

# Prosperity Beyond Growth: An Emerging Agenda for European Cities

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## Abstract

In recent years, post-growth ideas and policies have been catching the attention of policymakers, activists, and academics across the globe. Our research finds that European cities in particular are at the leading edge of the recent surge in interest. From Amsterdam to Glasgow, Barcelona to Vienna, European city governments and urban residents are seeking ways to realign their priorities away from Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth and towards the pursuit of social and ecological well-being. Despite this trend, most of the existing thought on post-growth has focused on the national or global levels; much less attention has been paid to what a distinctly urban post-growth political agenda might look like. This article begins to fill that gap, focusing on the European case and the cities currently at the forefront of post-growth experimentation. We explore the emergence of post-growth thinking both globally and at the city level by analyzing related terms (such as *circular economy* or *degrowth*) in academic and policy publications, and in Google search trends. While post-growth-related terms have only recently begun to be linked to cities, our analysis shows that interest in urban post-growth is rising steeply, especially in Europe where even the most growth-critical terms are beginning to permeate mainstream political debates. To conclude, we step back to consider the relevance of post-growth ideas to European cities and to ask what an urban post-growth agenda might look like.

Keywords: circular economy; Doughnut Economics; European cities; beyond GDP; urban post-growth

## Summary for policymakers

- From Amsterdam to Glasgow, Barcelona to Vienna, European cities are leading a recent surge in engagement with post-growth ideas and policies.
- Post-growth can be expressed through a range of related concepts, from *circular economy* to *Doughnut Economics* to *degrowth*, but they all foreground the harmful relationship that untethered growth has with climate breakdown, rising inequality, poor well-being, and weak social capital.
- Post-growth seeks to realign societal priorities away from Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth and towards social and ecological well-being.

- Our analysis of academic and policy publications, and Google trends, shows that interest in post-growth, and, more recently, urban post-growth, has taken off in the past two decades, and is concentrated in Europe.
- It makes sense that post-growth resonates in cities. Cities have a large environmental impact and are also often sites of the greatest inequalities, where the downsides to growth can be acutely felt—from pollution and wasteful consumption, to overwork and poor mental health.
- Cities, especially European cities, are also promising places for post-growth experiments. Generally, they are more politically progressive than nations, and their density enables the sustainable use of energy and space and the face-to-face communal and democratic relationships fostered by post-growth's focus on social well-being.

# Introduction

Over the last few decades, we have seen a growing chorus of voices calling for us to break out of a narrow mindset that assumes economic expansion is an overriding societal priority and, in the face of existential environmental dangers, challenges us to think—and measure—in new ways.

A wide array of different concepts and frameworks have been advanced in promoting these arguments, including the *well-being economy*, the *circular economy*, *degrowth*, and *Doughnut Economics*. Later in this commentary, we trace the development of these various concepts both in academic and policy literature and describe some of the differences between them. But stepping back, they can all be said to belong to a broad movement of thought, which we follow others in labelling *post-growth*. This relatively recent movement defines itself against the assumption that the main aim of economic policy—and a leading aim of government policy—should be to promote growth (Douglas, 2022; Schmid, 2022). The growing engagement with post-growth ideas and policies is a global phenomenon. To take just a few examples from the last few years:

- In 2020, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published a report: *Beyond Growth: Towards a new economic approach* (OECD, 2020).
- The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) included extended discussions of postgrowth ideas as part of its 2022 Sixth Assessment Report (IPCC, 2022).
- Both New Zealand and Canada have adopted economic measurement frameworks that seek to go beyond [Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Department of Finance, Canada, 2021; Ellsmore, 2019).

Nevertheless, Europe seems to have been at the centre of interest in post-growth thinking. This is true at the supranational (European Union [EU]) level and at the level of the nation-state. Examples include:

- The 2009 Stiglitz et al. report on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress commissioned by the French Government (Stiglitz et al., 2009).
- The commissioning of a new well-being measurement framework by the UK government in 2012, and creation in 2016 of an All-Parliamentary Party Group on the Limits to Growth, which has over 40 Members from across the political spectrum (Jackson & Robin, 2016; Self et al., 2012).
- Norway's announcement in July 2021 that it was developing a national well-being strategy, recognizing that “GDP is an insufficient metric for good lives” ( Wellbeing Economy Alliance, 2021).
- The EU's 8th Environment Action Plan, agreed by the European Council in December 2021, which features commitments to bring member states' consumption of resources within planetary boundaries and to introduce an indicator set to measure progress in well-being that goes beyond GDP (Regulation [EU] 2021/1119).

