

# Does the global South need to grow?

Reflections on problematic wording and  
visions within the degrowth community

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# Background

- A tendency within the degrowth movement to reproduce problematic statements about growth, e.g.,
  - that the global south needs to/should grow
  - that degrowth is about reduction in the global north
- This tendency seems to follow a change in understanding or definition of degrowth.

# Example 1 - general

«For example, degrowth means something different for communities in the Global South, **where many economies still need to grow**, and where the effects of overconsumption and the resulting exploitation and repression by the North is still a daily reality that needs to change with urgency.»

([explore.degrowth.net](https://explore.degrowth.net))

«How **much growth** is required to achieve good lives for all?»

(Hickel and Sullivan, 2024)

# Example 2

## - Contract and convergence

‘A key motivation for rethinking prosperity in the advanced economies is **to make room for much-needed growth in poorer nations**’

(Jackson, 2009, p. 175).

# Example 3

– reduction in the North = growth in the South?

“a planned reduction of excess energy and resource use **in rich nations** to bring the economy back into balance with the living world, while reducing inequality and improving people’s access to the resources they need to live long, healthy, flourishing lives.” (Hickel, 2020a)

“radically leaner resource and material use **in the North**, along with an extensive income and wealth redistribution worldwide, could tackle global social injustice and ensure a good life for all.” (Sekulova et al., 2023: 2)

“a planned reduction of energy and resource use **in advanced economies**” (Jackson et al., 2024:1)

Why is this problematic?

# 1 Means and ends

- No one «needs» growth as such
  - People need other things (e.g., water, food, shelter)
- Implicit meaning: growth (of some sort) can provide that which we need
- Let us be precise and specific!

## 2 Causes and effects

- Is (economic) growth a cause or a consequence?
- Be precise about cause(s) and effect(s)

“a radical reorganization of society that **leads to** a drastic reduction in the use of energy and resources and that is deemed necessary, desirable, and possible.” (Schmelzer and Nowshin, 2023: 16)



# 3 Needs and satisfiers

- We need to distinguish between needs and satisfiers (cf. Max-Neef)
- What are “basic needs» or «decent living» - contestable!
- Good lives (for all) – about material needs but also relations, autonomy, how we organise the economy, the meaning of/in life ++

# 4 Is increasing the production possible without harming people and nature?

- We are already pushing the limits in so many areas, extinguishing species, climate change.
- GTA warns about language like e.g., «energy rights». Can perpetuate colonial extractivism

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# 5 Development = growth?

- Degrowth has traditionally been closely allied with post-development
- However, the contract and convergence position (incl. eco-socialism?) seem to promote development and modernity
- This includes the (modern) focus on poverty,
  - contra e.g. Latouche on the invention of poverty
  - or Ranema's “dignified poverty”

# 6 Colonial?

- Is criticising “the South must grow” about stopping others from having the privileges I have?
- Or is it the continuous spreading and pushing of modern development model which is colonial thinking?

# Definitions of «degrowth»

- A recent tendency to define “degrowth” in quantitative or relative/comparative terms rather than absolutes:
  - e.g., more, better, increase, decrease

“a planned, coherent policy to reduce ecological impact, **reduce** inequality, and **improve** well-being.” (Hickel, 2020b: 4)

“a trajectory where the “throughput” (energy, materials and waste flows) of an economy **decreases** while welfare, or well-being, **improves.**” (Kallis, 2018: 9)

# Definitions of «degrowth» (cont.)

Research & Degrowth has changed their definition/description:

- «“a voluntary transition towards a just, participatory, and ecologically sustainable society.” (R&D, 2010)»
- “Sustainable degrowth is a downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions and equity on the planet.” (R&D, 2022)
- «“a multi-level voluntary path towards reduction of production and consumption aiming at ecological sustainability, good life, liberty, and social justice.” (R&D website, 2024)»

# Language matters!

- Discourses influence how people think - we should be careful about the words we choose.
- Definitions of degrowth, but also endless new uses of the word growth
  - Growth in quality vs. quantity
  - Grow certain sectors
  - Grow creativity
  - Personal growth
- If we are against «growthism», then let's stop this endless redefining of growth, and rather use more precise wording

# Conclusion:

## Return to the essence of «degrowth»

- (Re)-introduce broader aspects from early *décroissance* scholars, such as anti-utilitarianism, meaning in life, end domination of nature (Muraca, 2013)
- Let's leave «growthism» behind, and return to the broad understanding of what degrowth is about. It is about radical transformation, not about whether the South or the North should grow in one way or another.

See for example Schmelzer et al.'s (2022) definition of degrowth:

- “... redesigns its institutions and infrastructure so that they are not dependent on growth and continuous expansion for their functioning”.



# Literature

- Hickel and Sullivan (2024). How much growth is required to achieve good lives for all? Insights from needs-based analysis. *World Development Perspectives* 35 (2024) 100612.
- Jackson, T. (2009). *Prosperity without growth: Economics for a finite planet*. Earthscan.
- Muraca, B. (2013). Décroissance: A Project for Radical Transformation of Society. In *Environmental Values* 22: 147-169.

Definitions of “degrowth” are taken from:

- Parrique T., 2025. Defining degrowth. Working Paper n°2025-1, <https://timotheeparrique.com>

Thank you for your attention!

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