



SUSTAINABLE DE-GROWTH: AN ALTERNATIVE TO STRONG SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT?

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Abstract

Both the name and the theory of de-growth aim explicitly to repoliticize environmentalism. Sustainable development and its more recent reincarnation "green growth" depoliticize genuine political antagonisms between alternative visions for the future. They render environmental problems technical, promising win-win solutions and the impossible goal of perpetuating economic growth without harming the environment. Ecologizing society, degrowthers argue, is not about implementing an alternative, better, or greener development. It is about imagining and enacting alternative visions to modern growth based development. This essay explores such alternatives and identifies grassroots practices and political changes for facilitating a transition to a prosperous and equitable world without growth. Based on the analysis how the political and scientific discourses on Sustainable developed during the last two decades the paper develops the concept of Strong Sustainable development. Sustainable de-growth is the transition to a smaller economy with less production and consumption. A new study has explored its origins and compared it to sustainable development. The study found that to become a viable alternative to sustainable development, 'de-growth' needs to be more clearly defined, and its implications for employment need to be considered very carefully.

Key Words: *sustainable development, sustainable de-growth, green economic growth, environmental and social wellbeing.*

INTRODUCTION

Based on the analysis how the political and scientific discourses on Sustainable developed during the last two decades the paper develops the concept of Strong Sustainable Consumption Governance. Next to an emphasis that Sustainable Consumption has to consider resource consumption (including the available sink capacity of the ecosystem) it highlights their use and distribution among the Earth's population, and considers their contribution to human well-being. For the lifestyles of the global consumer class this implies giving specific attention to the levels and patterns of consumption. The paper questions the actual political SCP debate, its strong reliance on Sustainable Consumer Procurement, and the belief that green economic growth can cure all our problems. Instead it suggests other ways to go. To stimulate public debate it seems useful to apply a carrot and stick strategy. The stick in this case is to create a sense of urgency for the global environmental and social threads. The carrot would be to articulate better the message to the public and policy that a de-growing economy is not as much of a disaster as mainstream economics tends to suggest. In this context governments should overcome the dominant strategy of information provision but take responsibility for governance and accepting that hard policies like regulatory instruments and economic instruments are most effective. Civil Society Organizations should switch from promoting Sustainable (in fact green) Consumption by using marketing strategies and instead foster public debate about values and well-being.

A major problem that permeates human development today are the limits that the Earth's ecosystem imposes on efforts to persist in an increasing economic growth. With the end of the Cold War the environmental issue gained relevance but the economic interests still speak louder. The pattern of development based on the model of the Industrial Revolution still remains and is structured as unsustainable. But this unbridled growth resulted in speculative bubbles and crises which further harm the ecosystem and do not cooperate in a sustainable and more equitable society. Michael Renner of World Watch Institute says: "In general, environmental governance was relegated to the sidelines in search of economic globalization driven by corporate interests - a process that has been marked by deregulation and privatization and the relative weakening of political institutions national" (Renner, 2012).

The mistake is to believe that the resumption of indiscriminate economic growth and increased consumption is the solution to this situation. The new paradigm that is established is the need for economic-growth which in turn would cause a decrease in consumption. Only with this retraction is possible to leverage a stronger economy and without stress to the already aggravated ecosystem. The United Nations University (UNU - Wider) states that in 2000, 1% of the richest adults in the world own 40% of the world's wealth while the disadvantaged half of humanity has only 1% of global wealth. That is, the degradation of the environment happens only to meet the needs of the wealthier half of the world population, while the poorest are suffering from environmental degradation and are still priced out of material blessings. The poorest countries suffer from drought, soil desertification, floods, dumping of toxic products and other environmental disasters. Sustainability means, of course, social inclusion and rational use of natural resources. Ecologizing society, degrowthers argue, is not about implementing an alternative, better, or greener development. It is about imagining and enacting alternative visions to modern



growthbased development. This essay explores such alternatives and identifies grassroots practices and political changes for facilitating a transition to a prosperous and equitable world without growth.

About de-growth

The concept of “degrowth” is linked to the work of Nicholas GeorgescuRoegen (1971, 1995) and to its reading and distribution by philosopher Jacques Grinevald (1974). The material and energy limits imposed by the law of thermodynamics led N. GeorgescuRoegen to propose a “minimal bio-economic program” intended to make energy and material stocks last as long as possible for humanity. It is based on the notion that it is advisable to act on the demand of goods and services rather than on the supply, while remaining conscious of the need for poor populations to see their material conditions improve.