More recently, however, European cities have also been showing increased interest in post-growth concepts and frameworks, for example:

- Since 2020, Amsterdam, Barcelona, Brussels, Copenhagen, Leeds, and Glasgow city governments have all adopted Doughnut Economics as a framework to map and rethink their social and ecological impacts at the local and planetary levels.
- A shift towards the localisation of critical resources and economic assets has been taking place across Europe—including the high-profile cases of Barcelona, Paris, and Hamburg

re-municipalizing public utilities and innovative smaller cities like Preston in the United Kingdom, which has pioneered community wealth building.

- Barcelona also launched the Caring City programme which recognizes the social value of care work. Many other cities are following this example and placing care at the centre of urban governance (Rossetti & da Cruz, 2021).
- In 2021, London made a commitment to establish a new measure of well-being as the core indicator of the city's success.
- Vienna adopted its Smart City Framework in 2014, a strategy for 2050 based on the objectives of "radical resource preservation" and "high and socially balanced quality of living" (Vienna City Administration, 2014, 2).
- Bristol's One City Plan seeks to reduce poverty and inequality, increase the city's resilience and environmental sustainability, and "enhance the economic and social well-being of every community" (Bristol City Office, 2021, 14).
- Tallinn's vision for 2035 is inspired by a pursuit of well-being, liveability, and sustainability. (Sarv & Soe, 2021).

Many of these city government strategies were co-created with residents and engage with a rich array of existing post-growth activities in civil society—from energy and housing commons (Amsterdam) to networks of dedicated community spaces and social centres (Barcelona).

But despite this swell of post-growth approaches in cities, little attention has been paid to what a distinctly urban post-growth political agenda might look like, and how the movement has developed in Europe's urban centres. This commentary begins to fill that gap.

After setting out the general tenants of post-growth thinking, we trace its development, both as a global and national agenda, and at the city level. Our analysis of terms related to post-growth in policy and academic publications, and Google trends, shows that interest in urban post-growth has only emerged recently but is steadily rising. Interest is building especially quickly in Europe, where even some of the most growth-critical concepts are beginning to find their way into the political mainstream. We end by discussing what the relevance of post-growth is to cities in the 2020s, and what a distinctly urban post-growth agenda might look like, especially in Europe.

## Post-growth thinking

Much of the work of activists, politicians, and policymakers seeking to go beyond growth has a very practical focus. They are in the business of building coalitions, winning elections, creating local metrics, or developing and trialling policies—be it at the community, local, or city levels. Nevertheless, the post-growth movement rests on a critique of the way that a certain mindset has come to dominate thinking about development.

The critics of what is sometimes called *growthism* generally acknowledge the extraordinary achievements of the economic transformations of the last three hundred years (Daly, 2014). The Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions of the 18th century ushered in a new epoch in human history. New technologies combined with the development of market economies facilitated mass urbanization and a prodigious explosion in productivity and living standards. The economic output of cities, in particular, was responsible for the development of the middle class, which, in turn, was instrumental in the democratization of society. Globally, we humans produce and consume vastly more goods and services than we did even a century ago, although these developments have played out very unevenly within regions and between them.

Looking back over these developments, however, one characteristic that stands out is the relatively indiscriminate attitude to economic growth. It has been embraced, with little reflection, as a paramount goal of pretty much all states. Above all, growth-focused measures have come to dominate economic and political thinking in the form of GDP and its variants. GDP is the total monetary value of all the goods produced and transacted in the formal economy of a state over a given period (usually a year). The metric was first developed in the United States during the 1930s and became the basis for national accounting in the decades after the Second World War (Coyle, 2014). These days if economists want to understand how a country is doing, most begin with GDP. Yet the influence of GDP and associated metrics goes well beyond the field of economics. A huge amount of national political discourse—the agendas laid out in party manifestos, debated in parliaments, and discussed in the media—now treats economic growth as measured by GDP change as a proxy for progress.

