

**International Conference on Degrowth  
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Resume of the Observer Team**

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1) Degrowth: A Frame of Discourses, Movements and Topics
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### **... Building Bridges?**

The Degrowth Conference 2014 was a big, impressive, diverse, well organised conference and a continuation of the last Degrowth Conferences. Because of its variety and the introductory level of many sessions it inspired the picture of a **fair**. It could also be seen as a kind of **census of degrowth** which gives an overview of supporters and protagonists of the movement.

The gathering for a common narrative can be seen as the central outcome of the Degrowth Conference. The conference seems to have provisioned a neutral space for the (first) meeting between socio-ecological discourses and actors from different societal sectors and political directions. Rather than „building bridges“, it enabled the gathering on a common ground in form of a searching process. The networking seemed to progress through the ability of different movements, individuals and topics to tie into degrowth at different connecting points. Although there seem to be appropriate occasions to talk of a degrowth *movement*, the search for multiple areas of application will probably create a variety of shapes and targets. The multiple alliances under the degrowth umbrella have to come up with that. A continuing exchange and agreement will not be easy and possibly difficult to bear.

### **Interpretation as Speeddating of Socio-ecological (niche) Actors, Discourses, Movements**

We have the impression that both the participants and the raised topics are more diverse than they were in Barcelona in 2010. As the topic of degrowth is very „hip“ in Germany, many participants came from Germany. However, this does not mean that the movement is dominated by German activists, scientists or artists – it will certainly change once the conference will take place somewhere else. The degrowth-claim effectively ties niche actors together. The broadening of these networks enhances their chance to be heard in public. But the degrowth issues embraced by high-circulation press and mainstream media utilize predominantly individualistic perspectives on voluntary self-reduction. A range of positions and concepts going beyond epistemologies of market-based societies seem to remain unheard and at a reduction there. Therefore, it is possible that public understandings of degrowth will predominantly centre upon change of consumer behaviour and sufficiency.

### **Global South and Non-eurocentric Perspectives**

The connection to the global South has to be deepened. Critical perspectives on asymmetrical trade relations, post-colonialism and rights on resources in the global South where crucially under-represented. This can perhaps be traced back to the anonymous review process for scientific papers. But it seems that we are conscious about the Northern dominance and work on better and more contacts and topics. Compared to Barcelona this issue is more on the agenda. Especially in discourses of Latin America it is argued that equality in the global South requires growth. This has to be kept in mind. On the other side, degrowth could further develop its non-monetary perspective of equality. This enables less eurocentric concepts of equal distribution. Its conception of equality is rather based on access and maintenance of living resources. That means that it is not dependent on a certain concept of state, market or society.

### **Sufficiency and Sustainability**

The sufficiency and strong sustainability discourse has been highly represented by a wide range of scientific and practical actors. It seems one of the most uncontested bases of the degrowth discourse. In the degrowth context, its requirement is a combination of social and technological innovation. The sufficiency discourse is not necessarily accompanied by the awareness for structural problems of social inequality. It is partly based on a individualistic and particularistic conception. The need for institutions, which secure rights and access to assets of production and environment and curb accumulation of power and resource control, is articulated less intensively.

### **Critique on Capitalism/ Alternative Practices and Protest Movements**

The critique of capitalism was central for the Degrowth Conference 2014. Especially in supporting the urgency of degrowth visions – although it did not provide degrowth pathways in many cases. It was particularly articulated by social movements and grass-roots initiatives which were in great parts concerned with reacting on recent offences on democracy and civil rights, like TTIP. Causes and actors of growth and wealth/power accumulation were not prominently (and consciously) discussed on the conference. It remained vague how degrowth aligns with or challenges concentration of power. The word “power/Macht“ was used 9 times in the description of 400 events.

### **Bridges between Science and Society**

Focusing on the economics of degrowth, we have the impression that certain groups are working on very new and interesting alternatives. For example at the conference in Barcelona 2010 the workshop on “macroeconomics of degrowth“ was an introduction to Peter Victors LOW GROW, with about 20 participants. In Leipzig, there were three special sessions which were all very crowded. At the same time, the struggle for pluralism in economics is taking place with more and more groups and individuals being part of this movement. Many of these plural economists were in Leipzig. Moreover, the bridge to alternative economic approaches increases, for instance to “commons“. Besides, contributions by critical sociologists, geographers, political ecologists and psychologists highlighted struggles and problems that come up in a possible degrowth society. This enabled the Degrowth Conference and its participants to integrate theoretically with struggles that address increasing inequalities between and within states and region, gender imbalances and environmental injustices.

### **Enterprises, Legal Forms, Infrastructures**

Empirical research on possible steps for a transformation of existing economic organisations, legal frameworks, organizational modes and cultures (like „toxic cultures“) has not yet been made fruitful for the discourse on degrowth strategies. Discussing the transformation towards degrowth in dialogue with representatives of the existing economic and communal structures has until now not taken place. The discourse on legal barriers and potentials for degrowth transformations is not yet on the degrowth agenda. The conception of sufficient administrative forms of usage, organisation and production of goods and their support through (participative) legal policy making can be enhanced. What is social welfare in the degrowth society and which forms of (monetary) inequality can a degrowth society create (“neofeudalism”, for instance)?

