

Economic questions: the Kate Raworth question

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This is one of a series of posts that will ask what the most pertinent question raised by a prominent influencer of [political economy](#) might have been, and what the relevance of that question might be today. There is a list of all posts in the series at the end of each entry. The [origin of this series is noted here](#).

This series has been produced using what I describe as directed AI searches to establish positions with which I agree, followed by final editing before publication.

Why have I included [Kate Raworth](#) in this series? I have done so because in her work on doughnut economics, she reframes one of the central questions of economics, which is what is the economy actually for? Her “doughnut” framework challenges the obsession with growth by placing human wellbeing and planetary limits at the centre of economic thinking. By doing so, she provides an accessible framework for answering some of the questions posed by other thinkers in the series, who, in a more conceptual sense, have asked, what is the meaning of economics, or of life itself?

[Kate Raworth](#) is best known for her concept of [Doughnut Economics](#), first set out in 2012 and later developed in her book *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist*. The image she proposes is deceptively simple: a ring, or doughnut, bounded on the inside by the social foundation required for human wellbeing and on the outside by the ecological ceiling beyond which environmental systems break down.

Between these two boundaries lies the safe and just space in which humanity can flourish.

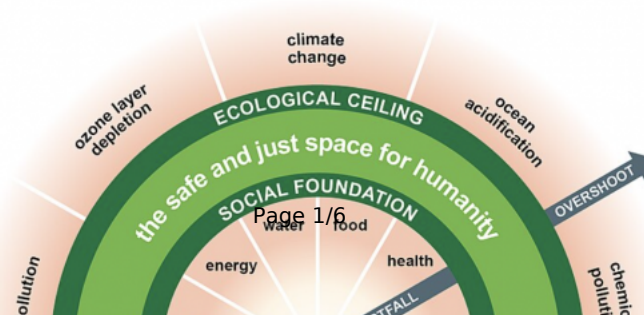


Image source: Wikipedia

Raworth's insight is that the purpose of economic activity should be to keep societies within this space, ensuring that everyone has the essentials of life while respecting the limits of the Earth's ecosystems. Yet modern economics still focuses overwhelmingly on increasing output, often ignoring whether that growth improves wellbeing or damages the environment, hence the **Kate Raworth Question: *If the goal of the economy is to enable people to thrive within the limits of the planet, why do we continue to judge success almost entirely by whether GDP keeps growing?***

The social foundation

Raworth's inner boundary represents the basic conditions required for a dignified life: food, clean water, healthcare, education, housing, energy, equality, political voice and social equity. Failing to meet this foundation means people lack essential capabilities.

In many countries, these deficits remain widespread. Poverty, insecurity and unequal access to services persist despite decades of economic expansion. Raworth, therefore, argues that economic success cannot be measured solely by output if large portions of society remain excluded from its benefits.

Meeting the social foundation is the first responsibility of a functioning economy.

The ecological ceiling

The outer boundary of the doughnut reflects the limits of the Earth's natural systems. Climate stability, biodiversity, healthy soils, freshwater availability and ocean health are all essential for sustaining life.

Economic activity that pushes beyond these limits undermines the very systems on which prosperity depends. Climate change and ecological degradation demonstrate how growth-oriented economies can overshoot planetary boundaries.

Raworth's framework insists that environmental constraints are not peripheral concerns. They define the operating conditions of the economy.

The safe and just space

The doughnut's central insight is that prosperity lies not in maximising growth but in maintaining balance, which is the theme that I addressed in my 2011 book, ***The Courageous State***. An economy should aim to lift everyone above the social foundation while staying below the ecological ceiling.

This requires a shift in perspective. Instead of asking how to grow GDP faster, policymakers must ask whether economic activity is improving wellbeing without exceeding environmental limits.

The goal becomes thriving within limits, rather than expansion without end.

Rethinking economic models

Raworth criticises the traditional circular flow diagrams that portray the economy as a closed system of production and consumption. In reality, the economy is embedded within society and dependent on the biosphere.

By restoring this context, Doughnut Economics reconnects economics with ecological and social realities. Markets, firms and households operate within systems that supply resources and absorb waste. Ignoring these systems creates policies that appear efficient but prove unsustainable.

The doughnut is therefore not merely a metaphor but a structural correction to economic thinking.

Cities and practical application

Raworth's ideas have gained traction in cities and local governments seeking alternatives to conventional growth strategies. Amsterdam, for example, has explored using the doughnut framework to guide urban development, aiming to balance social needs with environmental responsibility.

These experiments suggest that the framework can move beyond theory into practical policymaking. By mapping where societies fall short of social foundations or exceed ecological ceilings, policymakers can identify priorities for action.

The doughnut thus becomes a tool for guiding decisions rather than simply critiquing growth.

What answering the Kate Raworth Question would require

Taking Raworth's framework seriously would involve a substantial shift in economic priorities. At a minimum, it would require:

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Replacing GDP growth as the primary indicator of success, incorporating measures of wellbeing and ecological health.

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Ensuring universal access to the social foundations of life, including healthcare, housing and education.

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Operating within planetary boundaries, reducing resource use and emissions to sustainable levels.

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Redesigning economic institutions, from finance to taxation, so they support regeneration rather than extraction.

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Encouraging innovation that improves quality of life without expanding material throughput.

Such changes would move economic policy toward balance rather than perpetual expansion.

Inference

The Kate Raworth Question challenges one of the central assumptions of modern economics, which is that prosperity depends on continuous growth. Raworth argues instead that the real task of economics is to create conditions in which humanity can thrive within the limits of the planet.

Her framework reframes economic success not as the size of the economy but as its ability to sustainably meet human needs. If societies continue to pursue growth without regard for social foundations or ecological ceilings, they risk both persistent inequality and environmental collapse.

To answer Raworth's question is to recognise that the purpose of the economy is not endless expansion but the creation of a safe and just space in which people and planet can flourish together.

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- * **Economics questions: the Milton Friedman question**
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