## Critiques of growth

In their most basic form, critiques of growth-centred thinking insist on the planetary limits to unbounded economic expansion. Orthodox economic textbooks assume that growth can and should go on for ever. Yet, as argued in the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* report published 50 years ago—a report generally viewed as seminal in the development of post-growth thinking—our development trajectory is unsustainable and will, if continued, result in environmental and economic and social catastrophe (Meadows & Randers, 1974).

Faced with this argument, most economists and politicians put their faith in green or sustainable growth. This eco-modernist position contends that new technologies and environmental policies can reconcile growing GDP with increased sustainability, decoupling growth from environmental degradation and social inequalities. And it is true that at least some Western economies have seen an increase in GDP along with a decrease in production—and consumption-based carbon emissions (Ritchie, 2021). But even if all national governments were to meet their climate change commitments, which is very unlikely, these commitments are not sufficient to prevent catastrophic climate change (UNFCCC, 2021). And very few, if any, have turned the corner on species extinction, soil decline, or marine and river pollution (UNEP, 2011). Yes, we need to do everything possible to make economic activity more efficient and minimize its impact on the environment. But the critics of growthism argue that green technologies will not be enough to achieve the absolute decoupling—that is, the continued increase in GDP with absolute decline in resource use—that we need to avoid environmental disaster. Especially as gains in efficiency often translate into increased production rather than an absolute decline in resource-use or pollution (Jevons Paradox; Raworth, 2017). Sustainable development must involve the wealthiest nations and richest people consuming less.

But the case against growthism is not limited to its environmental impacts. Its critics point to a series of other challenges that have become increasingly apparent, the longer growth has continued (see, e.g., Fioramoni, 2013; Jackson, 2009; Raworth, 2017). Reviewing post-growth writing, we can identify at least five arguments in addition to the environmental one:

1. **Persistent and rising inequality and stubborn poverty.** The preoccupation with maximizing GDP or even GDP per capita fails to give due weight to considerations of social justice. Increasing GDP is compatible with preserving extremes of poverty and inequality. In fact, if inequality increases enough relative to the increase in average GDP per capita, most people can be worse off even though the average income is increasing. Economists are often attracted to the theory of a trickle down effect, whereby economic expansion

can be relied upon to lift all boats. But the theory has been confounded by experience, and organizations like the IMF have rejected it (Dabla-Norris et al., 2015). In addition, even where economists give due weight to considerations of equity, their focus on a narrowly economic understanding of well-being risks occluding other non-economic dimensions of (in)justice (Shah, 2018). For example, a group can experience a rise in living standards but find themselves discriminated against on basis of gender, race, sexuality, or other characteristics. While economic growth has increased living standards worldwide, and lifted billions out of poverty, it has played out very unevenly—over the last two decades economic growth in most advanced countries and many middle-income ones, including China and India, has gone hand in hand with widening inequality (UNDESCA, 2020). And evidence seems clear that more unequal societies are less politically stable, more violent, and less happy and healthy than more equal ones (Pickett & Wilkinson, 2011).

2. **The treadmill of work.** Economists from John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx, to John Maynard Keynes, assumed that economic growth would translate into a decline in the need to work, with people able to use their free time to educate and enjoy themselves and devote their energies to caring for family, friends, and community or to public causes. But our commitment to growing the formal economy means that productivity has increased massively with very little or no decline in time people spend at work. In fact, most developed economies are raising or proposing to raise retirement ages (OECD, 2017).
3. **Diseases of excess consumption.** Even as economies have grown, diseases associated with over-consumption of food, drink, and drugs and with sedentary lifestyles have increased. In some wealthy nations, notably the United States, these diseases are contributing to falling life-expectancy (Klobucista, 2022)—although it is hard to untangle the role that rising inequality and unhealthy consumption plays in this.
4. **Falling well-being and mental health.** Growing affluence has not always translated in increased well-being or happiness, and many developed countries have seen increased demands on mental health services. Studies have confirmed what most would guess intuitively: once people have what they need to live a decent life, increased income has only a modest impact on happiness, and quickly reaches a point where it has virtually no impact at all (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002; Kahneman et al., 2006). At the same time, post-growth writers argue that the competitive market ethos, consumerist values and pressures, and large and rising inequalities associated with orthodox economics, actively work to undermine the social connections, sense of fairness, communal solidarity, creative and purposive work, on which self-worth depends (Jackson, 2009).
5. **Declining social capital, and other forms of community.** Rising living standards might be expected to be associated with an increase in social capital as people have more time and resources to devote to extended family, friends, neighbours, creative work, or community groups and civil society. But social capital appears to have flatlined in many advanced economies and fallen in others, at least in part because affluence, and the market ethos associated with it, has brought with it more privatized lifestyles (Halpern, 2005).

