

Exploring the Compatibility of Economic Growth in Austria and the Worldwide Achievement of the SDGs

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ABSTRACT ^{1,2}

Since their inception in 2015, the UN SDGs have been heavily critiqued, with much scrutiny directed towards the apparent contradiction between SDG 8 (economic growth) and the environmental goals (Pradhan, Costa, Rybski, Lucht, & Kropp, 2017). While many promote notions of ‘green growth’, others point to our historical inability to decouple economic production from environmental impact at a sufficient rate to stabilize impacts, let alone reduce them. The almost uninterrupted growth of the global economy and most national economies over the past centuries has been accompanied by an almost constant decline in many environmental metrics, leading many to talk of impending crises. This paper does not tackle the relationship between growth and environmental impacts at the global scale, as many have done before, but instead investigates a single, small, European country: Austria. Specifically, we ask: Is economic growth in Austria compatible with the worldwide achievement of the SDGs?

Based on the literature, the authors formulated a deductive argument consisting of ten premises and leading to the conclusion that “economic growth in Austria is incompatible with the global achievement of the SDGs”. The goal of the research was to determine whether the argument is both valid (the truth of the conclusion being fully established by the premises) as well as sound (the premises all being true). To this end, a variety of economists with perspectives ranging from mainstream to degrowth were engaged as participants in a Delphi process. Through an online platform, they were presented with the full argument and asked to reflect on its validity. In both the first and second rounds, all but one expert concluded that the premises, if true, unavoidably establish the truth of the conclusion. The argument, it appears, is valid.

The experts then reflected on each premise, in turn, and commented as to its truth value. The ten premises drew particularly on the environmental and inequality-focused SDGs to explore their relation to economic growth in Austria through the concepts of thermodynamics, decoupling, regulation, and redistribution and dependency. After the first round achieved 74% unconditional agreement across the premises, the authors considered the expert feedback and reformulated several premises accordingly. All expert comments were anonymously circulated to all participants, along with the authors’ reflections and the revised argument in the second round, where the level of unconditional agreement across the premises reached 88%. Although only 36% of respondents in the first round and 45% in the second round unconditionally agreed with both the validity and soundness of the entire argument, the validity of the argument was supported by an overwhelming consensus (91%) and the truth of each premise by at least 82% of

respondents. On this basis, the authors conclude the argument to be both valid and sound: economic growth in Austria is incompatible with the global achievement of the SDGs. The important challenges for global institutions as well as national governments, who openly state their commitment to two incompatible objectives, are also explored.