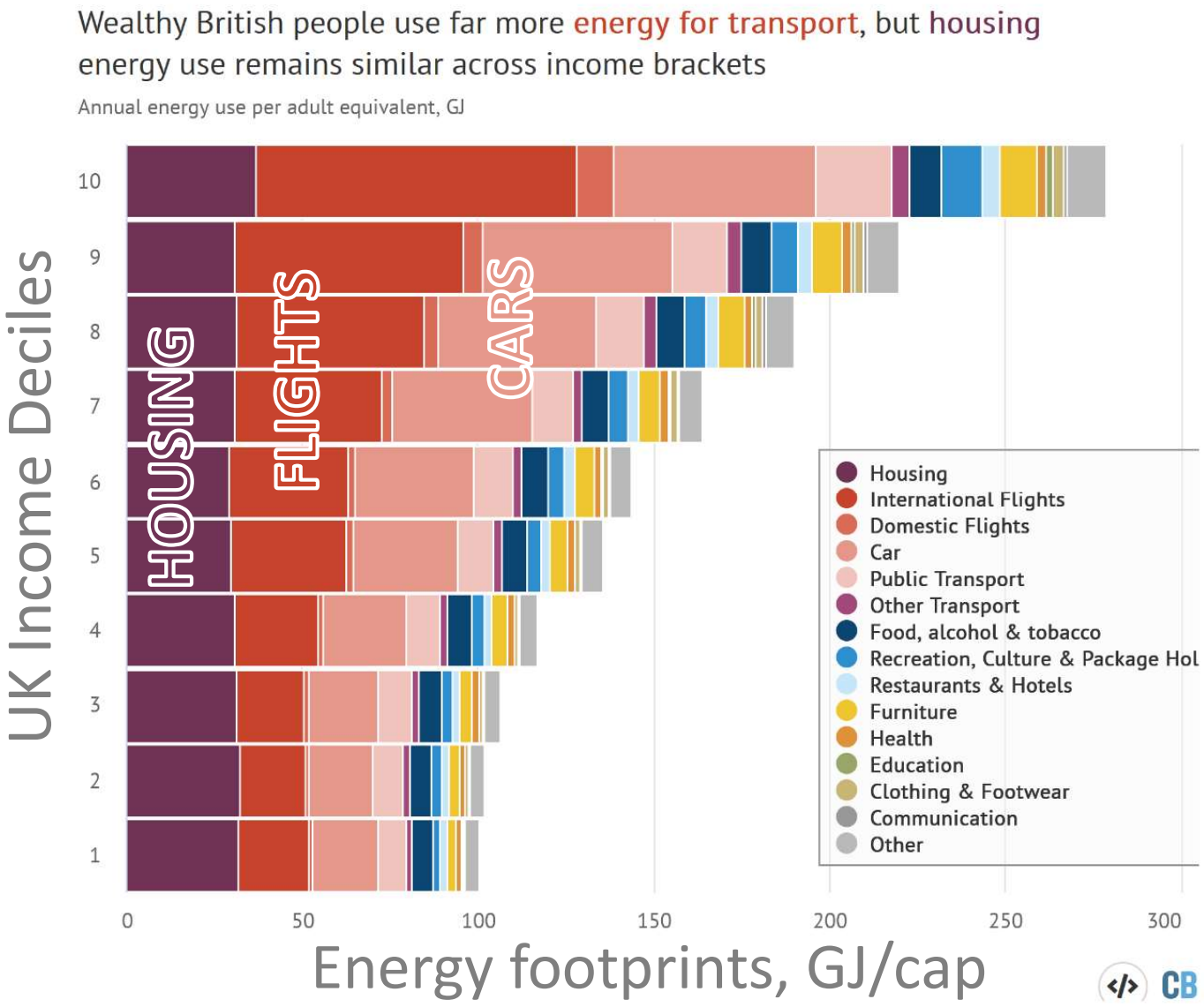
INEQUALITY PLAYS A MAJOR ROLE IN ECOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL BADS


