

# Can degrowth save us and the planet?

July 27 2023, by Dr Andreas Wittel

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In response to climate change and environmental breakdown, degrowth has become one of the key concepts in political ecology and related disciplines. Degrowth provides a critique of the ideology of growth measured as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a core objective for capitalist economies. It argues that degrowth is possible, desirable and necessary to halt further ecological destruction and to build socially just and ecologically sustainable societies.

It also discusses pathways to organize a future beyond growth. Therefore the term degrowth does not just refer to a set of theoretical concepts—it refers also to a movement of activists who engage with the implementation of these concepts on a local, regional, national and international level.

Over the last two decades, the [concept](#) has become so influential that it has entered the arena of policymakers. The conference Beyond Growth in May 2023 aimed to discuss and create policies for a sustainable future. It was held in the European Parliament in Brussels and actively supported by more than 20 MEPs. Unfortunately, in the UK a similar initiative has yet to emerge. Here degrowth is still limited to academic debates and to activist initiatives.

So far only two MPs, Caroline Lucas from the Green Party and Clive Lewis from the Labour Party, have publicly questioned the ideology of economic growth. The topic is also overwhelmingly ignored in mainstream British media. Considering the rapidly closing window of opportunity to avoid environmental breakdown, the silence on degrowth is unlikely to be continued for much longer. Degrowthers are convinced that degrowth must and will happen, either by design or by disaster.

Degrowth or post-growth is not a form of austerity, it is not about getting

poorer. It is a concept to rethink our values and what matters in life. At the core of degrowth concepts are values such as well-being, care, self-organization, and conviviality. It is a compelling invitation to prioritize our relationships with each other and with nature over extreme individualism and our addiction to stuff and purely consumerist forms of entertainment. It is, as Kate Soper argues, about an alternative hedonism.

I would add, it is about reviving solidarity and the common good as an alternative to the neoliberal regime of the competitive market.

The concept of degrowth originated in France in the early 1970s. In 1972 the Club of Rome, an economic think tank, published a report on the limits to growth. This became the first significant study to make a point that economic growth is not endless. Early adopters of *decroissance* were scholars such as Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, Andre Gorz, Ivan Illich, Erich Fromm and E.F. Schumacher.

While these scholars did not promote specific policies toward degrowth, they pioneered the concept by challenging the economic orthodoxy that economic growth has any intrinsic value. In 1972 Andre Gorz asked a crucial question: Is global equilibrium compatible with the capitalist economy, given that the material resources on our planet are not endless?

The question that Gorz raised in 1972 is indeed eye-opening. While there is growth in nature, there is no unlimited growth in nature. Trees can grow high, but eventually, they will stop growing. In nature, there are cycles of growth, stagnation and decay. The ideology of infinite growth, which is intrinsic to capitalism, has now become the biggest threat to life itself.

More growth means more energy consumption and more extraction of material resources. Why do we think that an economic system, any economic system, can produce growth forever? Degrowth means living

within the Earth's regenerative limits in socially equitable and collectively supportive ways.

Degrowth concepts not only question the ideology of unlimited economic growth, but they are also critical of the method with which [economic growth](#) is measured, namely via Gross Domestic Product (GDP). While the monetary measure of GDP has always been problematic as a method to determine economic progress, this is even more obvious in the accelerating ecological crisis and the accelerating crisis of global capitalism. Firstly, GDP does not take into account the widening gap of inequality.

Thus, a rise in GDP will only benefit the few while the living standards of the many get worse. Secondly, it does not take into account economic externalities. The profit of oil companies comes with a price that is not accounted for: the warming of the planet. The profit made due to the deforestation of the Amazon to secure our consumption of beef comes with a price: the warming of the planet.

The profit that water companies in the UK make because they don't properly take care of sewage, comes also with a price and its color is brown. The exploitation of nature cannot be continued endlessly, and we are fast reaching the point where we must accept the regenerative limits of our planet.

As always in academia, degrowth is not a concept set in stone. It is an open term with different foci and interpretations. There is no unified vision of degrowth. However, in the face of our environmental emergency, there is a surge in the academic literature that is activist and interested in policies and strategies to move from growth to degrowth and to outline pathways beyond capitalism. This would require a democratization of the economy, where workers are in control and not shareholders.

It would require a profound redistribution of wealth to finance public services and a universal basic income. Such a redistribution of wealth cannot stop at a national level. International solidarity, in particular, support for the Global South is required for a transition beyond growth.

The comeback of degrowth from the early 1970s anticapitalist theories is not a mere academic exercise any longer, it is driven by the urgency of our predicament. Now degrowth is turning into a movement which is rapidly growing (pun intended). Ultimately this is a struggle against capital. The [human species](#) will have to respond to the thread of ecocide with rigor and purpose. There is hope that degrowth will still be applied by design and not only by disaster. This depends on how quickly the movement can assert influence and power.

Provided by Nottingham Trent University

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