KAINMAAILMA

An economy in service of life

Respectful dialogue, human dignity and biodiversity

CHAPTER 5 · WHAT CAN WE DO?

An economy that serves life, respectful dialogue and thoughtful decentralisation

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30 October 2026 · English edition

A shared direction

A synthesis of the research and values underpinning Chapter 5 of Kainmaailma. This text brings together understanding gained through human experience, scientific research and critical discussion.

The economy is not merely a system of production, money and consumption. It is also a system of human relationships, work, care and life dependent on nature.

This text is a collaborative working draft.

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01 | The economy is part of the whole of life

Human beings are neither above nature nor separate from it. We belong to the same web of life as other animals, plants, forests, waters and the countless organisms in the soil.

All life depends on other life in many ways.

The economic system created by human beings also operates within this whole. Its existence rests on nature's vitality and on people's work, skills and interaction with one another.

Yet we have become accustomed to judging economic success primarily in terms of growth, productivity and financial profit.

These indicators tell us something about economic activity, but not enough about how people are doing, how communities function or what is happening to the natural world around them.

Can we consider economic activity successful if corporate profits rise while workers become exhausted, communities lose their vitality and biodiversity declines?

Kainmaailma's starting point is that we cannot.

The purpose of the economy is to serve life, not to subordinate life to the economy.

02 | The goal of continuous growth must be reassessed

The Earth's material resources and the capacity of ecosystems to withstand pressure are finite.

An unlimited increase in material production and consumption therefore cannot be the basis of a sustainable economy.

This does not, however, mean opposing all growth or development.

Skills, education, human well-being, art, culture, care and ecological restoration can develop without that development requiring ever-increasing consumption of natural resources.

We must also distinguish growth in material consumption from economic growth measured in monetary terms. They are related, but they are not the same thing.

In some circumstances, economic activity can grow while environmental pressures decline. Research does not, however, provide sufficient grounds for assuming that this will happen everywhere, across every type of environmental impact, and quickly enough.

Kainmaailma's aim is therefore not to prescribe a particular rate of economic growth or contraction.

The aim is a society whose well-being and ability to function do not depend on ever-increasing consumption of natural resources.

We must also acknowledge that countries and regions face different circumstances. Reducing poverty and meeting basic needs may require increased material production where people lack the conditions for a life of dignity.

Instead of growth itself, the primary question becomes: what are we growing, why are we growing it, and with what consequences?

03 | Nature is more than an economic resource

Biodiversity cannot be considered solely in terms of the economic benefits it provides to human beings.

Nature also has intrinsic value.

A forest is not merely a source of timber. It is a habitat for countless organisms, where different species live in complex interdependence.

A lake is not merely a water reserve or a recreational service. It is a living ecosystem whose well-being arises from a great many relationships.

When people make decisions that affect nature, they must respect this whole.

Economic activity should seek to avoid harming nature. Wherever possible, it should also contribute to restoring habitats that have already been degraded.

Protecting nature must not be left as a voluntary marketing tool for businesses.

It must form part of society's shared rules and of what makes economic activity acceptable.

We must also learn to listen to nature.

This means observing and studying nature and becoming familiar with its phenomena. Nature communicates its condition in many ways: through changes in species, water quality, the development of habitats and the behaviour of organisms.

Our task is to learn to interpret these messages with humility and to distinguish our own interpretations from actual observations.

We do not need to give nature human characteristics in order to respect it.

We are part of nature and responsible for the condition in which we leave it behind.

04 | Human dignity and the meaning of work

Every person has value regardless of their economic productivity.

This is a fundamental value of a new way of thinking about the economy.

A worker should not be seen merely as a factor of production or a cost to be continually reduced.

Every member of a workplace community has their own role, skills and significance in the success of shared activities.

Respect for work must be reflected in fair pay, safe working conditions, opportunities to participate in developing the work, and the way people treat one another.

