

Confronting Capitalism and Imperialism in the Struggle for Health (and in Healing the Ecological Rift between Humanity and Mother Earth)

David Legge
Borderlands, 24 April 2024

Background

- Public health physician: variously bureaucrat, academic, activist
 - Preoccupied with the application of political economy to health
 - Founding member of the People's Health Movement (Bangladesh, 2000)
- Discussion paper: [“Confronting Capitalism and Imperialism in the Struggle for Health”](#)
 - Prepared for the Fifth People's Health Assembly in Mar del Plata, Argentina, April 2024
- The [Mar del Plata Call to Action](#), adopted at PHA5 in April 2024

Outline

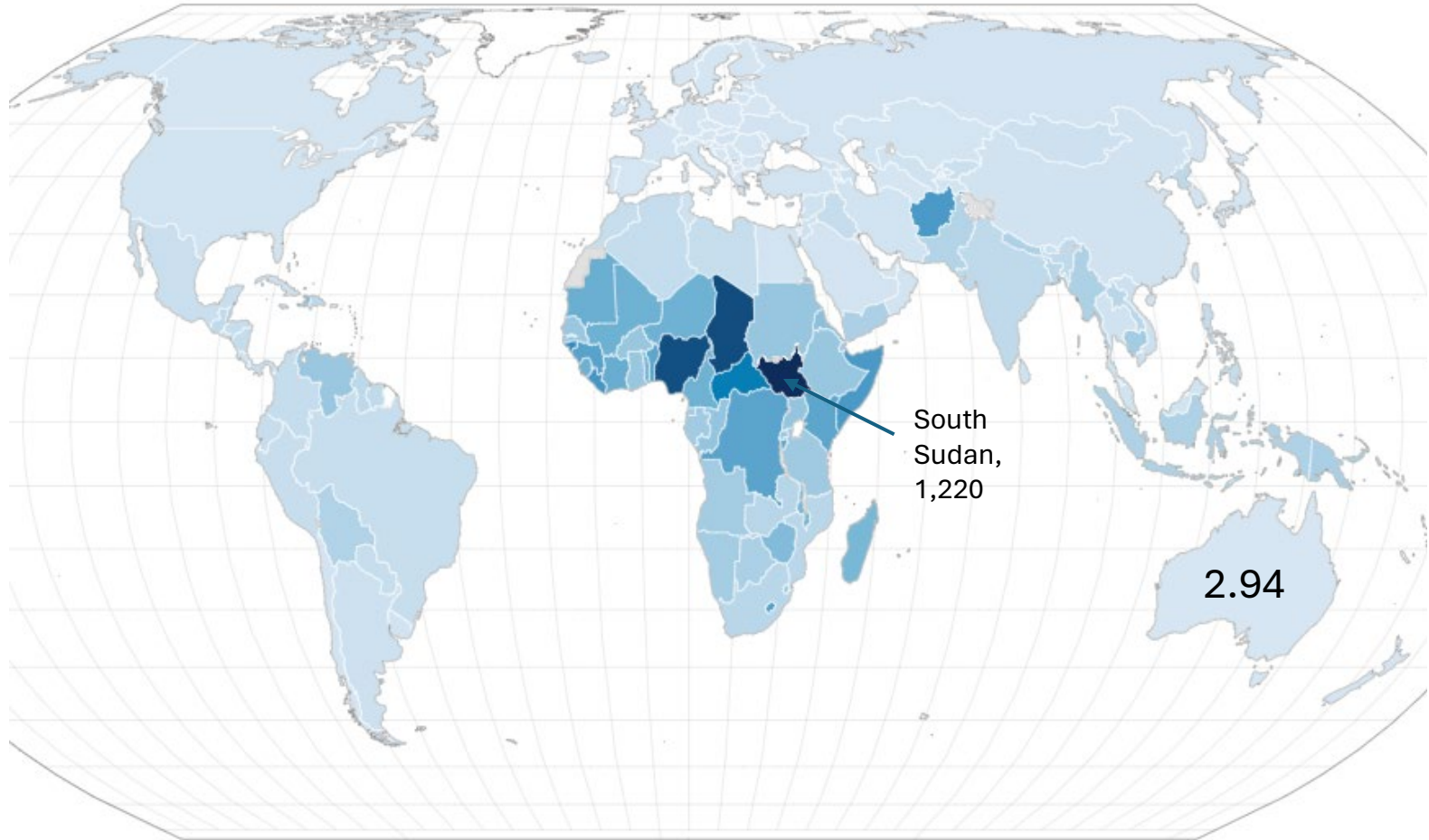
- Health for All by the Year 2000
- The broken promise
- Critical links between the health crisis and the workings of capitalism and imperialism
- Mapping the contemporary world order
- Possible futures
 - Business as usual
 - Possible turning points
 - Ideas which inspire
- Commitments to action

‘Health for All’

- WHO Constitution
 - The enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition
- WHA Resolution 30.43 (1977)
 - ... the attainment by all the citizens of the world by the year 2000 of a level of health that will permit them to lead a socially and economically productive life
- WHO & UNICEF: Alma-Ata Conference on Primary Health Care (1978)
 - prevailing health inequalities ‘politically, socially and economically unacceptable’
 - a vision of health care practitioners working with their communities to address the conditions shaping their health
 - a recognition of the need for a New International Economic Order (1974) for the full attainment of ‘health for all’
- People’s Health Assembly (Bangladesh, December 2000)

Maternal mortality ratio

(Number of maternal deaths per 100 000 live births, 2020, WHO, [link](#))