Inequality is socio-eco bad
1. Inequality drives (literally) overshoot
➢ Richest overspend-overconsume transport sectors, especially driving and flying, with planetary-scale consequences.
(Oswald et al. 2020, Baltruszewicz et al. 2021, 2023)
2. Inequality as socio-ecological detrimental factor
➢ Inequality prevents societies from realizing well-being at low resource use.
(Vogel et al, 2021)
3. Inequality as detrimental to health & democracy
➢ Lots and lots and lots of social science & political economy research (Piketty, Hickel, Weber, etc etc etc)

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(Oswald et al. 2020, Baltruszewicz et al. 2021, 2023)



Baltruszewicz et al 2023
Carbon Brief https://www.carbonbrief.org/richest-people-in-uk-use-more-energy-flying-than-poorest-do-overall/

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Vogel et al 2021

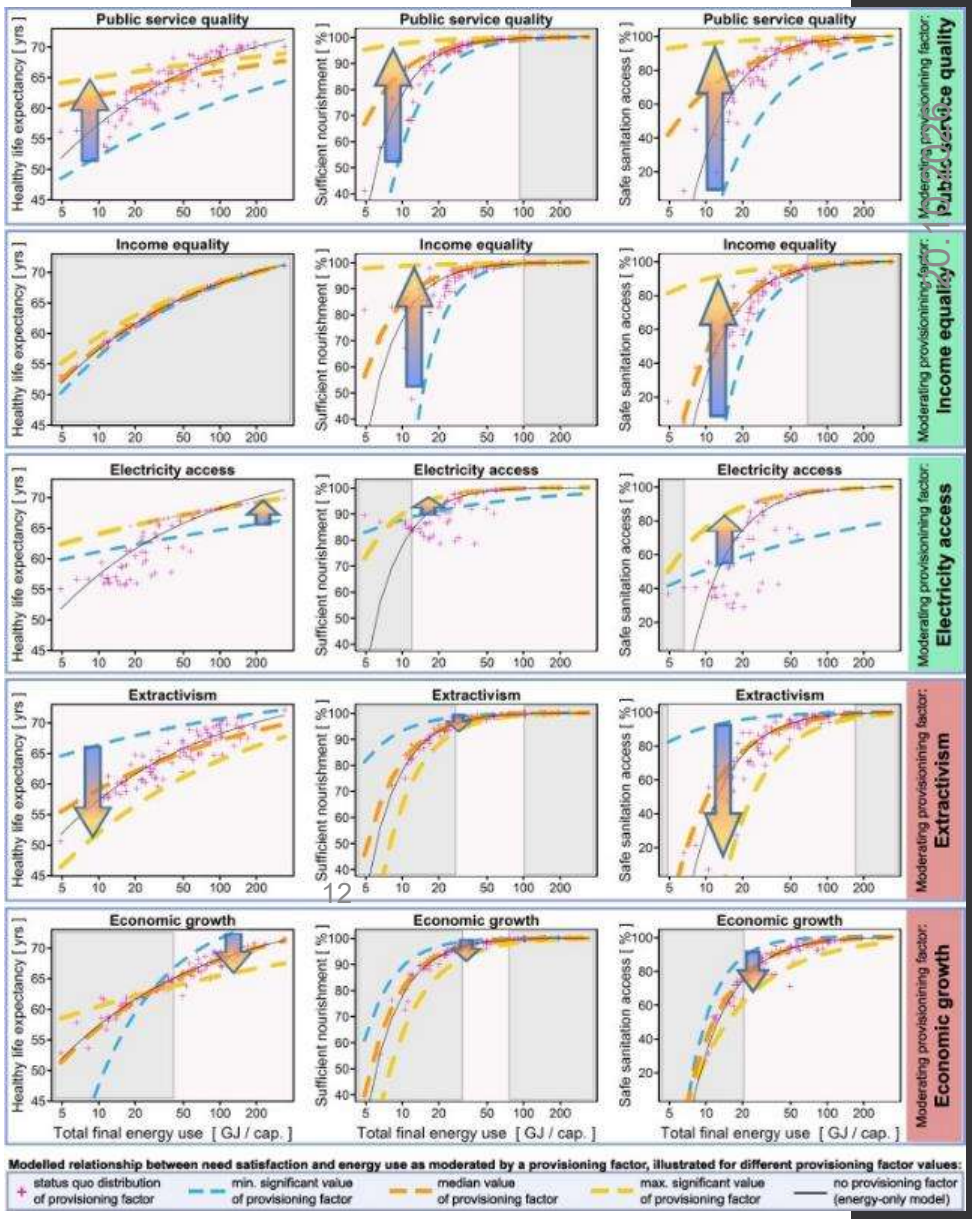
Socio-economic factors enabling well-being at lower energy use