Improving efficiency and productivity can be justified when it makes work easier, saves resources and supports well-being.

It must not, however, mean continually increasing the burden on people in pursuit of ever-greater financial returns.

We must also remember that the value of all work essential to society is not reflected in markets.

Raising children, caring for older people, helping loved ones, volunteering and many other forms of care are foundations of a functioning society.

Their significance must be recognised, and fair conditions must be created for carrying them out.

Human dignity does not disappear when a person is unable to do paid work.

Children, older people, people who are ill, people with disabilities and everyone who needs support belong to the same community, whose well-being is our shared responsibility.

A society's value is measured not only by the wealth it produces, but also by how it treats its members.

05 | Profitability is necessary, but it is not the highest purpose

Economic activity must rest on a sustainable foundation.

A business must be able to pay wages, meet its obligations, maintain its operations and make necessary investments.

Profit is therefore not inherently a negative thing.

The problem arises when maximising profit becomes more important than caring for workers' well-being, nature's vitality and the common good.

In Kainmaailma, profitability is seen as a means through which economic activity can continue and develop responsibly.

A business's success is also assessed by how it cares for its employees, customers, partners and the natural world around it.

This also requires changes to the structures of society.

The goodwill of an individual entrepreneur is not enough if the operating environment rewards irresponsible behaviour and places responsible businesses at an unreasonable competitive disadvantage.

We need shared rules, fair competition and economic incentives that support sustainable activity.

Reforming the economy does not therefore mean opposing business.

On the contrary: the aim is to create conditions for businesses to succeed by also caring for the common good.

06 | The welfare society is the foundation of shared responsibility

Thoughtful decentralisation does not mean society abandoning its responsibility to provide the services to which citizens are entitled.

Healthcare, social services, care for older people, education and other statutory services are society's responsibility.

Their provision must comply with shared national laws and regulations and safeguard citizens' equal rights.

The ways in which services are delivered may nevertheless vary according to local circumstances.

A solution that works in a sparsely populated area may differ from a service provided in the centre of a large city.

What matters is that people's rights and the quality of services are safeguarded.

Private businesses complement public services by providing people with goods, services and jobs.

Decentralisation does not in itself require cooperatives, shared ownership or new administrative structures. These may be possible options, but they are not prerequisites for action.

Economic constraints must also be acknowledged. Public services need sustainable funding, and their provision must take account of population structure, workforce availability and costs.

Equal rights do not require identical service structures everywhere.

07 | Thoughtful decentralisation and the vitality of local communities

In Kainmaailma, decentralisation is not an end in itself.

It is not sensible to decentralise every activity. Some services, production facilities and activities requiring specialist expertise benefit from centralisation.

The essential task is to assess which distribution of activities best serves people, the environment and society as a whole.

Excessive centralisation can weaken regional vitality, make services harder to access and reduce local job opportunities.

Uncontrolled decentralisation, on the other hand, can increase traffic, construction, costs and the fragmentation of natural habitats.

This is why thoughtful decentralisation is needed.

The aim is to strengthen local communities' capacity to act while retaining the benefits and security provided by wider society.

Local production, the processing of agricultural products, small businesses and services can support a community's vitality.

The use of local products and services can be encouraged when justified by their quality, availability, price and environmental impacts.

Local provision is not, however, automatically the better ecological solution. Production methods, energy consumption, transport and pressures on nature must also be considered.

Decentralised communities must not isolate themselves from one another.

They should form a collaborative network through which knowledge, expertise, services and products can move between communities.

The purpose of decentralisation is not to break society apart, but to strengthen the vitality and cooperation of its different parts.

08 | Two complementary directions for development

First direction: revitalising the outskirts of major urban centres and managing their expansion.

Around large urban centres are areas to which people have moved in search of more spacious housing and different living environments.

Services and job opportunities may nevertheless have remained concentrated in city centres.

In these areas, it would be possible to explore which services and activities could reasonably be brought closer to residents.

