

Exploring the Promises and Pitfalls of Green Growth

The United Nations University Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability convened the **International Symposium on Green Growth and Global Environmental Change** on 25th and 26th July, 2014 at UNU, Tokyo. The symposium was supported by a grant from the Asia-Pacific Network for Global Change Research under its CAPaBLE Programme, a small grant from the Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation, and a fellowship from the British Academy. The event brought together researchers and policy practitioners at various stages in their careers and representing diverse intellectual interests and ideological orientations.



It created an important space, much appreciated by participants and guests, to scrutinise the promises and pitfalls of Green Growth; an idea that has acquired considerable traction in national and international environmental policy deliberations after the Rio +20 conference. Authors from 17 countries and various international organisations (UNU, UNCTAD, UNESCO, ILO, UNICITRAL and the Global Green Growth Institute) presented a total of 30 papers discussing empirical evidence testing the claims of Green Growth, debating its ideological underpinnings and their implications as a response to modernity's environmental crisis and exploring alternatives.

The central idea of Green Growth is that technological innovation supplemented by market allocation of resources and some state regulation can assuage the ecological and social impacts of open-ended economic growth and its attendant energy and resource throughput confronting environmental governance today. Based on empirical evidence presented the symposium took the view that such “ecological modernisation” strategies whilst important and necessary are also insufficient to adequately contain the impacts of energy and material throughput – the “social metabolism” – arising from open-ended economic expansion. Case studies included papers from South Korea, the European Union, Brazil, India as well as a global survey of climate change mitigation measures.

Complementing these cases, other papers queried and clarified the neoliberal ideological underpinnings of Green Growth and explored the scope of these policy mechanisms to rescue capitalism from its contradictions. Cases discussed carbon markets in Australia, NGO activism in China, democratic deficit in the Philippines, energy efficiency in Vietnam, counter-hegemonic movements in Thailand, the urban waterscape in Jakarta, rural development in India, the nature

of the green wave in North Korea, the juxtaposition of scarcity and creativity in the built environment, the scope of international environmental law and the trade-offs in the Green Economy, among others.



Further historical and ideological interrogation suggested that rather than offering grounds for containing expanding commodity frontiers and the externalisation of their social and ecological impacts, Green Growth strategies represent a further iteration in the production of capitalist nature that has proceeded since the 15th century. Failing to recognize this and implicitly excusing these policy mechanisms from critical scrutiny for a nuanced understanding of their location in capitalist production renders them capable of diluting creative, commons-based, and non-capitalist alternatives in response to modernity's environmental crisis.

Turning to the question of “if not Green Growth, then what else” brought forward a hopeful yet realistic assessment of creative initiatives from around the world. Papers questioned the monolithic sanctity accorded to the concept of “property” and hence opened up the possibility of multiple nuanced relationships of social production and reproduction that restricted the imperatives of capitalist production to one among many social drivers. Other papers detailed social initiatives from around the world seeking to build “hybrid cultures” while also pointing out their risks of being co-opted by the dominant capitalist relationships.



An insight that drew wide acknowledgment is that efficiency strategies, which constitute the core of the “ecological modernisation” project, are a necessary but insufficient condition for environmental governance. Responding to such limitations, scrutiny of the ideological underpinnings of Green Growth highlighted contradictions implicit in it embodying another iteration of the production of capitalist nature. Faced with this reality the symposium pointed to environmental governance that moved beyond the technocratic realm and empowered human-centered initiatives and social movements where the normative is reclaimed as a sight of political contest and creativity through deeper reliance on commons’ resources to democratically deliberate norms and negotiate a more equitable future on a shared and finite planet.

The symposium opened up valuable space to critically scrutinize Green Growth and to consider creative responses to its contradictions. The relative novelty of such an opportunity was highly appreciated by many of the participants. The second output under this grant from the APN is a co-edited volume tentatively titled “Green Growth: Political Ideology and Political Economy” expected in 2015, with Zed Books.