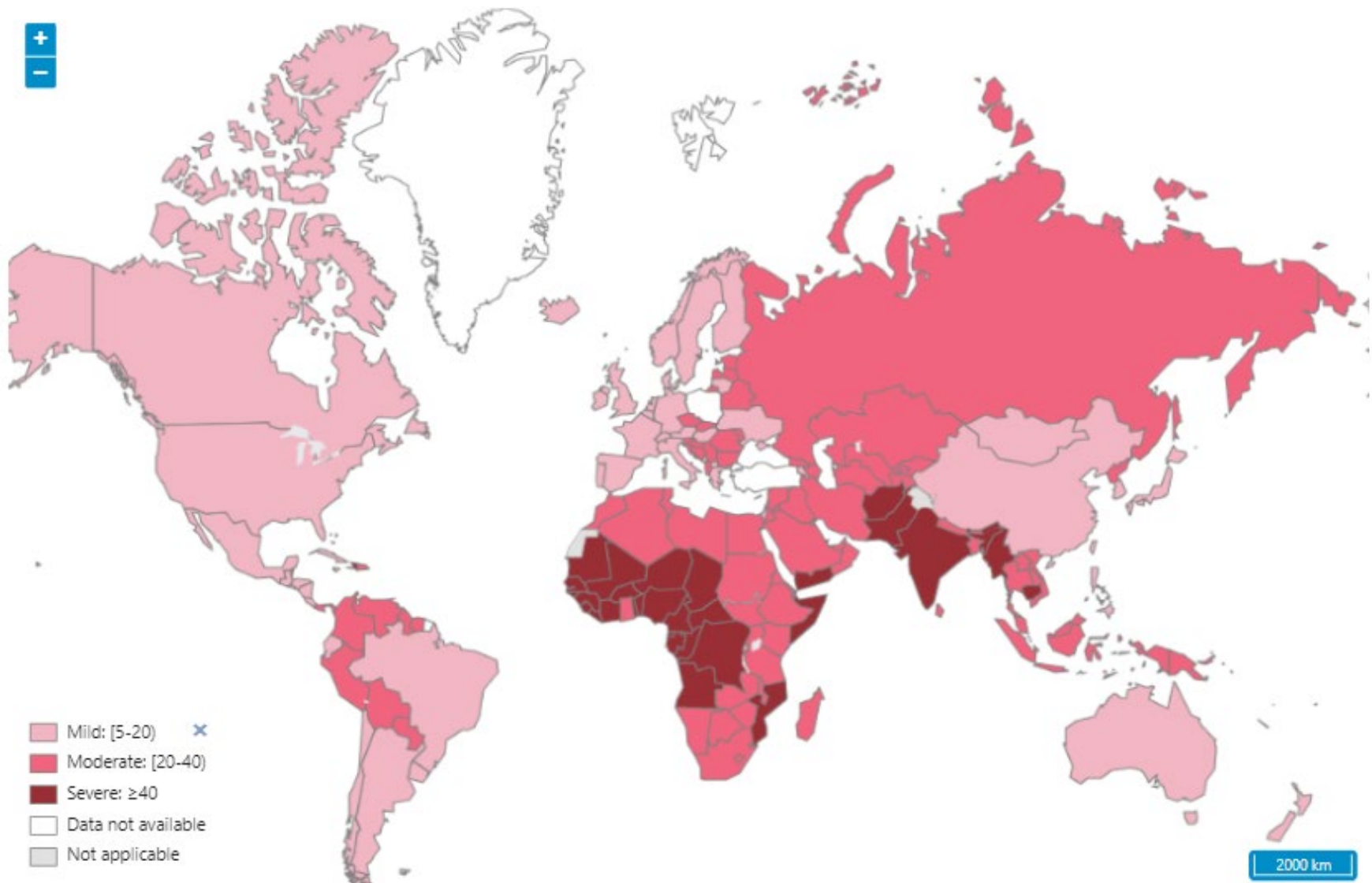


deaths per 100 000
live births

Min
1.1

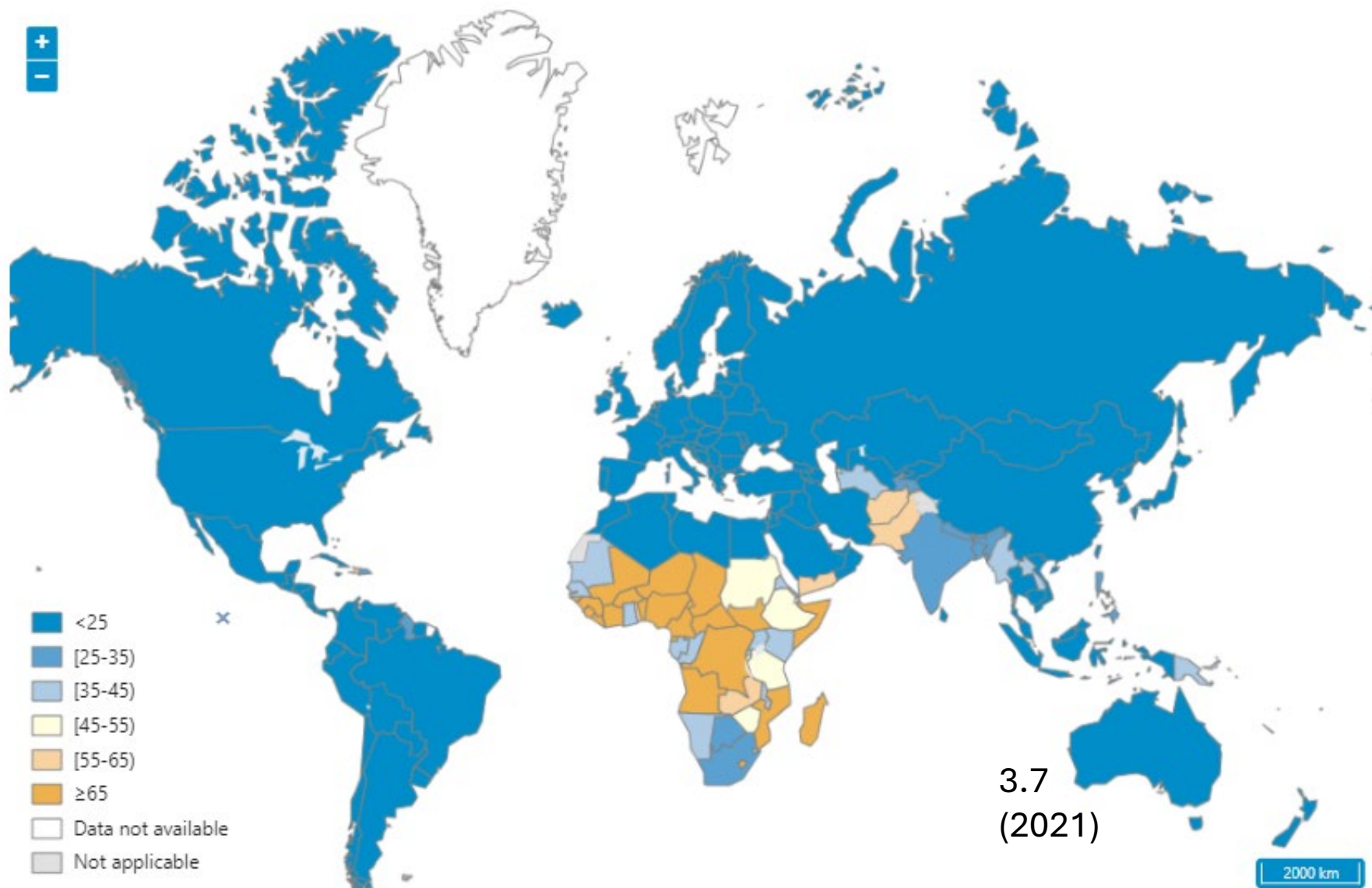
Max
1,220

Prevalence of anaemia in women of reproductive age (ages 15-49, %, 2019, WHO, [link](#))