Positive factors:

- Public services
- Healthcare
- **Income equality**
- Democracy
- Network infrastructure, electricity & sanitation access.

Negative factors

- Extractivism
- Economic growth above a moderate income.



PART C

TO DECOUPLE GROWTH FROM WELL-BEING, WE NEED TO FOCUS ON HUMAN NEEDS

Decoupling Well-Being from Growth

1. We know how to understand & analyse determinants of human well-being. Seriously.

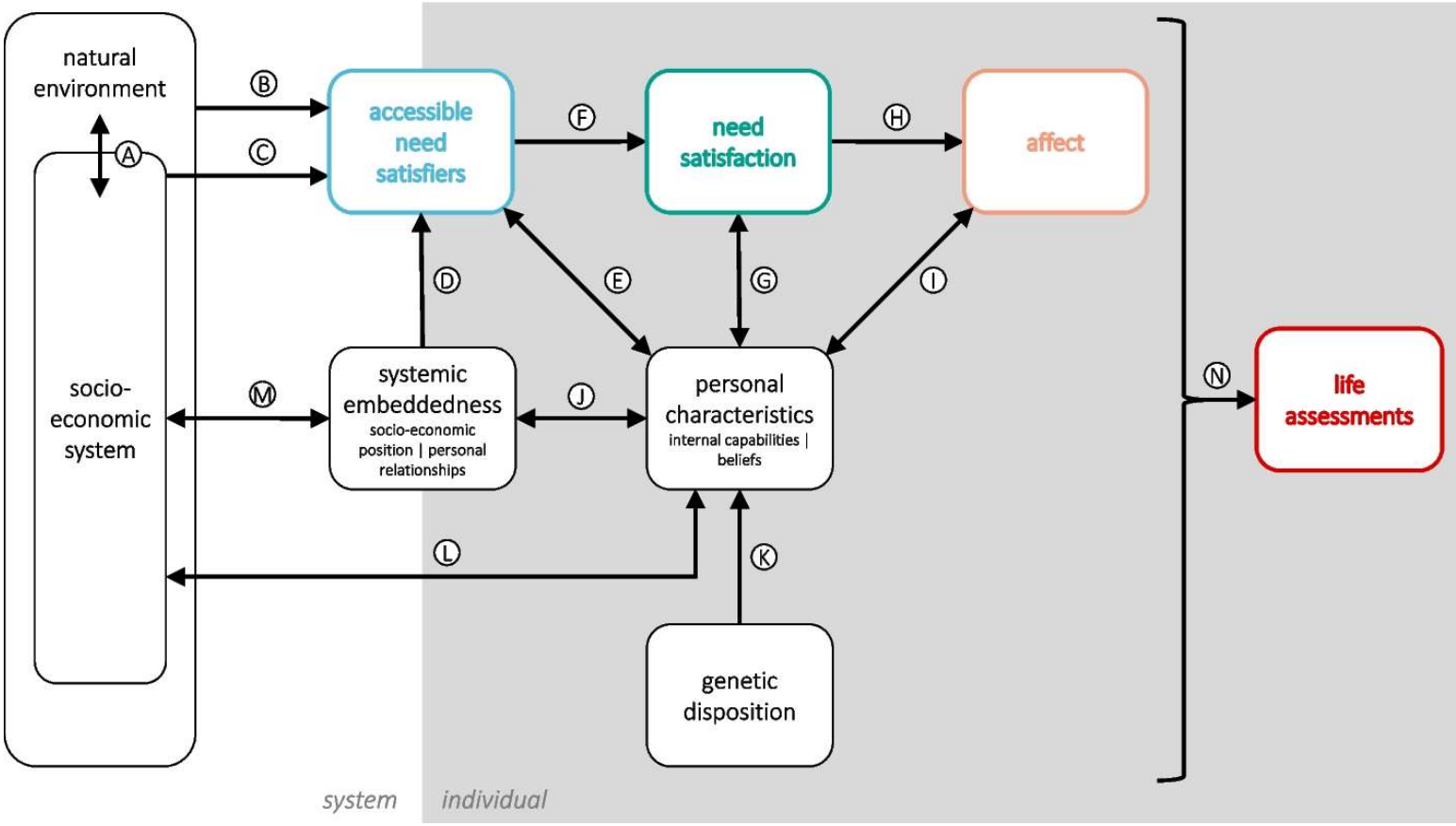
- Lots and lots and lots of research
  (Gough & Doyal 1991, Gough all the years, Max-Neef 1991, Sen, Nussbaum, Gasper 2007, but also Brand Correa & Steinberger 2017, Lamb & Steinberger 2017, Brand Correa et al 2020, and now Tamberg et al 2025)