Implementation should first consider existing buildings, residential areas and transport connections. The purpose is not uncontrolled construction of new areas at nature's expense.

Preserving biodiversity and intact habitats is an essential part of development.

Second direction: restoring vitality to areas at risk of depopulation.

In many areas, population decline has led to the disappearance of services, fewer jobs and, eventually, accelerating outward migration.

In such circumstances, simply hoping that people will move into the area is not enough.

We must identify the conditions that would make it possible to live there, earn a livelihood and enjoy a life of dignity.

Services and jobs are interdependent: without residents, services are difficult to maintain, but without services, attracting new residents is difficult.

Breaking this cycle requires long-term cooperation between public authorities, residents and businesses.

We must also acknowledge that it may not be possible to reverse population trends in every area.

In those cases, the aim may be to safeguard the well-being of the remaining residents, access to services and nature's vitality, rather than pursuing population growth at any cost.

In both directions of development, approaches must be shaped by local circumstances and jointly agreed objectives.

09 | Respectful dialogue as the starting point for decision-making

Respectful dialogue does not simply mean giving everyone an opportunity to speak.

It means making a genuine effort to understand others' perspectives and jointly seeking the most well-founded solution possible.

Decision-making must listen to residents, workers, entrepreneurs, representatives of public services and other affected parties.

The perspectives of people who find it difficult to participate in conventional decision-making procedures must also be safeguarded.

Nature's perspective must be present in decision-making through ecological research, local knowledge of nature and respect for nature's intrinsic value.

Decision-making must be transparent.

Facts, value choices and uncertainties must be distinguished from one another.

Different views can be compared critically, while the people expressing them must be treated with respect.

Dialogue does not, however, require complete agreement. Sometimes decisions must be made even when differences remain.

In those circumstances, it is especially important that the decision-making process is fair, the reasons are transparent and responsibility can be taken for the decisions.

10 | Shared rules and local solutions

Society needs shared laws, duties and rights.

Their purpose is to safeguard citizens' equality, fair treatment, environmental protection and predictability in how activities are carried out.

Local decision-making must not mean weakening these rights.

At the same time, we must recognise that the same administrative and economic solutions do not work everywhere.

It must be possible to assess locally which services are needed, how they should be organised and how opportunities for businesses can be developed.

Local solutions must also be compatible with regional and national objectives.

Natural ecosystems, waters, transport and economic activity do not follow municipal boundaries.

Wider cooperation and shared coordination are therefore needed alongside local decision-making.

Society must be able to combine shared principles with different ways of putting them into practice.

11 | Research, experience and monitoring

Kainmaailma does not want to base its activities on ideals alone.

We need research-based knowledge and approaches evaluated in practice.

Research alone does not, however, resolve questions of values. Alongside it, we need people's experiences, local knowledge and open discussion about the future we seek.

Economic results must be monitored, but so must workers' well-being, the availability of services, community cohesion, biodiversity and the long-term effects of activities.

Numbers and indicators have an important role here.

They can reveal problems we would otherwise miss. They can help us compare alternatives and identify solutions that are not working as intended.

Indicators must not, however, replace encounters with people or reduce nature to a calculated benefit.

Both quantitative and qualitative information should be used to assess economic activity.

Failures must also be acknowledged.

If a trial does not strengthen community well-being or worsens the condition of nature, its implementation must change.

The aim is not to prove a predetermined model right, but to find solutions that actually work.

12 | Respecting critical questions

New economic thinking inevitably gives rise to questions and objections.

How do we safeguard public services if economic growth slows?

How do businesses finance necessary investments?

How do we protect workers' livelihoods and employment?

How do we prevent the costs and environmental harms that decentralisation may cause?

How do we ensure that local decision-making does not lead to inequality or domination by the most powerful local actors?

And how do we act when human needs and the protection of nature appear to conflict?

These questions must not be dismissed.

