

**Letter to the UN High-Level Expert Group on Beyond GDP
in support of expanded wealth accounting**

Dear co-chairs Lustig and Basu,

GDP is an important summary statistic but is frequently misused in public discourse and decision making. There is a strong need for additional high-level metrics to deliver on *Our Common Agenda*. We applaud the United Nations for establishing the High-Level Expert Group (HLEG) on Beyond GDP and strongly support the group's work toward a new framework.

The purpose of moving beyond GDP is to develop economic statistics that empower governments, investors, businesses, researchers, journalists, and the public with more complete measures of economic activity. GDP's construction and application in practice—together with its frequent misinterpretation as a measure of national progress—has contributed to significant harm to the planet, social cohesion, and the many groups routinely excluded from the benefits of growth. The pathway beyond GDP must enable nations to retain the benefits of growth and the information value of GDP (which has smoothed business cycles and improved tax and fiscal policy), while ensuring well-being, equity, inclusion, and sustainability for all citizens.

GDP benefits from three essential characteristics that must be shared by any framework intended to move beyond it. First, GDP is appealing because it summarizes vast information into a concise, intelligible metric. This reduces cognitive and coordination costs, providing policymakers, markets, and the public with a common reference point for diagnosis, comparison, and accountability. Metrics that go beyond GDP must be similarly concise.

Second, the robust theory underlying GDP ensures disciplined measurement choices. It clarifies what is being measured, how components relate to one another, and what trade-offs are being made. The units of measurement underlying GDP are clearly defined, internally consistent, and grounded in well-established economic concepts, lending credibility, comparability, and durability over time. Without similar discipline, metrics intended to go beyond GDP risk being arbitrary, internally inconsistent, and vulnerable to shifting political priorities. This is precisely where many alternatives have struggled in the past.

Third, GDP is powerful because it is relevant. It is used every day to make decisions in national budgets, to determine access to international financial markets, and to assess

sovereign creditworthiness, among many other examples. Any framework beyond GDP must provide metrics that are similarly actionable and acted on.

In our view, the pathway beyond GDP that best meets the above challenge of concision, robustness and relevance is to complement GDP with a set of expanded (also known as “comprehensive” or “inclusive”) wealth accounts measuring the value of human, natural, social, produced, and financial assets. Such accounts would be concise, theoretically robust—resting upon decades of scholarship and empirical effort—and highly relevant to what matters: well-being, equity, inclusion, and sustainability. A growing body of theoretical and empirical research supports our contentions on these points.¹

No matter what approach is taken, the pathway beyond GDP will require substantial efforts to collect and organize data, some new and some existing. There are several benefits to organizing those data within an internally consistent framework, like that of expanded wealth accounting, that is interoperable with the rest of economic statistics. First, this would allow effective use of new data management tools, including AI, that work best with highly structured data. Second, it would ensure that reporting on well-being, equity, inclusion, and sustainability complements GDP and is comparable across countries. Like GDP and its underlying systems of national accounts, data in expanded wealth accounts could be used to compute myriad indicators with wide relevance. Examples include enhancing the measurement of productivity, which today ignores the contribution of natural and social capital, and informing the relationship between environmental and health policy in the nexus where air pollution and human capital intersect.

With the right impetus and resourcing, we believe a globally relevant and practicable system of wealth accounts could be established conceptually and empirically within a few years. We are cognizant that different threads exist within expanded wealth accounting research to date; for example, the United Nations *Inclusive Wealth Reports* and the World Bank’s *The Changing Wealth of Nations* series. Our intention is not to advocate for any single approach. Indeed, we acknowledge that additional research will be needed before settling on a unified approach. This would include, for example, research on disaggregation of wealth by group and region; assessing climate damages and other forms of ecosystem degradation in relation to wealth; and understanding the value of human and social capital. Many of us are actively involved in such research. The concepts, sources and methods are

¹ See, among many others, Agarwala *et al.*, 2020; Arrow *et al.*, 2012; Bizikova *et al.*, 2024; Bolt *et al.*, 2006; Dasgupta, 2001, 2012, 2014, 2021, 2025; Dasgupta & Levin, 2023; Dasgupta & Mäler, 2000; Fenichel & Abbott, 2014; Fenichel, Abbott, & Yun, 2018; Hamilton & Clemens, 1999; Hamilton & Hepburn, 2017; Managi & Kumar, 2018; Managi *et al.*, 2024; McLaughlin, 2026; Pearce & Atkinson, 1993; Pearce *et al.*, 1996; Pilling, 2018; Polasky *et al.*, 2015; Smith *et al.*, 2018; UNU-IHDP & UNEP, 2012, 2014; UNEP, 2021; World Bank, 2011, 2021, 2024; Zenghelis *et al.*, 2020.

advancing and, importantly, coalescing. Of course, completing this effort will require financial and technical support for the national statistical agencies that must be at the centre of any such work.

Importantly, there is already significant progress and momentum. Highlights include the United Nations and partners' efforts to compile international accounting standards for natural capital (the *System of Environmental-Economic Accounting*) and the recently updated *2025 System of National Accounts*, which includes specific chapters devoted to measuring well-being and sustainability. Nationally, many countries already measure key components of wealth, such as produced, financial, and natural capital. One country, the United Kingdom, has already committed to regular measurement of a full set of expanded wealth accounts.

In closing, we support the essential work of the HLEG and look forward to your final report. As experts in economic statistics and sustainable development, we stand ready to engage.

Sincerely (signed alphabetically by surname),

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