2. Human need satisfaction decouples well-being from growth.

- Focusing on need satisfaction is far more effective than aggregate growth for human well-being. Residual influence of growth is negligeable.
  (Tamberg et al 2026 (coming soon!))

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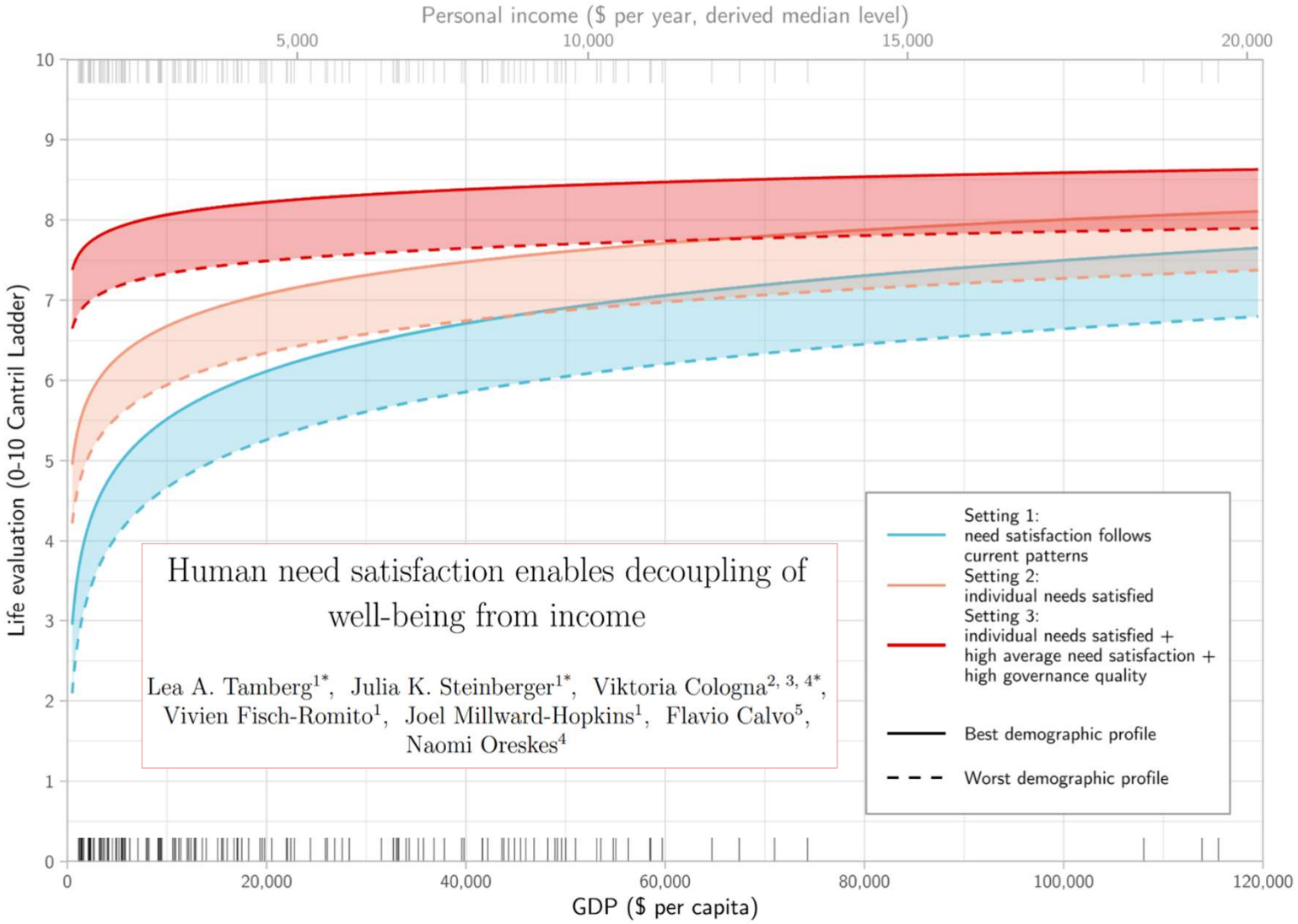
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Tamberg, L. A., Fisch-Romito, V., & Steinberger, J. K. (2026). Determinants of Well-Being: A Causal Framework. *Social Indicators Research*, *182*(2), 23. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-026-03816-w