2. Dynamics: formats and actors
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### **The Role of the Individual - Psychological and Emotional Aspects**

In general, we had the impression that one of the strengths of the degrowth topic is its ability to build bridges on many different levels. The story of growth used to be very powerful but is

losing attraction as well as the ability to answer peoples' daily questions. Large parts of society are unsatisfied and live in a permanent cognitive dissonance: What they feel and think about life does not fit their experiences (=growth-life) or the story told by the mainstream (media). At the same time degrowth offers these opportunities. While multiple entrance points enable people to be part with each ones personality (scientist, activist, artist, practitioner, sharing of emotions or anxieties), degrowth delivers a powerful and visionary story that makes people feel part of something motivating and meaningful. Growth-life loses attraction, people leave it voluntary or are pushed out of it. By creating a new vision, be it personal or common, the idea of degrowth is becoming more popular and is spreading out. The shared spaces of practice, experience and emotions had an important role for creating social relevance of the degrowth value system. This could enhance transforming value systems and practices simultaneously. But does the individual approach lead to the politicization of the private or to the privatization of change?

### **Bridges to Society**

The bridge to NGOs and activists is already very strong and is still reinforced. What is missing is a stronger connection to policy makers, business companies and the „99%“. The interest in degrowth by political parties can be explained by different motivations – there are not many but let's see and contact these open-minded politicians and let us confront the others with our thorough and contemporary approaches. Sooner or later they will have to face reality and accept that the area of growth is over. The same is true for small scale companies and broad/wider society. They might already have doubts on further growth. We have to intensify these doubts and integrate these important parts of society. Until now the degrowth-“movement“ seems left-wing. In order to effectively change society we need to get in touch with “normal“ citizens and offer our vision of a degrowth society. This could furthermore bear dissonances/differences – from a pluralist point of view something that will come with a pluralist society.

### **Different Velocities and Dynamics / Discussion Cultures, Levels and Targets**

The great diversity of formats and levels was very inclusive. One of the strengths of the degrowth discourse is that people with a wide set of interests are part of it. The conference offered opportunities for artists, scientists, practitioners and activists to engage in five different lines. However, although this was a first step towards a pluralist agenda, we observed that action along these lines was independent and without clear contact to each other.

Some panel discussions were lacking dialogue processes. A format more orientated on discussions in small groups and less input could be more effective. The negotiation and discussion-based sessions, like the GAP-Process, were in some groups curbed by differences in approaches, negotiation culture etc. and topics. This raises the question of how to deal with differences. It implicates to take a decision between the search for consensus and the creation of multiple alliances in the degrowth spectrum. This puts into question the relations between groups which profit more or less from being part of the boundary object “degrowth” and from its broad versatility.

### **3. Context: architecture, technology and atmosphere**

- Use of media technology (live stream and video conferences) reduces the need to travel – side effect: smaller, participative workshops were more densely visited, because big panels can be watched later

- Transparency and means of participation (homepage was not interactive but connected to co-munity which was a great documentation and discussion platform, enabling processes and a good overview)
- Sufficient and sustainable provision (solidarity and vegan economy food, recycling paper, giving away of surpluses, private accommodation)
- Caring and recreation spaces and times were integrated and visible, for example the kitchen and beer garden, sleeping room, child care and the "Zeitwohlstand"-Café
- De-commodification: reducing the costs of non-conformity (organising private accommodation and rides, soy milk and vegan meals were not more expensive than usual) and enabling voluntary reciprocity (names and colours on buttons: offering whispered translation, cooking, helpers desk, etc.)
- Place of foundation meetings of new groups (Post-Enquete-Kommission, Commons Institute, ...) and flashmobs (art programme, invitation of musicians, theatre therapists etc.)
- GAP-Process (aim: overcoming gaps between science, practice, art, etc., but decentralized self-organisation was hindered by time schedule and amplitude)
- University facilities: very originally constrictive and rather representing the idea of science as a untouchable space instead of created through interaction - place was fruitfully transformed by conference.
- Questions of hierarchy where a little bit too much limited to gender or racial issues. What about education?
- Little inclusion of struggles against racial or ethnical discrimination as well as for refugees rights.

Questions and ideas for the future
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- Need for a "Forschungswende" (scientific turn)? Are we producing new perspectives and in the meantime reproducing old mechanisms in the way we acquire research funds, research in traditional ways, etc.?
- Are we acting or reacting: are civil movement's reactions on recent developments of neoliberal economic policy already approaches for degrowth societies? Are nowtopias too short-sighted regarded degrowth examples? How about degrowth by design out of disaster?
- Was the conference a starting point for searching for approaches, steps, strategies and turning points for a transformation? How can a participative follow up-process be organized?
- Missing: articulating pathways and steps to create economic postgrowth organizations and the necessary framework?
- No really new degrowth actors yet. Existing actors use the degrowth narrative and explain why they fit there, it is not clear how much they adopt it for their future projects and interpretation of actual situations (for instance TTIP)
- Constructive dissent is missing, because focus on finding consensus was so strong? But: fears of being unheard in the degrowth choir was articulated by several movements
- Need to develop assembly formats which provide decentralized, participative development of degrowth ideas, collaboration and projects - limits to goals and topics this time?

- How about building up a degrowth strategy group reflecting indicators of success and access to multipliers? How to (re-)encode the narrative for different parts of society? How to address people involved in law making processes, media, communal/European politics, etc.?)
- Lack of (self)reflection on categories, dynamics, different access to societal institutions (media, law making process, production assets, finance) and power relations between actors in the degrowth discourse and movements which haven't yet been involved in political strategies or conflicts.
- Finding ways to supervise and reflect (non-)participatory aspects, intransparency and power dynamics in the organisation and discourse formats