Moreover, in a recent twist to their arguments, some post-growth thinkers are observing that, regardless of our assessment of it, growth is beginning to run out of steam in some parts of the world. Advanced economies appear to have entered a new phase of low productivity which, paradoxically, sharpens the argument for rethinking the growth-centred economic paradigm. Past economic expansion has largely depended on technological progress enabling workers to produce more with less. But with productivity apparently slowing in wealthier economies, the critics of growth argue that we can no longer rely on rising GDP to deliver better lives (Jackson, 2018). Instead, we need to embrace post-growth agendas.

Post-growth thinking is sometimes presented as primarily of relevance to wealthier economies. And it is true that much of the interest in it comes from these economies and that their privileged position, built on the global exploitation of human and natural resources, should oblige them to lead the way in tackling the challenges that have arisen from their development. But countries of the Global South are frequently much more vulnerable than countries of the Global North to climate change and most other environmental pressures, and to the economic and social threats that are inextricably bound up with them. Poorer countries also face many of the social problems associated with the unqualified pursuit of growth: obesity, for example, is far from merely a rich nation disease (Yach et al., 2006). While countries of the Global South certainly need economic growth in some form, it does not make sense for them to follow development trajectories that have landed richer nations with so many problems. And some of the most fertile contributions to post-growth thinking have come from the field of international development, notably Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (Moore, 2015; Sen & Nussbaum, 1993). Against this background, it is not surprising that post-growth debates, ideas, and movements are attracting growing attention in the developing as well as wealthier countries, with Global South thinkers pointing to the non-Western ideas and practices on which post-growth agendas can draw (Gerber & Rajeswari, 2018).

## A new set of values

Critics of mainstream, growth-focused thinking form a very broad church and can differ among themselves (Kreienkamp, 2022). One wing of the movement argues for *degrowth* and insists that we need to focus on deliberately shrinking wealthy economies (D'Alisa et al., 2015; Hickel, 2021). Others foreground prosperity, well-being or the Doughnut as the goal or guide ropes that should steer development, while remaining open-minded about what this means for growth. Kate Raworth, for instance, describes her position as *growth agonistic*, recognizing that living within the Doughnut might involve expansion in some parts of the economy. Still, proponents of post-growth from across this spectrum of positions are motivated by many of the same social and political values.

Post-growth thinkers take aim at the market individualism that, they argue, has been encouraged by the preoccupation with growth, in favour of more mutualistic or communal relations and institutions (Sandercock, 2022). Post-growth advocates are generally supportive of policies to encourage shared ownership and cooperative enterprises, promote the sharing economy and the commoning of production and consumption, strengthen voluntary and communal relationships, and support (and create a fairer distribution of) unpaid caring activities—a point on which post-growth agendas and feminist ones connect (Pérez Orozco, 2014).

Finally, post-growth thinkers want to see a greater role for deliberation and democratic decision-making in our societies. They argue that, in according pre-eminence to markets as the best systems of governance for driving economic growth, we have marginalized the role that collective, democratic procedures should play in politics and policymaking.

## The rise of post-growth ideas

We have suggested that we have seen a surge of interest in post-growth ideas and policies over recent years, especially in Europe, and this is borne out by a survey of academic and policy publications and internet search engine activity. Academic interest in terms associated with the eco-modernist interest in sustainable growth—that is the position that we can grow the economy indefinitely while protecting the environment—has a long history, going back at least to the 1960s

(see Figure 1). This is true of *sustainable growth* itself, even if the concept only really took off in the late 1990s.

Interest in post-growth terms, like *circular economy*, *degrowth*, and *well-being economy*, by contrast, really takes off in the first decade of this century, rising dramatically around 2010, with new publications employing these terms becoming several orders of magnitude above those of previous years. We also find, if we look at the provenance of post-growth academic research, that (except for terms being primarily employed by technical disciplines, such as *steady-state economy*, *decoupling*, and even *green growth*) most of it is coming from Europe. This is particularly true for the most growth-critical concepts, for example, *degrowth* and *Doughnut Economics*.