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PART D

WE HAVE ALREADY MAPPED OUT POLITICAL/POLICY PATHWAYS – CONFRONTING POWER IS KEY.

NEW ECONOMIES FOR ERADICATING POVERTY

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https://www.neep-poverty.org/



real
A POST GROWTH DEAL

A Policy Package for Eradicating Poverty Beyond Growth



A joint contribution
by the REAL project
and friends



erc European Research Council
Established by the European Commission

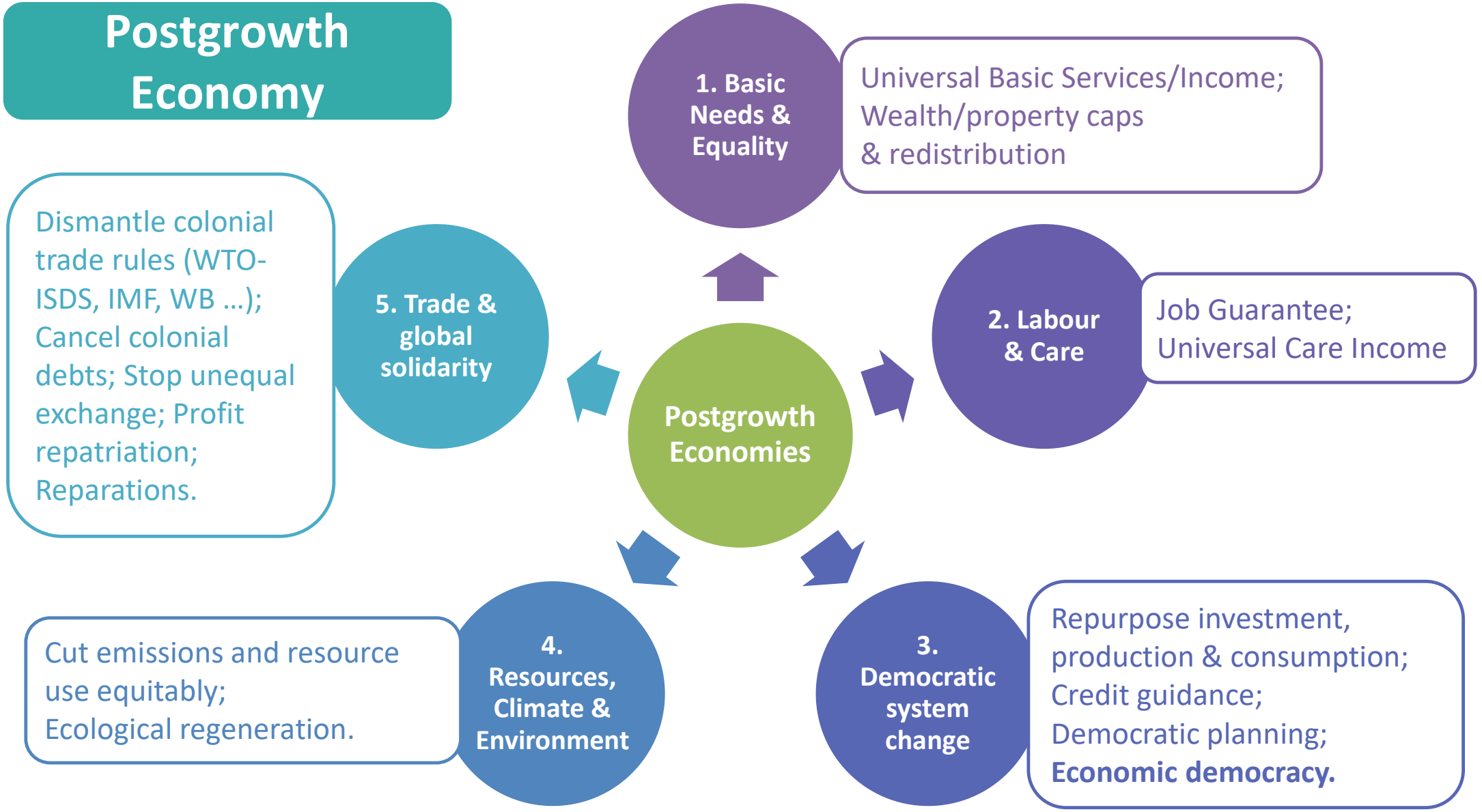
https://www.realpostgrowth.eu/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/A-Roadmap-for-Eradicating-Poverty-Beyond-Growth-.pdf

