

94th Executive Council Meeting of the WFSW

Round Table 1:

Scientific cooperation and peace in an unstable geopolitical environment

ON THE VITAL NEED TO INCLUDE DEGROWTH IN THE RESEARCH AGENDA

A contribution to the debate

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We are living difficult times. It is no news to anyone that Earth's resources are limited. Every resource that humankind makes use of is limited. Nevertheless, it is not the risk of exhaustion that should be our main concern. The main question is for what purpose those resources are being used and the rate at which they are being consumed. This is a civilizational problem or, if you like, of the ways in which human societies are organized.

This is clearly expressed in the following quote:

“The global economy is structured around growth — the idea that firms, industries and nations must increase production every year, regardless of whether it is needed. This dynamic is driving climate change and ecological breakdown. High-income economies, and the corporations and wealthy classes that dominate them, are mainly responsible for this problem and consume energy and materials at unsustainable rates.”¹

The minds of decision makers are haunted by the prospect that the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rates may slow. This is however what we should hope for and really do understand what is required to guarantee a livable future for the future generations: what we must achieve are not lower GDP growth rates but negative growth rates, i.e. degrowth.

Such a path is not easy to follow and this we must recognize as a growing number of fellow researchers do today as they look for a way out of the present state of affairs.

As you may know the use of GDP as a reference point for the health of national and global economies although still widely used is controversial and is growingly being contested by a number of prominent researchers and social and political activists.

Two years ago, in the Report “Our Common Agenda”, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres made clear the inadequacy of the use of GDP for that purpose by pointing out that (quote) “Absurdly, *GDP rises when there is overfishing, cutting of forests or burning of fossil fuels. We are destroying nature, but we count it as an increase in wealth. Such discussions have been ongoing for decades. It is time to collectively commit to complementary measurements. Without that fundamental shift, the targets that we have fixed in relation to biodiversity, pollution and climate change will not be achievable*”².

Neither would any of the UN established *Sustainable Development Goals* be achievable — the Secretary General might have added.

Let us for a moment consider the question of health.

A report published by the World Health Organization about a year ago,³ points out that if policymakers didn't have a "*pathological obsession with GDP*", they would spend more on making health care affordable for every citizen.

Health spending does not contribute to GDP in the same way that, for example, military spending does, say the authors of the Report led by Professor Mariana Mazzucato, Chair of the WHO Council on The Economics of Health for All.

Naturally focused on health problems, both globally and locally, the report refers to GDP as (quote), "*an inappropriate measure of progress that perversely rewards profit-generating activities which harm people and destroy ecosystems, undermining what we really value*". It points out that its concept inherently leads to consequences such as its inflation by wasteful spending on health services, drugs or devices, that may harm or make no difference to people's health. While, at the same time, ignoring many crucial activities that are vital for health and for the very survival of humans and of our planet. Furthermore, since a profit-centered economy does not place a monetary value on care, unremunerated care for children and older persons is overlooked and care jobs are generally underpaid. Also, the single largest sector of global work – the unpaid labor traditionally done by women – is not considered. The Report correctly underlines the fact that "national accounting systems have celebrated and rewarded the destruction and exploitation of Earth's ecosystems in the pursuit of a greater GDP".

As said before, a possible path towards degrowth is anything but easy. It will require a sustained multidisciplinary research effort from the scientific community. And can only succeed if it gains a large social support. Experience tells us that of these two demanding conditions the first appears to have a greater chance of being fulfilled.

Some of us might recall the publication 50 years ago of the 200-page book "*Limits to Growth*" that contained the results of a study carried out by the System Dynamics group at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in Cambridge. It brought an unpleasant message to the world: continued economic and population growth would deplete Earth's resources and lead to global economic collapse by 2070. The study was probably the result of the first modelling studies to forecast the environmental and social impacts of industrialization⁴. Quoting Nature's Editorial of May 2022:

"For its time, this was a shocking forecast, and it did not go down well. (...) It was near-heresy, even in research circles, to suggest that some of the foundations of industrial civilization — mining coal, making steel, drilling for oil and spraying crops with fertilizers — might cause lasting damage. Research leaders accepted that industry pollutes air and water, but considered such damage reversible".

With the passing of years and with what I believe to be the impact on consciences of the progressive aggravation of the effects of climatic change, the way things are seen today is substantially different. In fact, a growing number of members of the scientific community have since included degrowth in their research agenda.

Let me draw your attention to “*Research on Degrowth*”⁵ an article published in the *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, a peer-reviewed scientific journal that publishes review articles about environmental science and environmental engineering ⁶. This is not the place or the time to discuss the article’s contents which deals extensively with the subject and conveys to the reader abundant reference information. We will limit ourselves to reproduce here a selection of the “summary points” presented by the authors at the end of the article.

- Economies can be stabilized without growth if basic monetary, fiscal, labor, and welfare institutions are transformed (working hours are reduced, new investment in clean sectors is offset by disinvestment in dirty sectors, debt interest is spent or socialized, redistribution of wealth is secured, and growth in relational goods compensates for decline in material goods).
- Capitalism as we know it is incompatible with degrowth.
- Perpetual growth is ecologically limited and, in all likelihood, disastrous.
- Planned degrowth is politically unlikely, given established interests and power relations.
- An authoritarian and more unequal variant of capitalism is likely to emerge after a period of stagnation, unless social forces organize politically to produce more democratic alternatives.

Let me add, for myself, that neither private-liberal nor state capital as we know it can accommodate for degrowth

As a final note let us point out the fact that in a number of countries scientists of the younger generations are actively organizing to take part in the common fight for a livable future.

A notable initiative engaging the research community is the academic association named “*Research and Degrowth*”. dedicated to research, awareness-raising, and events organization around the topic of degrowth. ⁷

At present, it conducts the majority of its local activities in Spain and France, while organizing and co-organizing international events in various parts of Europe and beyond. R&D has presently about fifteen active members based in Barcelona and France. It has created an informal network with members in more than 60 countries.

In their own words, “*in the degrowth process, R&D is concerned with democracy, international cooperation, and understanding as opposed to societal closure, fragmentation, and authoritarianism*”. They strive “*to bring scientists, civil society, practitioners, and activists together to think, imagine, discuss, and create proposals for sustainable degrowth*”.

So, let us have hope.

Thank you for your attention.

Frederico Carvalho

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¹ “*Degrowth can work — here’s how science can help*”, Jason Hickel, Giorgos Kallis, Tim Jackson, Daniel W. O’Neill, Juliet B. Schor, Julia K. Steinberger, Peter A. Victor, Diana Ürge-Vorsatz, *Nature*, December 12, 2022 <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-04412-x>

² https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-eport/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf

³ “*Valuing Health for All: Rethinking and building a whole-of-society approach*” - The WHO Council on the Economics of Health for all - Council Brief No. 3”, 8 March 2022

<https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/valuing-health-for-all-rethinking-and-building-a-whole-of-society-approach---the-who-council-on-the-economics-of-health-for-all---council-brief-no.-3>

See also the following note

⁴ See “*Limits to growth? It’s time to end a 50-year argument*”, Editorial, *Nature*, 17 May 2022

⁵ “*Research on Degrowth*”, Giorgos Kallis, Vasilis Kostakis, Steffen Lange, Barbara Muraca, Susan Paulson and Matthias Schmelzer, *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, Vol. 43:291-316 (Volume publication date October 2018), First published as a Review in Advance on May 31, 2018

<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-102017-025941>

⁶ Beginning in 2020, the *Annual Review of Environment and Resources.*, is published [open access](#) under the [Subscribe to Open](#) (S2O) publishing model.

⁷ <https://degrowth.org/>