[Insert Figure 1]

**Figure 1:** Trends over time in usage of post-growth-related terms in academic literature (the key is ordered from the first term to be used to the latest, presented left to right, row by row)

Turning from academic research to the research and policy publications of five leading multilateral and non-governmental organizations—the UN, World Bank, OECD, EU, and World Economic Forum—we also see a strong interest in these concepts. However, the weight of focus is on more familiar, and less challenging eco-modernist concepts, including *sustainable growth*, *inclusive growth*, and *green growth*. Still, about 9% of the total universe of publications engaging with these terms from the OECD and 27% from the EU address the *circular economy* or *beyond GDP*, and 25% from the World Economic Forum address these two concepts along with *well-being economy* and *post-growth* (Figure 2).

[Insert Figure 2]

**Figure 2:** The prevalence of post-growth terms in policy publications of five leading multilateral and non-governmental organizations

The general public has also shown increased interest in post-growth ideas, as indicated by Google search trends (Figure 3). The first graph shows that for the last few years the term *circular economy* is attracting much more interest than concepts such as *sustainable growth* or for that matter *post-growth*—perhaps a surprising finding given the somewhat technical connotation of the *circular economy* term. We can also see that interest in the pro-growth terms *sustainable growth*, *green growth*, and *inclusive growth* has been fairly flat. The second graph, by contrast, shows an upward trend in searches for *Doughnut Economics* and *degrowth*, whereas searches for *post-growth* and *beyond GDP* remain flat.

Figure 4 shows which of these terms is most searched across the globe. *Sustainable growth* is the most Googled term in the United States, Pakistan, Australia, and South Africa, *green growth* in Canada and South Korea, and *inclusive growth* in India and Nigeria. By contrast *degrowth* is the most Googled term in most of continental Europe and *Doughnut Economics* in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Denmark, and New Zealand.

[Insert Figures 3a and 3b]



**Figure 3a:** Search trends of green/inclusive/sustainable growth (Google Trends, 2022)<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 3b:** Search trends of post-growth-related terms (Google Trends, 2022)

[Insert Figure 4]

**Figure 4:** Prevalence of themes across the globe (colour intensity represents percentage of searches; Google Trends, 2022)

## Post-growth and cities

We have provided a brief overview of post-growth arguments and looked at some of the leading trends in academic, policy, and popular interest in post-growth themes. Cities occupy a somewhat paradoxical position here. On the one hand, urban activists and local politicians have played a leading role in the post-growth movement. We have seen over recent years the proliferation of local civil society groups dedicated to promoting a post-growth economy, and many of them are city based.<sup>2</sup> And, as noted at the start of this commentary, a growing number of cities, especially in Europe, are seeking to go beyond growth and are adopting post-growth agendas and metrics.

On the other hand, cities have not—or not until very recently—come into systematic or sustained focus among the critics of growth. GDP is generally measured at the national level and most of the debate about its strengths and weaknesses as a metric have implicitly or explicitly addressed themselves to national policymakers or abstracted from spatial considerations all together. The 1972 *Limits to Growth* report, for example, refers to *nations* around 35 times but *cities* only 6 times. One recent survey finds that the burgeoning field of post-growth research, “to date, has been relatively silent about urban space” and refers to “the attested underrepresentation of urban perspectives in post-growth scholarship” (Schmid, 2022, p. 2).

Once restricted to the literature focusing on the urban scale, our search of academic publications clearly shows interest in urban post-growth trails behind interest in post-growth generally. As an example, the earliest general academic entry using *beyond GDP* is from 1987 but the first entry focused on beyond GDP and cities only appeared in 2016 (Figures 1 and 5).<sup>3</sup> Here too, the interest is coming principally from Europe. As Figure 6 shows, the United States and China dominate production of urban research on green growth but Europe leads the field on post-growth concepts. These findings correlate with a recent survey of post-growth urban research literature, which finds that 28 of 40 case study cities were in Europe (Schmid, 2022, p. 16).