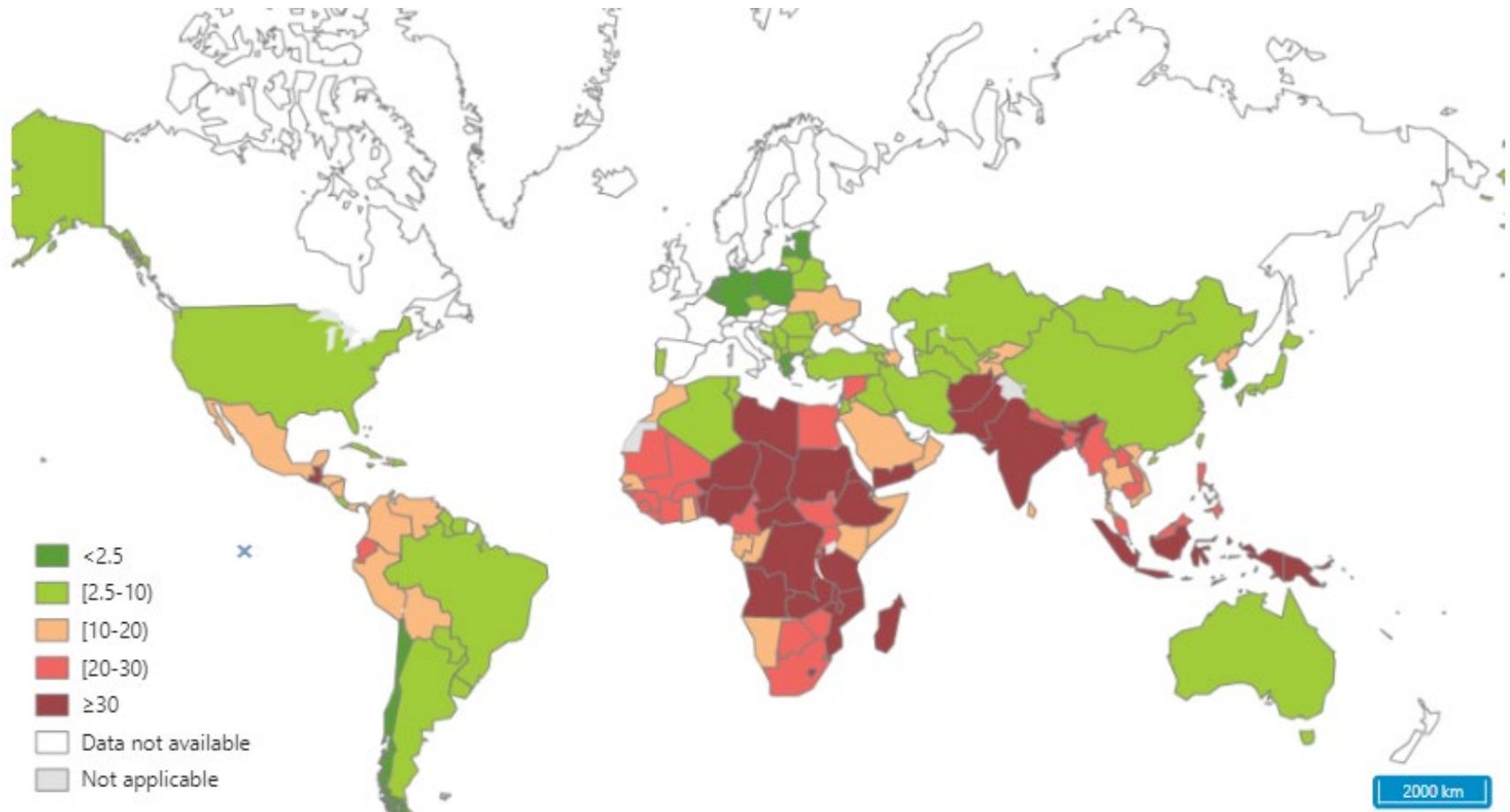


Under-five mortality

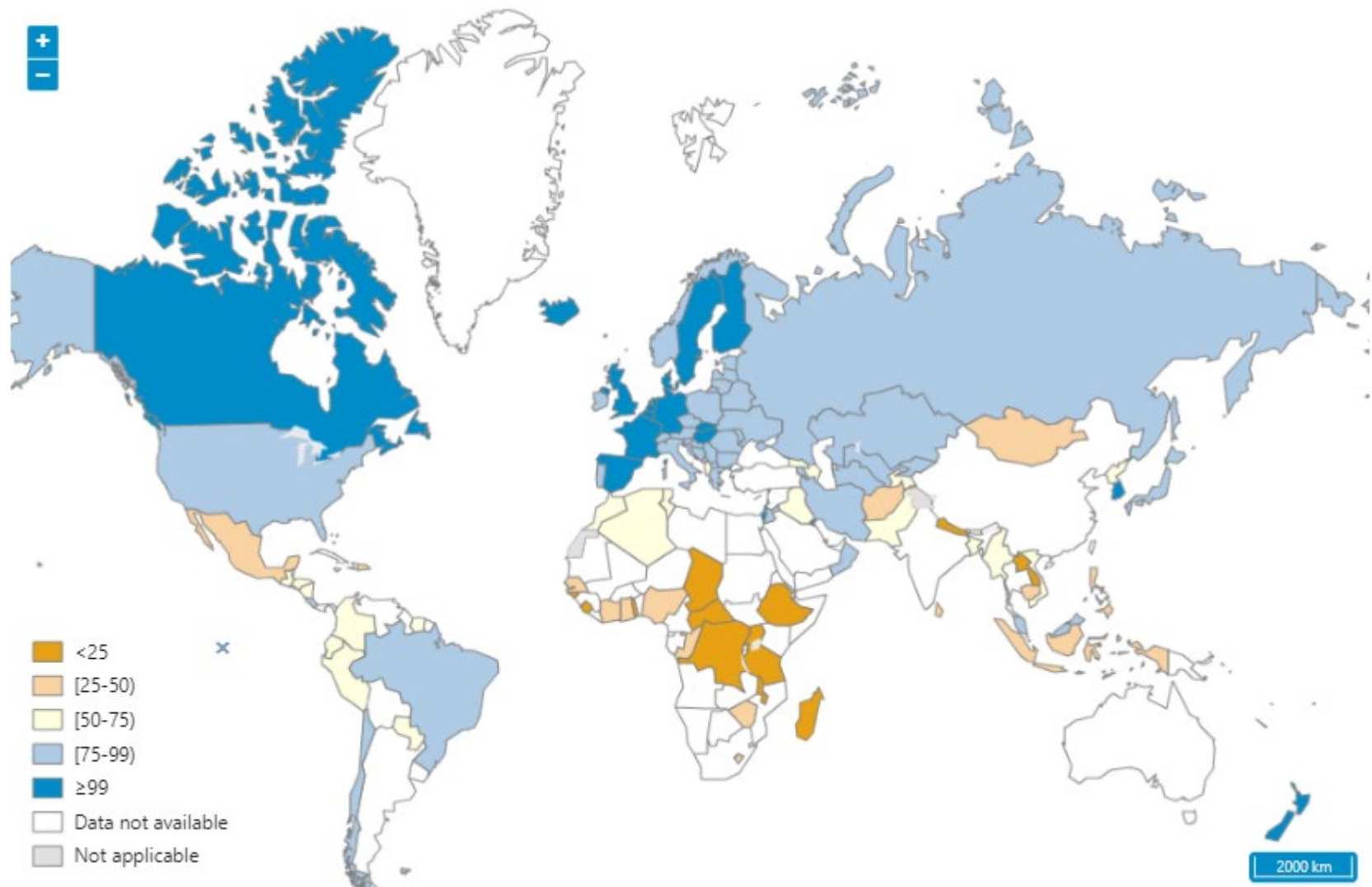
(probability of dying by age 5, both sexes, per 1000 live births, 2021, WHO, [link](#))



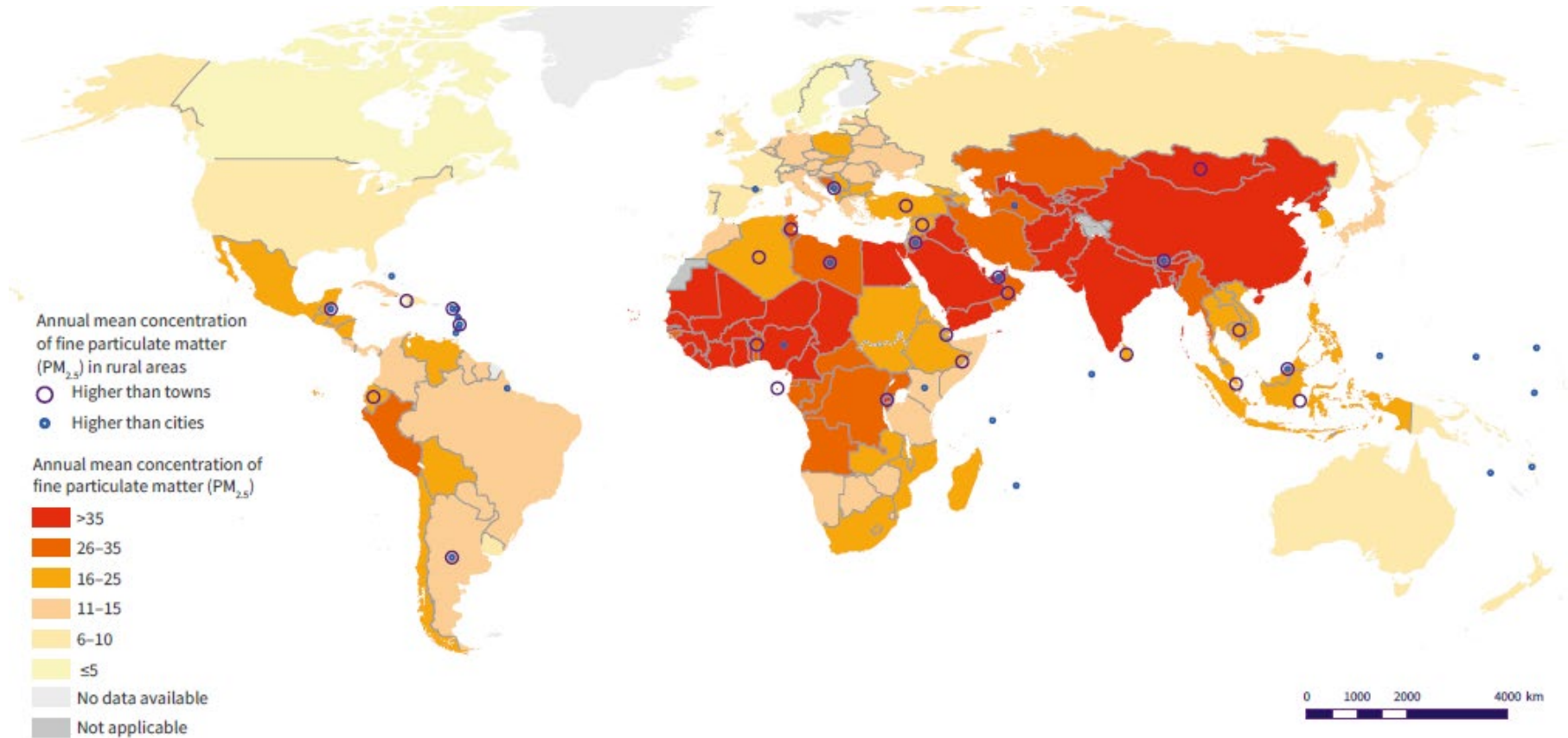
Prevalence of stunting in children under 5 years (% height for age <2SD, 2022, WHO, [link](#))



Population using safely managed drinking-water services (%, 2019, WHO, [link](#))



Annual mean concentrations of fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) (Showing national levels and rural areas compared with towns and cities, 2019)



Current health expenditures (CHE) per capita (US \$, WHO, [link](#))

Location	CHE (US \$, 2021)
High income	3,695
Upper middle income	575
Lower middle income	157
Low income	45
Australia	7,055
USA	12,012

Health Care Impoverishment

Total population pushed below the \$3.65 poverty line by household health expenditures (2019, WHO, [link](#))