These proposals are closely related to the ideas held by certain political ecology thinkers in terms of self-limitation of needs and the development of a “sufficiency” standard. The concept of “convivial austerity,” formulated by Ivan Illich (1973), can be used as an example of a model society where needs are reduced but social life is richer as a result of its being more convivial. The need for autonomy sought by individuals—which opposes the heteronomous mode of bureaucratic and market control—forces one to give critical consideration, as did André Gorz (1975, 1991), to the economic and psychosociological links that unite productivism, consumerism and work organization. To do away with the simple existential compensation provided by the consumption of a great number of goods and services, it is important to distribute productivity gains differently and to reduce work time (Harribey, 1997). In other words, it is necessary to redefine the boundaries of economic rationality and market relations and work towards “post capitalism.”

Degrowth (in French: *décroissance*, in Spanish: *decrecimiento*, in Italian: *decrecita*) is a political, economic, and social movement based on ecological economics and anti-consumerist and ant capitalist ideas. It is also considered an essential economic strategy responding to the limits to growth dilemma (see *The Path to Degrowth in Overdeveloped Countries and Post growth*). Degrowth thinkers and activists advocate for the downscaling of production and consumption—the contraction of economies—arguing that overconsumption lies at the root of long term environmental issues and social inequalities. Key to the concept of degrowth is that reducing consumption does not require individual martyring or a decrease in wellbeing. Rather, 'degrowthists' aim to maximize happiness and wellbeing through nonconsumptive means—sharing work, consuming less, while devoting more time to art, music, family, culture and community.

The essence of de-growth is not supporting de-growth in the current system – as growth oriented economies based on the institutions of capitalism are not capable of not growing because without economic growth they collapse and new problems emerge beside the aforementioned ones – but restructuring completely into a system where increased well-being can be achieved without the constant growth of production and consumption while their negative environmental impacts significantly reduce (Gould et al. 2004, Kallis et al. 2012, Latouche 2011, Tokic 2012). Thus de-growth is actually a kind of transformational sustainability theory which is very sensitive to social and environmental problems also (Hoopwood et al 2005).

About Sustainable development

Sustainable development (SD) is a process for meeting human development goals while maintaining the ability of natural systems to continue to provide the natural resources and ecosystem services upon which the economy and society depend. While the modern concept of sustainable development is derived most strongly from the 1987 Brundtland Report, it is rooted in earlier ideas about sustainable forest management and twentieth century environmental concerns. Sustainable development is the organizing principle for sustaining finite resources necessary to provide for the needs of future generations of life on the planet. It is a process that envisions a desirable future state for human societies in which living conditions and resource use continue to meet human needs without undermining the "integrity, stability and beauty" of natural biotic systems.

Sustainability can be defined as the practice of reserving resources for future generation without any harm to the nature and other components of it .Sustainable development ties together concern for the carrying capacity of natural systems with the social, political, and economic challenges faced by humanity. Sustainability science is the study of the concepts of sustainable development and environmental science. There is an additional focus on the present generations' responsibility to regenerate, maintain and improve planetary resources for use by future generations.

Sustainable development has its roots in ideas about sustainable forest management which were developed in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In response to a growing awareness of the depletion of timber resources in England, John Evelyn argued that "sowing and planting of trees had to be regarded as a national duty of every landowner, in order to stop the destructive overexploitation of natural resources" in his 1662 essay *Sylva*. In 1713 Hans Carl von Carlowitz, a senior



Mining administrator in the service of Elector Frederick Augustus I of Saxony published *Sylvicultura oeconomica*, a 400page work on forestry. Building upon the ideas of Evelyn and French minister JeanBaptiste Colbert, von Carlowitz developed the concept of managing forests for sustained yield. His work influenced others, including Alexander von Humboldt and Georg Ludwig Hartig, leading in turn to the development of a science of forestry. This in term influenced people like Gifford Pinchot, first head of the US Forest Service, whose approach to forest management was driven by the idea of wise use of resources, and Aldo Leopold whose land ethic was influential in the development of the environmental movement in the 1960s.

Sustainable Growth

The first group of work under consideration emerged from standard economics. Although the notion of sustainable development arose, in part, from the critique of growth—a central issue in the neoclassical corpus—theorists holding this view nonetheless plan to propose growth models that address this issue. Solow's model, slightly amended, still constitutes the dominant element in the neoclassical theory's response to the issues concerning sustainable development. Other types of work complete this doctrinal system by emphasizing the idea that sustainable growth is in line with environmental development and environmental protection.