[Insert Figure 5]

**Figure 5:** The emergence of post-growth thinking at the urban scale in academic literature

[Insert Figure 6a and 6b]

**Figure 6a:** Countries of origin of post-growth social science research focusing on the urban

**Figure 6b:** Countries of origin of green growth social science research focusing on the urban

# The building blocks of urban post-growth

But what does a post-growth agenda when applied to cities, and to European cities in particular, look like? How does it differ politically, socially, economically, and spatially, from a national-level agenda? As we suggest later, while the arguments for going beyond growth are not fundamentally different at the urban and the national level, they do have some different emphases, many of which speak strongly to European urban contexts.

First, cities, especially Western cities, have high living standards and make a disproportionately large contribution to climate change and other environmental harms. It follows that they should take the lead in cutting greenhouse gas emissions and making good on the environmental damage they have done. And, indeed, some of the cities with the highest living standards in Europe stand out as champions of post-growth (Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Brussels, Paris). Perhaps this is unsurprising—it might be easier to have political discussions about scarcity in places which are already prosperous, but prominent policymakers and activists in these cities are beginning to speak about degrowth as a moral responsibility for societies' wealthiest (Belliard, 2022).

Second, inequalities are greatest, and poverty is often concentrated, within urban territories—where it is also often more visible (Behrens & Robert-Nicoud, 2014). So, a politics concerned not just with growth but also with distribution and poverty alleviation will have particular relevance to cities. In Europe, many urban citizens are also concerned about global inequalities, and some are frustrated by the way green growth can shift the costs of ecological transition onto the Global South—see, for example, concerns voiced about the European Green New Deal (Fuchs et al., 2020; European Environmental Bureau, 2020). Post-growth tools like the Doughnut model, which helps cities to map their social and ecological impacts globally and locally, and to plan just interventions, might resonate particularly in European cities as some begin to face up to the histories of colonialism and extractivism that have fuelled their growth (Dimitrova, 2020; Neal, 2020; Nicholls-Lee, 2020).

Third, the downsides as well as the benefits of growth are felt particularly acutely in cities (Correia et al., 2022). The density of cities means that air, noise, light and other forms of pollution tend to be highest in them. The same is true of congestion. While urban dwellers do not necessarily produce more waste per capita than others, the total waste they do produce is often highly visible and burdensome—it is there for all to see and for local authorities to manage, in the form of crowded bins, dirty parks, and streets. In a similar way, city homes tend to be relatively smaller, providing many of their residents with daily reminders of the case against accumulating stuff. Poor mental and physical health, including diseases of stress and over-consumption, and the experience of anomie or being lonely in a crowd are often concentrated in cities (Okkels et al., 2018). The case against privatization, enclosure, and commodification can be felt particularly acutely in cities, where opportunities for sharing or commoning are widespread: urbanites depend on shared public space and social infrastructure and so experience its erosion by market forces particularly acutely (Foster et al., 2016). Finally, cities generally have high proportion of workers to non-workers, and city workers tend to work particularly long hours, especially when travel to and from work is included, making the post-growth concern with free-time particularly salient.

At the same time, the potentialities of post-growth approaches can also seem greater in cities:

- Cities are generally particularly efficient and sustainable in their use of energy and space. It can therefore be easier for urban residents to envisage living within planetary boundaries. European cities, especially, tend to have compact urban forms and dense historic centres built before the advent of the car. This makes it easier in Europe than, for

example, in the United States, to imagine moving to a post-growth urban world of walking and cycling and localized shared services like neighbourhood food hubs or community-owned renewable energy infrastructure.