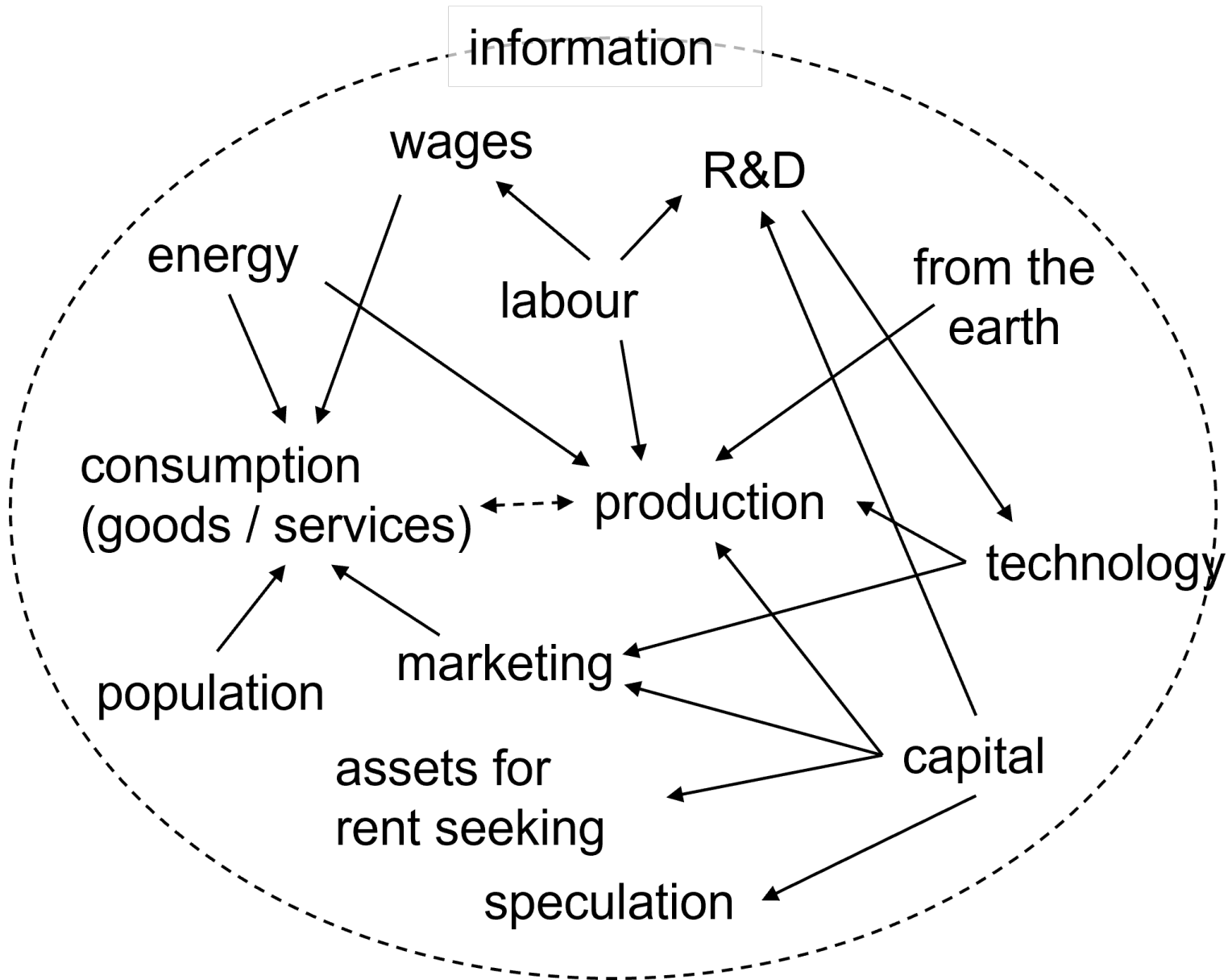
Countries	Population impoverished (millions, 2019)
High income	0.63
Upper middle income	23.84
Lower middle income	105.36
Low income	11.48

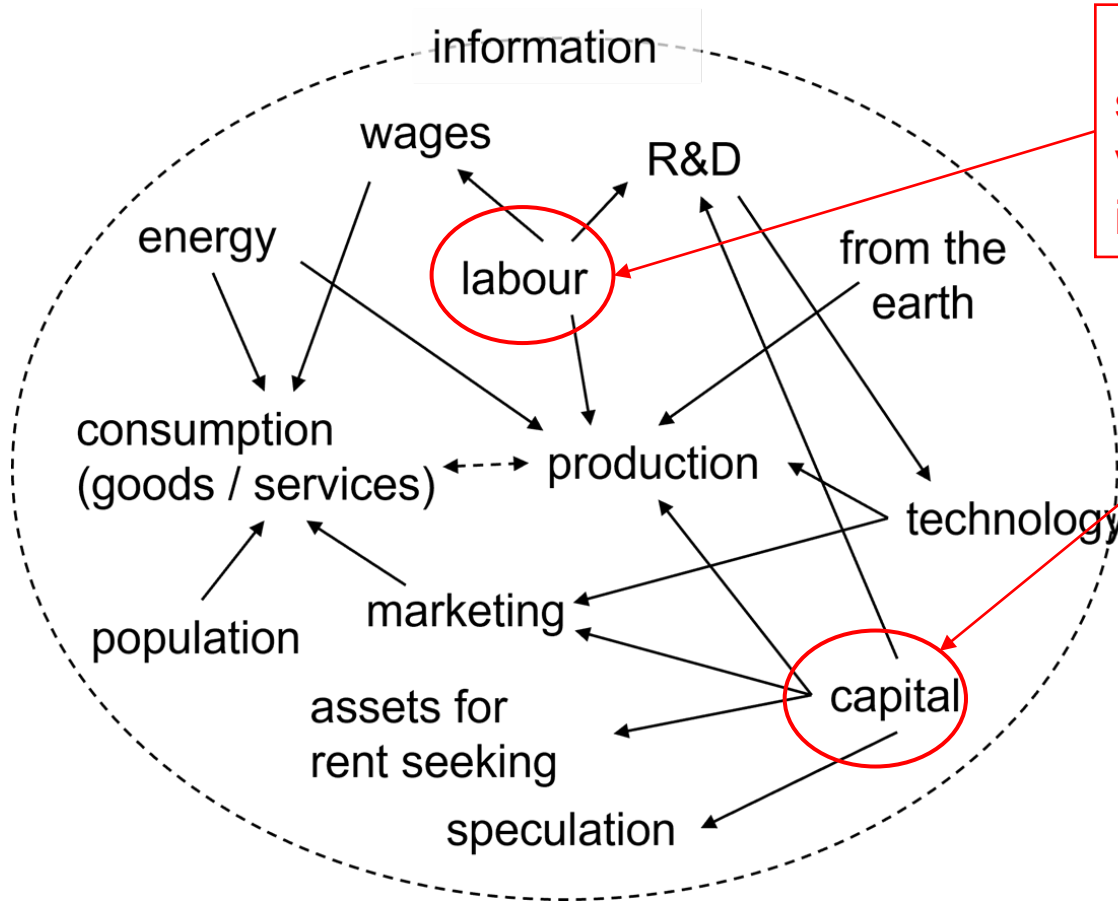
Critical links between the health crisis and the workings of transnational capitalism and imperialism

- deepening economic inequality
 - overproduction, deindustrialisation, financialisation, imperialism
- environmental degradation, including global warming biodiversity loss
- food systems designed to maximise corporate profits
 - industrial (large scale, energy and chemical intense) food systems (at the cost of small farmers' livelihoods, environmental degradation and people's health)
 - global monopolist corporations sitting astride global supply chains, commodity speculation
 - trade rules to protect Northern agribusiness and open Southern markets
- war and conflict, occupation and ethnic cleansing, forced migration, authoritarian regimes
- fiscal crisis, austerity, and privatisation (utilities, services, infrastructure)
- a global drive to privatise healthcare, impacting on quality, efficiency, and equity of access
- extreme intellectual property laws
 - impose price barriers to accessing healthcare products and focus innovation priorities on profitable markets, rather than people's needs

The crisis of transnational capitalism:

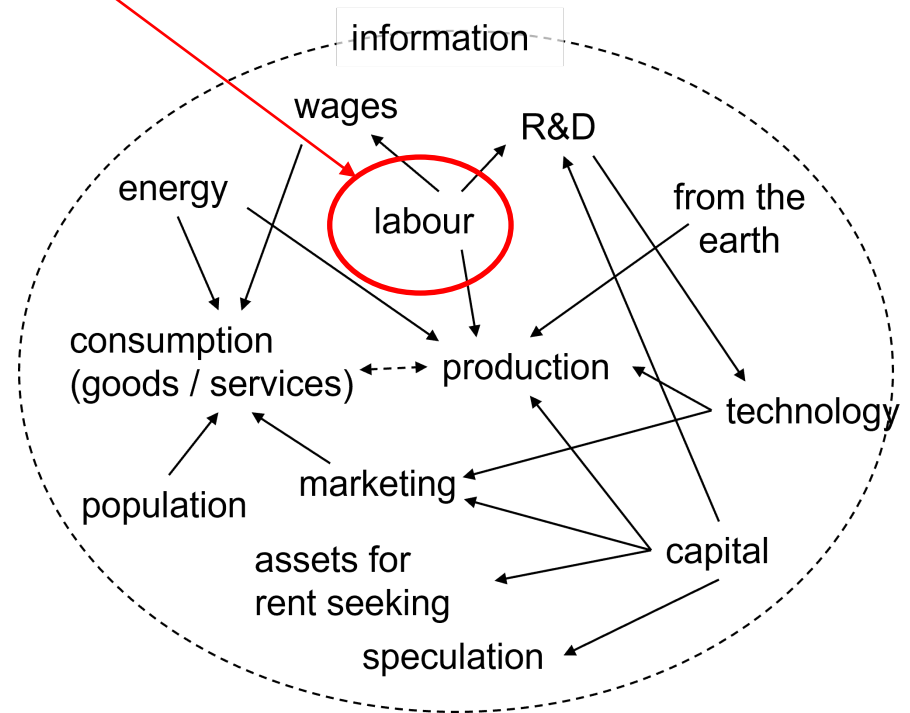
- over-production (and under-consumption)
- financialisation