Ecological footprint

The ecological footprint is a measure of human demand on the Earth's ecosystems. It compares human demand with planet Earth's ecological capacity to regenerate. It represents the amount of biologically productive land and sea area needed to regenerate the resources a human population consumes and to absorb and render harmless the corresponding waste. According to a 2005 Global Footprint Network report, inhabitants of high income countries live off of 6.4 global hectares (gHa), while those from low income countries live off of a single gHa. For example, while each inhabitant of Bangladesh lives off of what they produce from 0.56 gHa, a North American requires 12.5 gHa. Each inhabitant of North America uses 22.3 times as much land as a Bangladeshi. According to the same report, the average number of global hectares per person was 2.1, while current consumption levels have reached 2.7 hectares per person. In order for the world's population to attain the living standards typical of European countries, the resources of between three and eight planet Earths would be required. In order for world economic equality to be achieved with the current available resources, rich countries would have to reduce their standard of living through degrowth. The eventual reduction of all available resources would lead to a forced reduction in consumption. Controlled reduction of consumption would reduce the trauma of this change assuming no technological changes increase the planets carrying capacity.

Green Economy

The Green Economy is the tendency to ally development respecting the natural limits of the ecosystem, creating social welfare reducing environmental risks. Emerging countries are somewhat resistant when carbon emission containment measures are required, and may represent a limitation to their development. However, it is the task of the emerging countries, which have not yet reached a high level of development but have a position to increase, promoting the conditions to leverage a model of increasingly sustainable economy, serving as a model for other countries. Ana Flavia Barros, a Brazilian professor of International Relations, says that emerging countries are being required both proposals as the responsibilities regarding the current environmental issue because: "if liability has always been the rich countries, now new responsibility is also emerging, robust economies, with internationally articulated leaders, big polluters and emitters of greenhouse gases (GHG), and large consumer markets, given that China, India, South Africa and Brazil represent 1 / 3 of the world population "(Barros, 2011).

Degrowth and sustainable development

Degrowth thought is in opposition to all forms of productivism (the belief that economic productivity and growth is the purpose of human organization). It is, thus, opposed to the current form of sustainable development. While the concern for sustainability does not contradict degrowth, sustainable development is rooted in mainstream development ideas that aim to increase capitalist growth and consumption. Degrowth therefore sees sustainable development as an oxymoron, as any development based on growth in a finite and environmentally stressed world is seen as inherently unsustainable. Critics of degrowth argue that a slowing of economic growth would result in increased unemployment and increase poverty. Many who understand the devastating environmental consequences of growth still advocate for economic growth in the South, even if not in the North. But, a slowing of economic growth would fail to deliver the benefits of degrowth—self-sufficiency, material responsibility—and would indeed lead to decreased employment. Rather, degrowth proponents advocate for a complete abandonment of the current (growth) economic system, suggesting that relocalizing and abandoning the global economy in the Global South would allow people of the South to become more self-sufficient and would end the overconsumption and exploitation of Southern resources by the North.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Sustainable development is the favoured approach, which aims to address environmental concerns whilst promoting economic growth. Sustainable de-growth has at its core a downscaling of economy and believes that economic growth, even if disguised as sustainable development, will lead to social and ecological collapse. It proposes that decreasing the size of resource flows is the only way to ensure resources are not depleted and this must be coupled with strengthened social and ecological values. To decrease CO₂ levels, there should be targets for reducing environmental impact indicators, such as energy consumption, natural resources and land use. Accompanying this there should be research and analysis to understand the required conditions for reaching these objectives. For example, research into the profiles of societies, in terms of their levels of consumption and industrialization. Inherent to sustainable de-growth is a reduction in GDP. This is likely to cause an increase in unemployment unless initiatives are in place to reduce the amount of working time by individuals, delink income from employment or develop formulas for a basic income¹. An existing partial example of this is the case of European agri-environment measures which provide farmers with incentives linked to sustainable use of land instead of production. In general, the relations between de-growth, income, and employment need careful discussion.

However, GDP is not the only economic indicator and the concept of growth itself must be further defined and developed so that the meaning of 'de-growth' is clearer and more consistently understood. Currently it has different definitions depending on whether it is used by academics or grass roots organisations. There may also need to be more coherence in general between its proponents, for example, between conservationists, trade unions, agro-ecologists and peasant movements. Sustainable de-growth has an obvious disadvantage in that it confronts current powers in society. No important economic players, such as government leaders or private sector executives, would have an interest in considering a no-growth policy. Advantages in downsizing and improving the ethical aims of society need to be promoted in this respect.

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