They are part of respectful dialogue.

Research on the post-growth economy has identified significant gaps, particularly in assessing the effects of large-scale economic changes.

This means that the consequences of new approaches must be studied before extensive changes are made.

We must also avoid assuming that decentralisation, local provision or small-scale activity are automatically good solutions.

Their success depends on circumstances and implementation.

Kainmaailma must be willing to revise its own proposals in the light of new research and experience.

Respectful dialogue also means being willing to acknowledge that our own thinking remains unfinished.

13 | How do we move from ideas to action?

Once shared values and principles for decision-making have been defined, we can turn to local development opportunities.

Development should proceed through a jointly agreed process.

First, we become familiar with the area, its nature, residents, livelihoods, services and history of development.

Next, we listen to the people who live and work there and identify the problems and opportunities that the proposed changes seek to address.

We then develop a range of feasible alternatives.

The economic, social and ecological effects of those alternatives are examined as carefully as possible.

Finally, limited trials can be selected and their implementation monitored together.

Activities are developed and, where necessary, changed on the basis of these trials.

This makes it possible to avoid trying to apply one ready-made solution everywhere.

At the same time, experiences from different areas can be shared through a wider network for other communities to draw on.

14 | Kainmaailma's future direction

Kainmaailma's purpose is not to build a new rigid economic doctrine or a single social model that suits everyone.

The aim is to create a shared foundation of values and a way of working through which fair and ecologically sustainable solutions suited to local conditions can be developed.

The economy, work, care, local communities and biodiversity form a whole whose different parts continually interact with one another.

The well-being of each part matters to the system as a whole.

The economy of the future should therefore not be assessed solely in terms of growth, consumption or financial profit.

Its success should also be judged by how well it secures a life of dignity, strengthens communities and sustains nature's vitality.

Respectful dialogue gives us the opportunity to seek these solutions together.

Science provides knowledge, people's experiences bring understanding, and shared values show the direction.

Thoughtful decentralisation, in turn, can be one practical way to translate these ideas into real action.

We do not need to know all the answers in advance.

We do, however, need to know what we are aiming for and which values we want to respect.

The goal is not a society in which everything serves only to expand the economy. The goal is a society in which the economy, work and collective action safeguard the continuation of life and the preservation of biodiversity.

The structure of Kainmaailma's thinking

Values guide decision-making; research and experience help us find feasible solutions.

RESPECT FOR LIFE

Human dignity and biodiversity

SHARED VALUES

Care, justice and the common good

RESPECTFUL DIALOGUE

Research, experience and human encounters

THOUGHTFUL DECENTRALISATION

Local solutions and shared rules

THRIVING COMMUNITIES AND NATURE

Monitoring, learning and development

We are not simply suggesting that centralisation should be reduced. We must assess why, when, how and under what conditions doing so makes sense.

Critical observations

01. Research and experience complement one another. If we merely replace GDP with another extensive set of indicators, we may still lose sight of people and living nature. Indicators are necessary, but they alone do not tell us what is valuable.

02. Decentralisation can also have negative consequences. Developing the outskirts of major urban centres can improve access to services, but poor implementation can increase car dependency, construction and habitat fragmentation. A local solution is therefore not automatically sustainable.

03. Alternative economic models must be examined critically. The literature on post-growth economics contains promising ideas, but also gaps in the empirical assessment of large-scale changes. These gaps should not be concealed, nor should they be used as a reason to dismiss the question of nature's capacity to sustain life.

Research background

Selected studies and source publications informing this synthesis. Their findings alone do not resolve the value questions raised in the text.

• IPBES (2022). Assessment of the Diverse Values and Valuation of Nature.

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• ILO. Research reports on unpaid care work and social protection.

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• OECD (2025). Reinforcing Rural Resilience.

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A shared idea: respectful dialogue is more than a beautiful principle. It is a method for examining alternatives, addressing conflicts and developing solutions together.