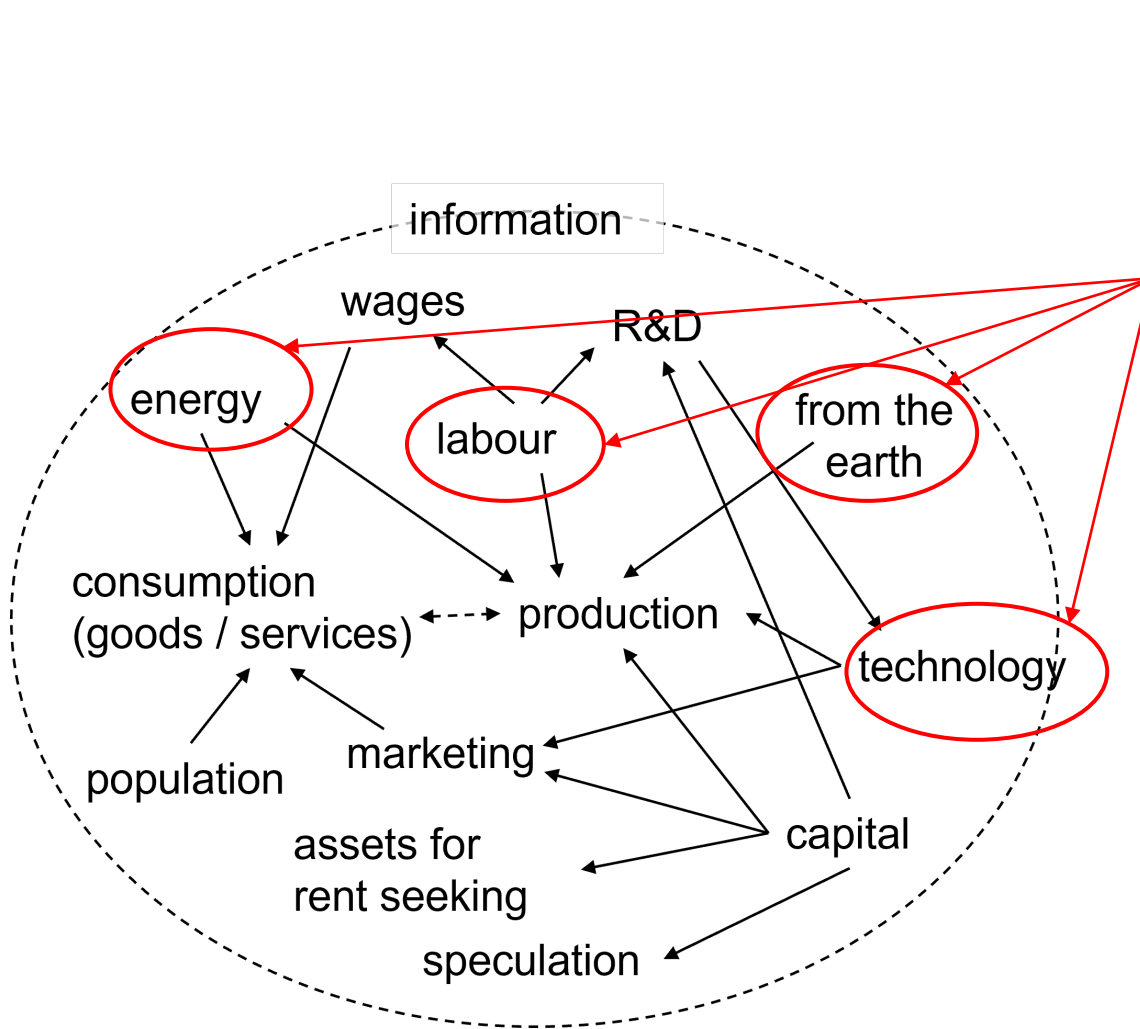




1. labour and capital struggle for share in surplus value: increased wages or increased profit?

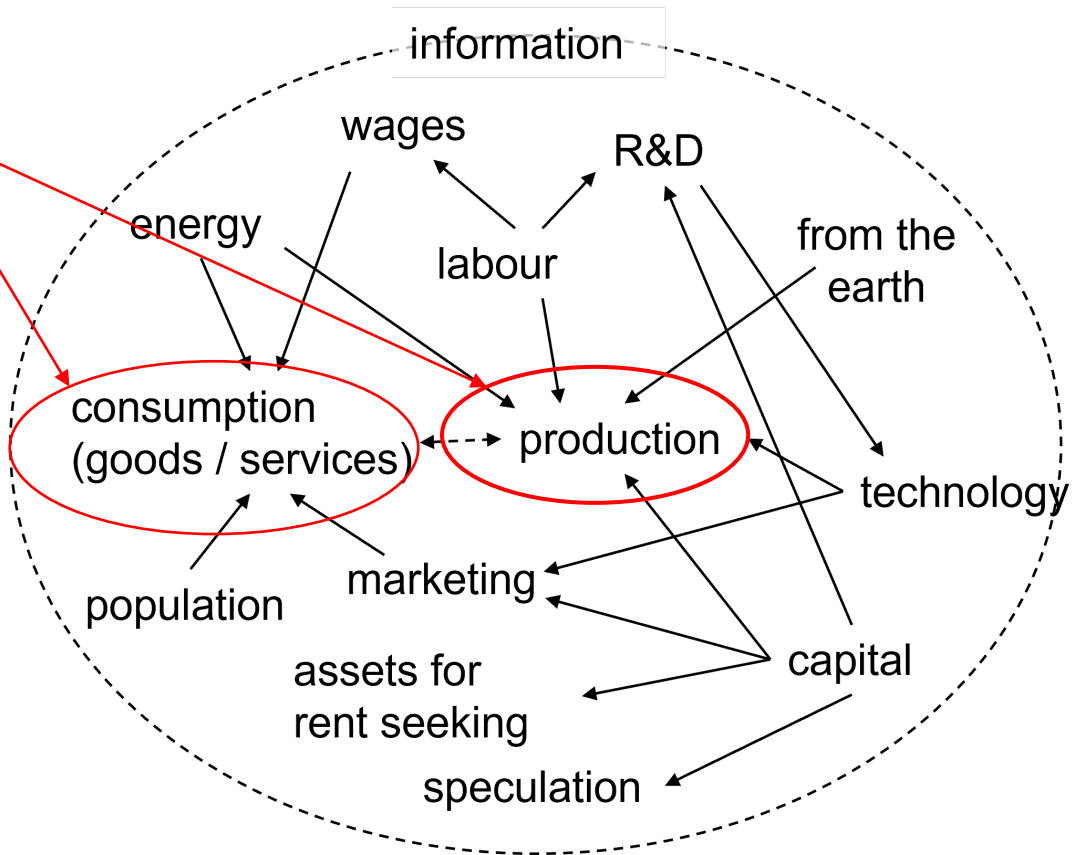
2. Capital defeats labour in high income countries through its ability to shift work to low wage countries. Leads to increased profit share but increases risk of crisis (weakening demand, weakening social cohesion)