POSTGROWTH & DEGROWTH ECONOMIES

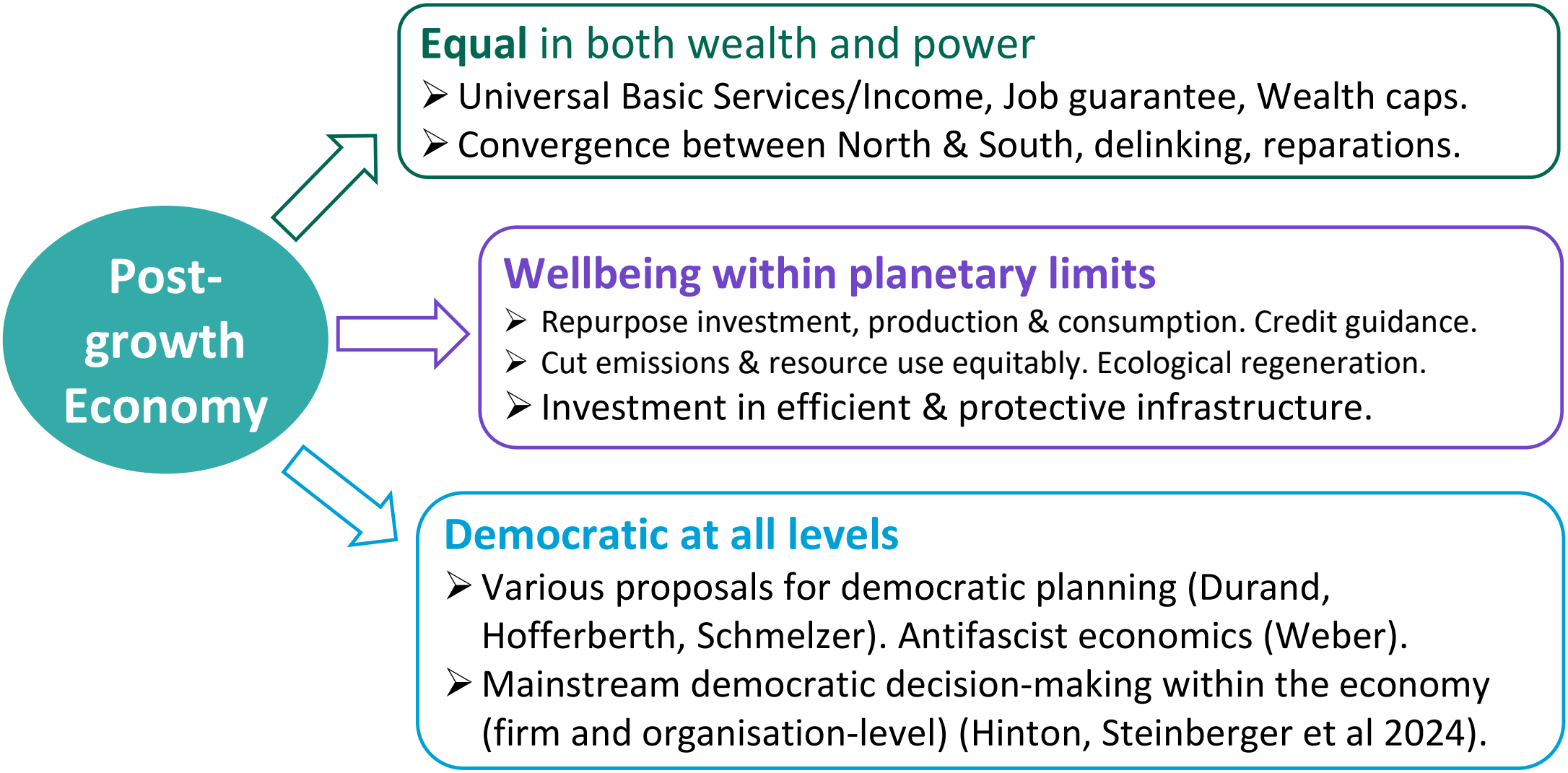
FUNDAMENTAL PART OF OUR SHARED STRUGGLE FOR WELLBEING WITHIN PLANETARY BOUNDARIES

Low- & Middle-Income Countries	High-Income Countries
Genuine Development: Expand decent jobs, public provisioning, public health, education, energy, land, and digital access.	**Strategic reprioritisation:** Shift economic priorities from output expansion to well-being within planetary limits.
Economic Sovereignty: Cancel or restructure unsustainable debt, reform trade, finance and IP rules, regulate profit repatriation, and organised price controls.	**Sufficiency & Fairness:** Curb luxury consumption; set binding resource-reduction targets; shorten the work week and guarantee green/care focused jobs.

Nag et al 2026, A Policy Package for Eradicating Poverty Beyond Growth.



Nag et al 2026, A Policy Package for Eradicating Poverty Beyond Growth.


Post-growth Economy
Equal in both wealth and power
➢ Universal Basic Services/Income, Job guarantee, Wealth caps.
➢ Convergence between North & South, delinking, reparations.
Wellbeing within planetary limits
➢ Repurpose investment, production & consumption. Credit guidance.
➢ Cut emissions & resource use equitably. Ecological regeneration.
➢ Investment in efficient & protective infrastructure.
Democratic at all levels
➢ Various proposals for democratic planning (Durand, Hofferberth, Schmelzer). Antifascist economics (Weber).
➢ Mainstream democratic decision-making within the economy (firm and organisation-level) (Hinton, Steinberger et al 2024).