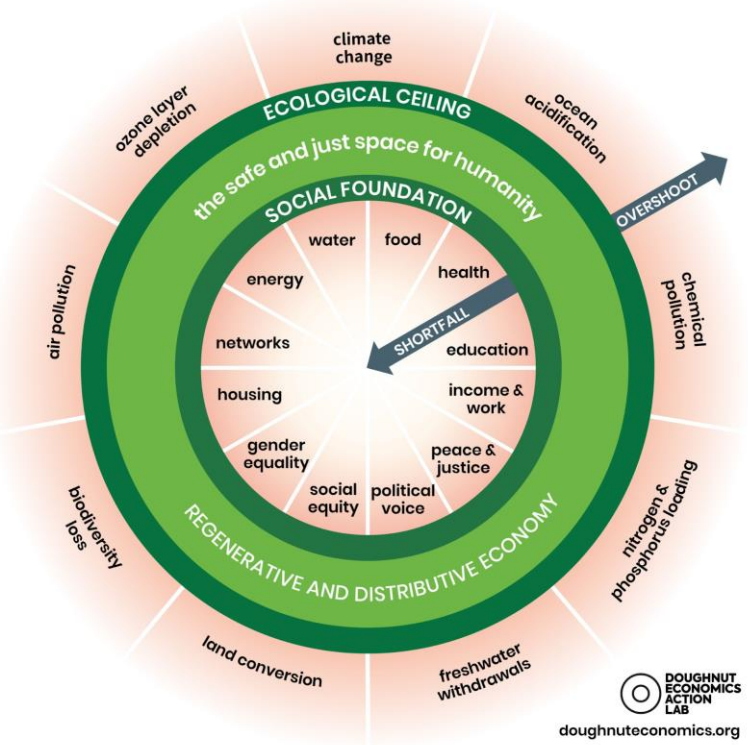
Exploring the Potential of Downscaling Doughnut Economics to Achieve a Sustainable Vision of Cambridge

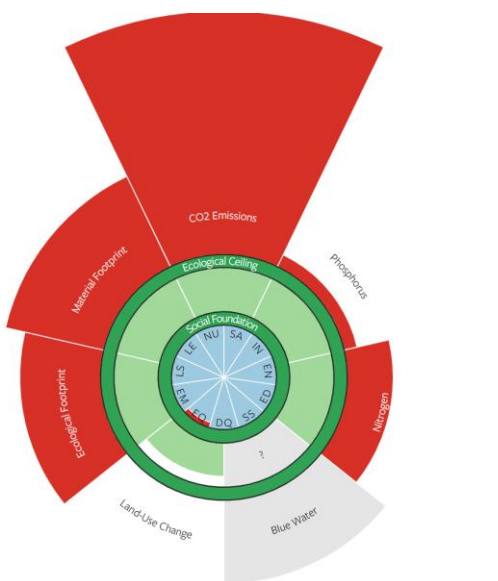
Introduction

In light of a polycrisis of climate and environmental issues, alongside rising inequality in many post-industrial societies, the concept of 'Doughnut Economics' is becoming increasingly popular as a policy framework for local governance. Doughnut Economics is a holistic framework for sustainable development which aims to balance a "social foundation" against an "ecological ceiling" to achieve a "safe and just space for humanity" (see the diagram opposite). My research project explored the potential of downscaling Doughnut Economics to the city of Cambridge.



Methodology

The Doughnut framework can be broken into four lenses: the local-social, local-ecological, global-social, and global-ecological (see the four lenses diagram). To examine Cambridge through these lenses, my research consisted of reviews of secondary literature supplemented with interviews of key stakeholders.



Results

Overall, Doughnut Economics is a useful framework for sustainable development, but transformative change would be required at both the local and national level to enable Doughnut Economics to be downscaled to Cambridge.

- **Local-social lens:** Cambridge performs well on many of the headline indicators, such as income, education and health, yet this masks underlying inequalities in these dimensions, driven by factors such as low social mobility and a housing affordability crisis.
- **Local-ecological lens:** Cambridge performs poorly on many of the local-ecological dimensions, with low biodiversity, systemic issues with water management, and widespread soil degradation, for example.
- **Global-social lens:** Cambridge is a highly globalised city, largely because
- of the high concentration of companies specialising in biotechnology, software, semiconductors, AI and so on. These companies are at the forefront of many emerging fields of science and technology, yet they also play a role in the design and manufacturing of products with a high socio-environmental footprint.
- **Global-ecological lens:** Cambridge – like the rest of the UK – exceeds its 'fair share' per capita contributions to many of the planetary boundaries, such as carbon emissions, material footprint and biogeochemical flows. For context, the UK's position on the Doughnut is visualised in the diagram opposite
- **Future directions:** under current policies, Cambridge is unlikely to be brought within the Doughnut in the foreseeable future, and this would require radical and transformative change.
- **Challenges:** there are two key barriers to the adoption of Doughnut Economics in Cambridge. First, the economic growth paradigm is deeply embedded within institutional practices and discourses and this discourse feeds into local planning strategies such as housing. Doughnut Economics requires policymakers to reject this approach, as it advocates an 'agnostic' view of GDP. Second, the lack of devolved powers and funding for local councils like Cambridge means that transformative change would be required at the national level as well as the local level, to support radical social, political, and economic reforms that are necessary to implement 'Doughnut Economics'.