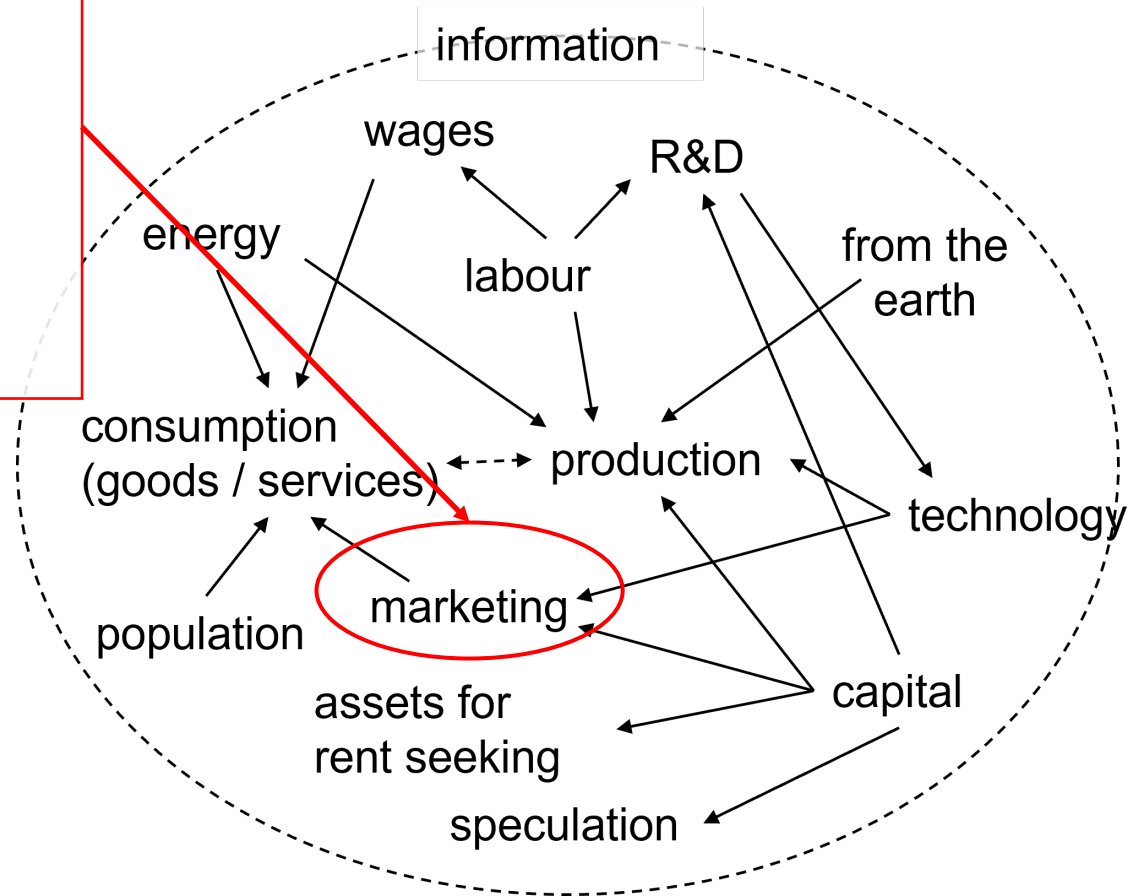


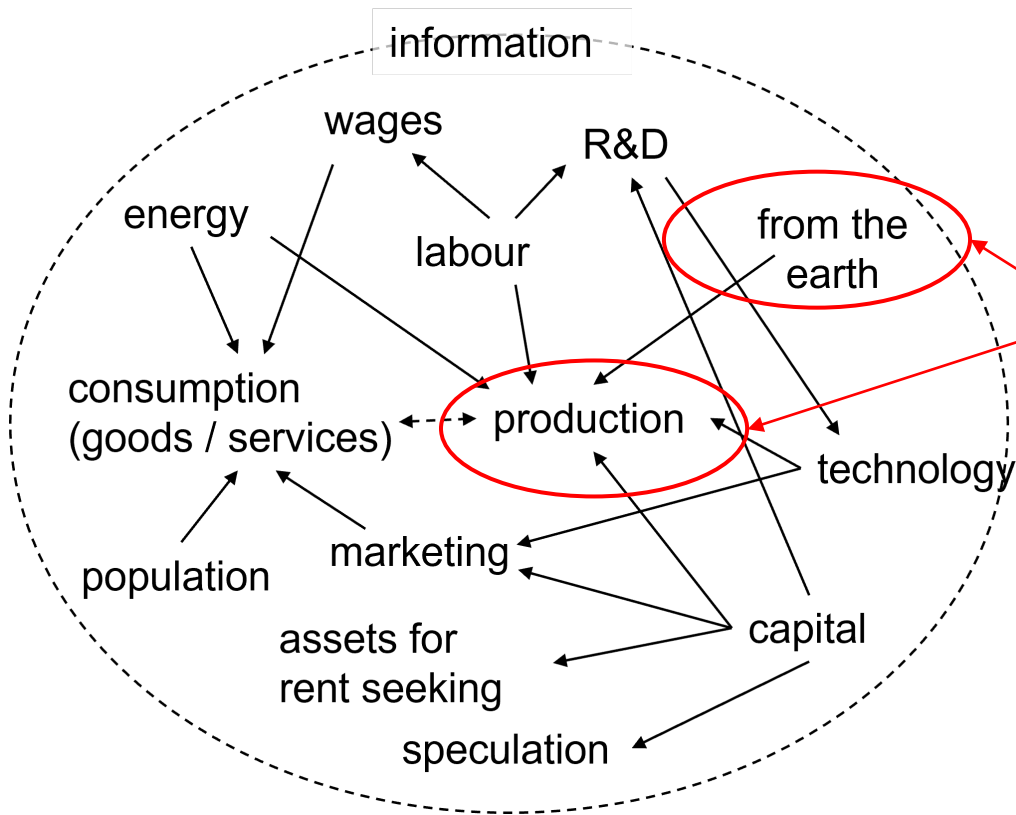
3. Productive capacity explodes through access to cheap labour in L&MICs, continuing replacement of labour by fossil energy and technology. Globalisation enables global markets and global supply chains.

4. Consumption growth fails to match production as productive capacity explodes and high wage jobs evaporate

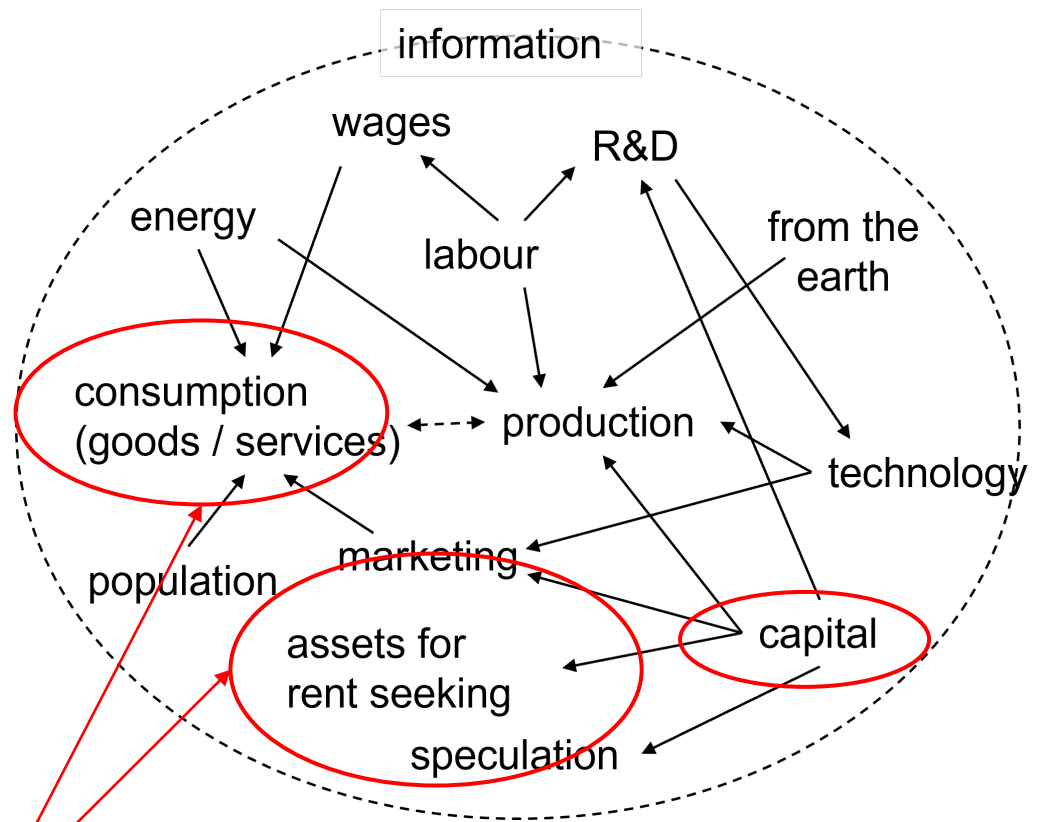


5. Sluggish sales lead to insistence on accessing and creating new markets through the privatisation of public functions, the commodification of family and community functions, and the cultivation of third world middle class





6. Sluggish economic growth drives increasing exploitation of 'environmental services' (extractions and discharges). Fossil resistance to action on global warming, demands continued burning. Growth fetish of capitalism demands continued economic growth (and material throughput).