- Post-growth thinking argues that we should attach less value to consumption and accumulation and more to communal and social relationships. But cities, with their public realm, social infrastructure, vast range of communities, and far-reaching social networks, are well positioned to generate and sustain relationships. Early thinkers about post-growth tapped into some specifically European cultural imaginaries around community. Latouche (2009, 2014) imagines post-growth cities infused with the conviviality of southern French villages, where people, he imagines, had free time to spend with family, friends, and neighbours. Whilst many parts of the world have similar cultural values, it is possible that the European roots of much post-growth thinking helps it to chime with cities in the continent.
- Post-growth thinking emphasizes the values of a vibrant civil society, democratic participation, and active citizenship. But while the internet makes it easier for us to engage across distance, most civic and political participation remains local. And almost all volunteering, and especially informal volunteering—caring for an elderly neighbour, looking after a friend's child after school—happens face to face. Even the most effective international campaigns and national political parties depend on actors collaborating at the neighbourhood or local level. Cities enable and facilitate this physical collaboration (Dhal, 1967). In Europe, cities can build on their rich history of democratic engagement with ideas related to post-growth. In the 1970s and 80s, for example, European urban movements championed cycling, housing cooperatives, slow food production, street markets, and self-managed common spaces—all concepts which resonate with post-growth urban strategies today (Savini et al, 2022).
- Innovation tends to be led by cities (Hall, 1998). Urban dwellers and city governments will generally find it easier than their counterparts in rural areas to reimagine a post-growth world and develop policies that can help move towards it. In Europe, as EU funding is increasingly channelled through innovation policies, cities need holistic policy agendas like post-growth to build innovation missions around and to make innovation more than a buzzword or an end in itself.
- Cities tend to be more progressive than their nations, enabling the building of radical green and/or post-growth politics (Luca et al., 2022). Once again, harbouring popular support for green and progressive politics, European cities can enable policymakers and activists to explore more growth-critical concepts like *degrowth* and *Doughnut Economics* (see Figure 6), and, in due course, perhaps also to build political coalitions which can put these concepts into practice.

It is true that cities face one major disadvantage when it comes to leading on post-growth ideas and policy. In most states, including European ones, national governments keep a tight leash on cities, who have only limited legislative and executive authority (da Cruz et al., 2019). It is national, not municipal governments, that hold most of the power over fiscal policy, trade policy, energy, labour market regulation, and the regulation of production and consumption. Crafting a new economic model for society may well be beyond the governance capacities of city governments.

However, even here, city governments do have control over policy sectors that are critical to slowing their economic metabolism, reducing unsustainable consumption, and narrowing inequalities—including powers over transport and mobility, planning, housing, social infrastructure, waste management, along with their powers as employers, investors, and owners of land and buildings. While isolated initiatives are developing in cities in all these policy areas, there are also mounting calls for planning departments to develop integrated post-growth

frameworks capable of reimagining our patterns of urban life, work, and infrastructure as a whole (Savini et al, 2022).

## Conclusion

This commentary has explored how post-growth has recently emerged as a global agenda, and even more recently, as an urban one. At both the global and the city level, in academic and policy publications, and in Google search trends, we found that interest in post-growth is especially concentrated in Europe. We began, in the final section, to sketch out some of the distinct ways in which post-growth speaks to European cities today, and what it might promise them in the future.

As our analysis of academic publications shows, researchers are developing a keen interest in urban post-growth. Research communities—academia, civil society, and social movements—have vital roles to play in both supporting and scrutinising these nascent post-growth agendas as they are developed in European cities.

In particular, we hope that future research, including the next phase of our research at the LSE Cities' European Cities Programme, will focus on the how post-growth ideas are being put into practice. How do policymakers, activists, and academics build political coalitions around post-growth in European cities? How do they make these ideas palatable to citizens in general and combat the concerns about scarcity they often evoke? Which post-growth approaches get prioritized and why? How do cities across contrasting regions of Europe engage differently with post-growth? What can European cities learn from other parts of the globe where centres of interest in post-growth are developing, like Latin America?

This further research will likely lead us to unpack and develop our first thoughts on European urban post-growth in this article. For now, we hope it helpfully feeds into broader transdisciplinary discussions building around urban post-growth. As urban citizens suffer one of the worst crises in cost-of-living in decades, climate breakdown begins to assert itself in Europe, and economic inequality and political apathy and polarization run rife, it is perhaps unsurprising that European cities are questioning the orthodoxy of growth and seeking alternative pathways to prosperity. Whether or not they are able to put urban post-growth into practice at scale remains to be seen, but, in the crisis-riven context of the 2020s, the arguments for exploring post-growth ideas are ever more compelling.

## Notes

[to be set]

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The authors have nothing to disclose.

## Contributions

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<sup>1</sup>Lines represent Google search interest relative to the highest point on the chart at the global level. A value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term (50 means that the term is half as popular, etc.). A score of 0 means that there was not enough data for a particular term, at that particular time.

<sup>2</sup>For a list of some of these actors, see <https://demoshelsinki.fi/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Landscape-analysis-of-an-emergent-economic-movement-14012022.pdf>, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup>To identify the urban-focused literature in this space, we repeated the systematic analysis in Scopus using the same search terms and Boolean operators plus the terms *urban* OR *city* OR *cities*.