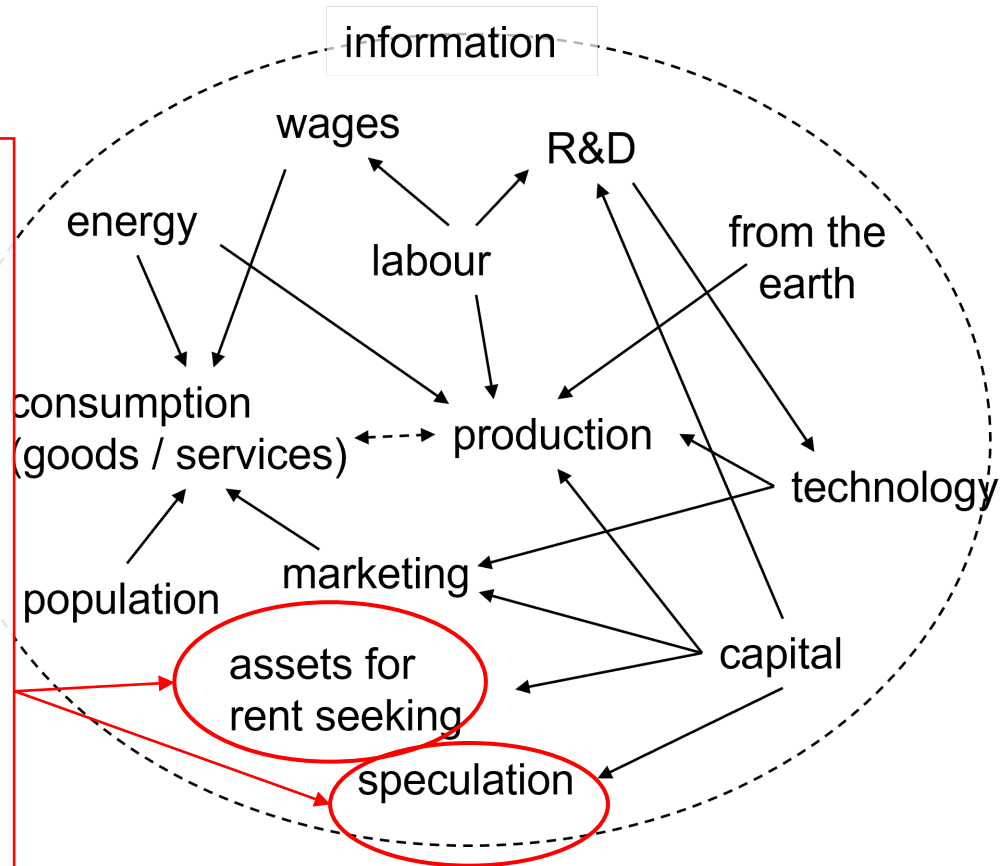


7. Investment in new productive capacity slows down and capital flows increasingly to speculation, rent seeking and debt funded consumption

8. Recurrent economic crisis through asset bubbles: housing, stock market and currency bubbles (as bank funded home-seekers and speculators bid up the value of the available assets).

Flow on effects of crash through banking, exchange rates and trade affect global economy.

Assets acquired for rent seeking: property, shares and bonds, IP (incl brands)

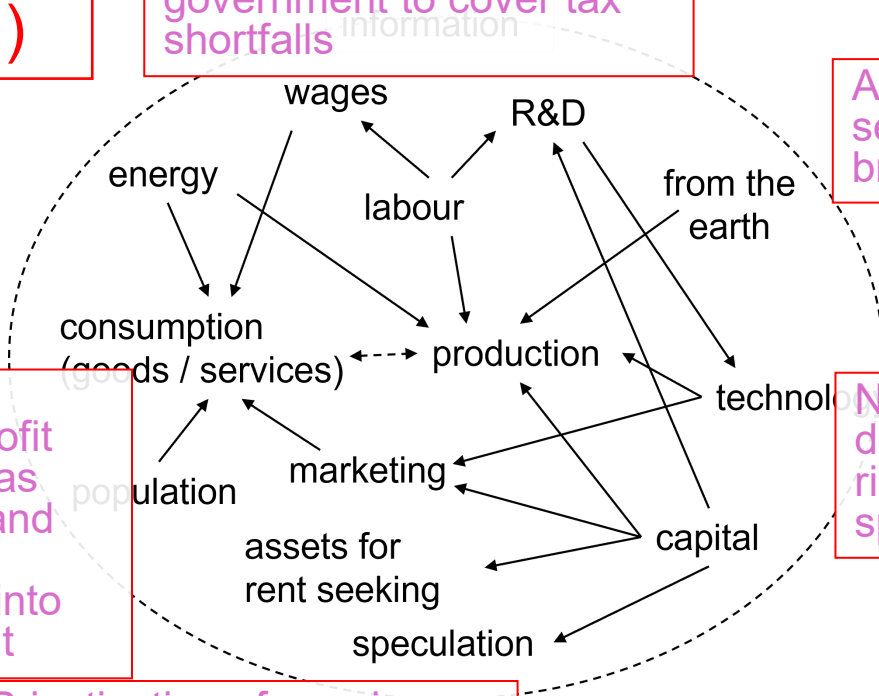


9. Expansion of size, wealth and power of the finance sector (financialisation)

State support of financial sector (too big to fail) encourages increased irresponsible lending and excessive debt creation

Profits redirected as lending: for corporate acquisitions; for household consumption and to government to cover tax shortfalls

Asset purchases for rent seeking: real estate, IP, brand, debt



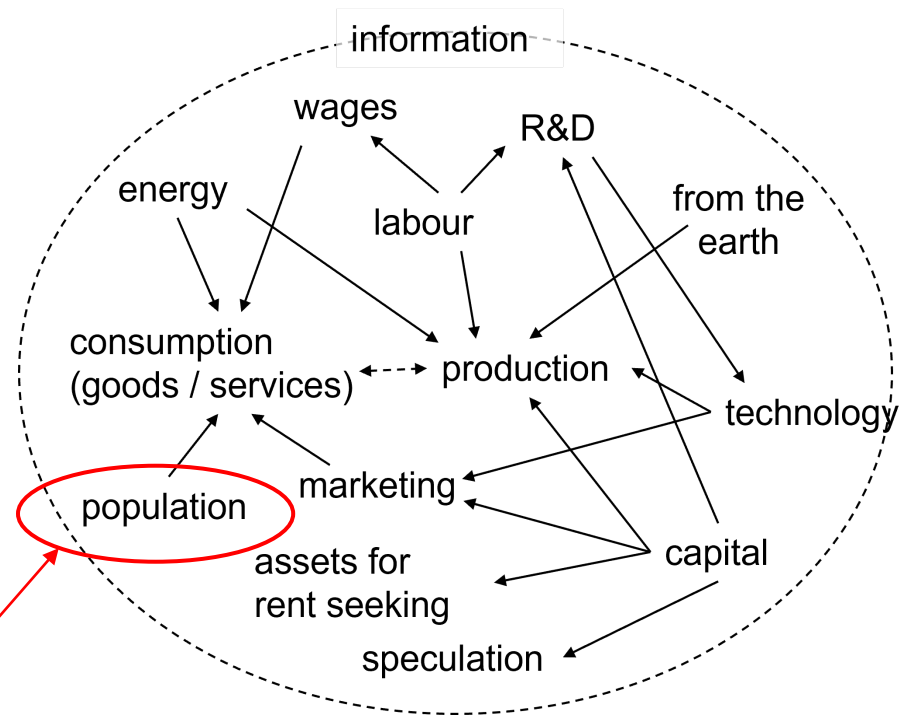
Slowing growth so business redirects profit into financial sector (as portfolio investment and speculation and rent-seeking) rather than into new direct investment

New financial derivatives increase risky lending and speculation

Privatisation of pensions (superannuation) redirects billions from tax into savings held by private financial institutions (lent on for asset speculation and consumption)

Bidding up of asset values on borrowed or non-existent money (asset bubbles) feeds consumption expenditure (wealth effect)

10. Marginalisation, exclusion, alienation. One billion people living in dire poverty, surplus to requirements as labour, but held in reserve pending rising wages in the current low wage production platforms. Alienation (including from deindustrialisation) leads to loss of faith in the promise of 'progress': delegitimation of the 'established world order'



Imperialism

- Unequal power relations
- Unequal economic exchange

Imperialism: unequal power relations

War, subversion,
trade and financial
sanctions

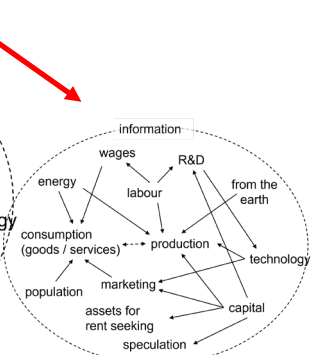
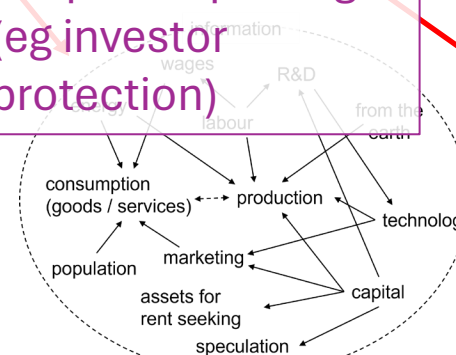
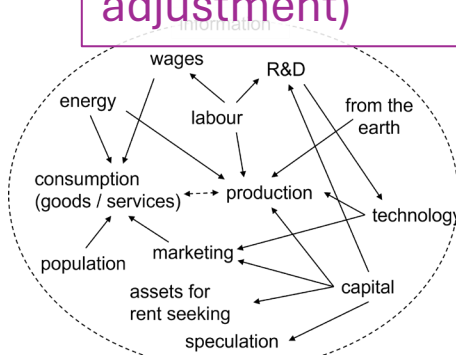
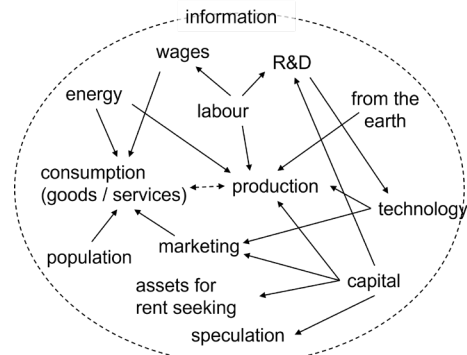
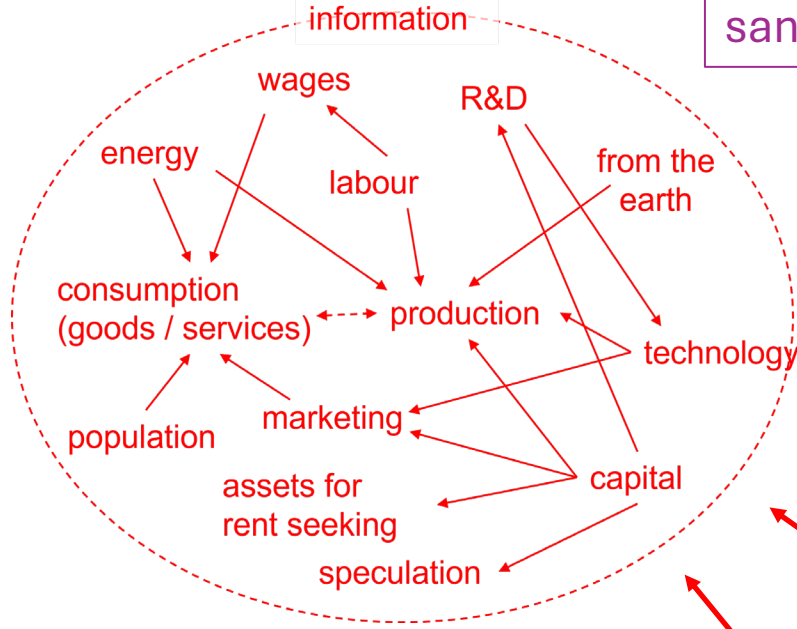
Ideological
pressures (news,
education,
entertainment)

Imperial control of
intergovernmental
organisations

Northern
dominance of
research,
development,
technology

Debt (dependence,
structural
adjustment)

Corporate privilege
(eg investor
protection)



Imperialism: unequal exchange

Trade liberalisation (technological advantage, protection of Northern IP & brands, standards, pressure to drop protection, declining terms of trade)

Agricultural protection and subsidy (dumping cheap foods, small farmers, commodity speculation)

Labour arbitrage (labour intensive manufacturing & assembly platforms, migration controls, supply chain prices advantage North)

Financial liberalisation (currency speculation, need for 'insurance', dollar privilege)

Extractivism (mining, fishing)

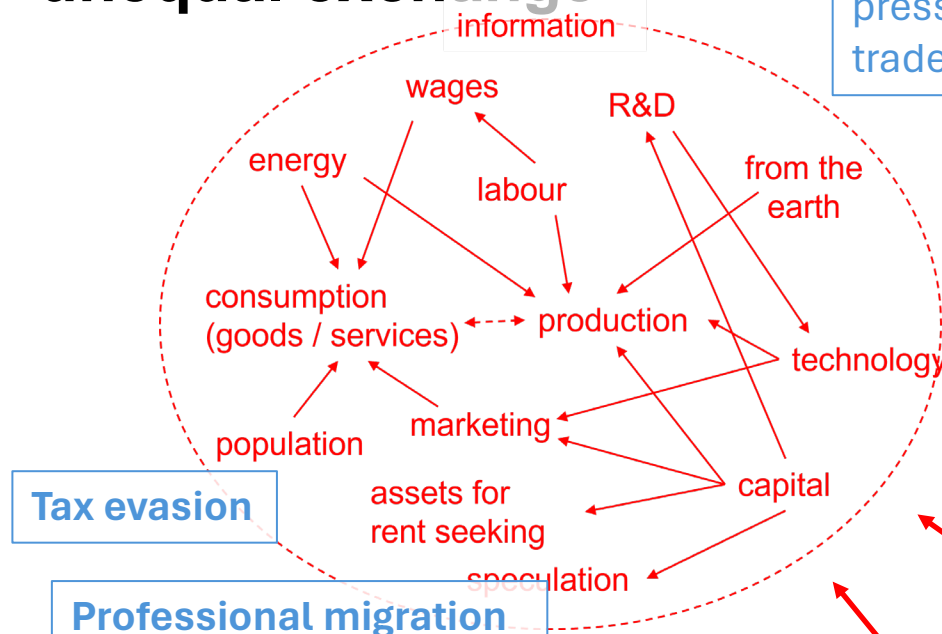
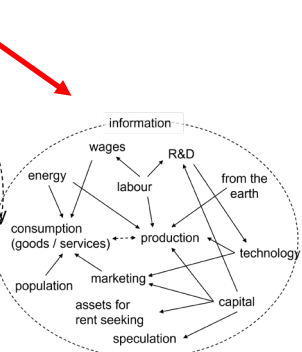
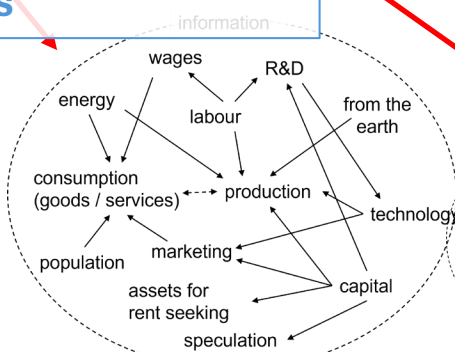
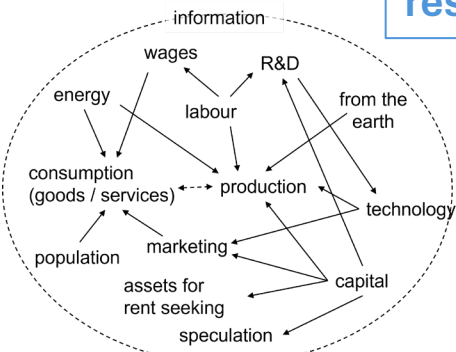
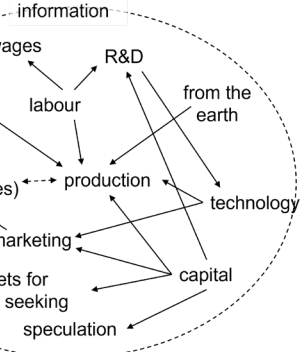
Theft of genetic resources

Tax evasion

Professional migration

Privatisation (rent seeking)

'Super exploitation' (Marini)



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What is to be done?

Mapping the contemporary world order

Projecting 'business as usual'

Possible turning points

Ideas which inspire

Commitments for action

Mapping the contemporary world order

- The crisis of transnational capitalism
 - overproduction, financialisation, fiscal crisis
- Imperialism
 - asymmetric power relations
 - economics of unequal exchange
- The interplay of geopolitics and democratic accountability
- Institutions of global governance
- Political fields of ideological engagement

Possible futures

‘Business as Usual’

- Human habitat
 - Continued emissions
 - Accelerating global heating
 - More regions uninhabitable
 - Food insecurity, population displacement, conflict
 - Desperation and concrete barriers
- Global economy
 - Deepening inequality
 - Deindustrialisation
 - Fiscal crisis and austerity
- Society and culture
 - Securitisation of nation and class (border walls and gated communities)
 - Alienation, hopelessness, echo chambers, xenophobia, communalism, fascism
- Geopolitics
 - US decline
 - US China conflict
 - More imperial wars
 - Continued diversion of resources to military expenditure

Possible turning points

- Concern regarding global warming and ecological degradation **drives** degrowth, equitable space for development, and North South financing for adaptation
- Rejection of inequality, alienation and austerity **drives** structural change in global economic governance
- Decline of US imperialism **makes space** for the governments of the Global South to gain new leverage over global governance: a new multipolar world
- Strengthened democratic ethos in Global South **holds** governments accountable for driving new world order
- Decency of human spirit **drives** rejection of xenophobic, nationalist, and fascist response to polycrisis
- Disaster of greed and materialism **drives** new spirit of equity and eco-harmony

Ideas which inspire

- Democratically accountable economic planning (ecosocialism)
- Buen vivir, living well
- Gramsci on 'optimism of the will'
- Decoloniality
- Challenging the intersecting oppressions
 - class, gender, ethnicity, ability, etc
- New geopolitical configurations
- Convergence of social and political movements
 - Seeing the commonality of structural oppressions
 - Building solidarity across difference

Commitments to action

- The macro micro principle
 - addressing the local and immediate challenges in ways which also contribute to redressing the macro and longer-term challenges
- Direct cultural action
 - living differently, reaching across difference, building solidarity
- Political advocacy
 - policy action and democratic accountability
- Primary health care
 - community connection
 - building the movement
- Hope, uncertainty, action