

## Submission of a short paper for the *Degrowth Conference* in Leipzig 2-6 September 2014

### Locking in or helping shift? Trends and developments affecting sustainable resource use and degrowth

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#### Short abstract:

A number of global megatrends are challenging the likelihood and feasibility of options for degrowth: Rising global population and affluence levels, proliferation of westernized lifestyles and production and consumption patterns with associated resource use needs and environmental impacts jeopardize the earth's carrying capacity. Degrowth in the sense of socially sustainably and equitably reducing materials and energy use and shifting to a focus on welfare instead of economic indicators emerges as one central theme to stay within planetary boundaries. In the context of a German research project, trends and developments supportive to and impeding degrowth are being analysed. While socio-economic acceleration, encompassing increasingly short-term product and consumption cycles counteracts degrowth, emerging new mental models and business models towards simplicity and product-service-systems support degrowth. Knowledge on relevant trends and their causal linkages is key to identifying promising leverage points for policies supporting degrowth.

#### Long abstract:

A number of global megatrends are challenging the likelihood and feasibility of options for sustainable resource use and degrowth. Rising global population and affluence levels, ever more widespread adoption of westernized lifestyles and production and consumption patterns with associated resource use needs and environmental impacts jeopardize the earth's carrying capacity and substantially go beyond planetary boundaries (Rockström et al. 2009, UNEP 2011). With humankind becoming the single most dominating species and affecting virtually all bio-physical processes and ecosystems, we have now entered an era that has been coined the Anthropocene (Steffen et al. 2011).

Globally, to satisfy prevailing societal and economic needs and aspirations, humanity requires some 70 billion tonnes of materials (Wiedmann et al. 2013). In transforming these materials into products, food, energy functions for mobility and housing and the necessary infrastructure (EEA 2012) a large share of ecosystems becomes ever more degraded (MA 2005) and some 50 GtCO<sub>2</sub>e are emitted annually (Montzka et al., 2011). Maintaining or upscaling these patterns in the future will require more than one planet earth (WWF International 2012), with overshoot day (the day at which the annually available global biocapacity is fully exploited) being reached earlier every year.

Hence, the dominating westernized economic model of ever-increasing economic growth leading to societal prosperity need to be re-considered – not only for respecting environmental limits, but also for increasing global social justice. Degrowth appears as one central theme to helping achieving this.

According to Daly (1996) degrowth is the socially sustainable and equitable reduction of the materials and energy a society uses, the 'throughput' of society. Following Kallis (2012), degrowth is understood here as more than degrowing GDP – rather it includes a range of different policies and a shift from the focus on economic indicators to welfare as the most important political indicator. While the degrowth debate is ongoing and yielded a variety of notions of degrowth, all degrowth strands advocate a shift from material wealth to wellbeing. Often policies on the reduction of work hours, basic health and social security schemes for all and redistributive taxation systems in connection with reforms in the international financing sector are presented as part of a degrowth pathway (Kallis, 2012; Urhammer and Ropke 2013).

While these ideas would have attracted little attention in (western) societies a few decades ago, today a range of trends seem to speak a different language. All over Europe transition towns appear, schemes of a shared economy are applied and especially young professionals decide to 'downshift', to name but a few (Langsdorf et al. 2014 forthcoming).

However, despite such supportive developments, it appears that a majority of existing trends and developments strongly lock society into a pattern of perpetual growth and acceleration: ever shorter production and development cycles, ever more budget being poured into marketing and advertisement to create the necessary demand, an associated increase in consumerism and increasing pressure even on pupils and students to develop in accordance to the needs of the capitalist system.

Relevant trends that will likely have implications for sustainable resource use and resource policy are analysed in the context of a German research project. Altogether, more than 15 relevant trend issues have been identified by means of literature review, expert interviews and an expert panel. Some of these trend issues relate to systemic elements which highlight the power of lock-ins and the difficulty of system change. Others relate to emerging changes that might support changes and shifts towards sustainable resource use and degrowth. The most relevant trends in this context were found to be:

- socio-economic acceleration: increasing adoption of western lifestyles and of the westernized economic model; increasingly short-term product and consumption cycles; increasing pressure on the workforce in terms of less available time
- new mental models and business models: voluntary decisions by individuals, communities and innovative leaders to step out of the traditional consumer lifestyle model and to simplify their lives; business cases for a shared economy and product-service-systems; consumers demand more sustainable products and processes, driving sustainability concerns up the value chain
- urbanization and infrastructure: increasing number of city dwellers and megacities; the comparatively high urban environmental footprint vs. the potential savings in urban settings stemming from innovation potential and higher population density
- digitalisation, new media and smart ads: further digitalisation of all spheres of society (private, commerce, work); increasing security risks for consumers, companies and governments due to digitalisation; proliferation of personalized advertisement
- democracy and participation: protest generation (particularly students) erodes away due to increasing focus on personal career management and competition pressure; retired people becoming the majority of voters in many countries; media channels/outlets becoming streamlined and less diversified

The findings from the trend analysis add more detail to many of the known megatrends (e.g. continued economic growth, competition for resources, growing climate change impacts; see EEA (2013)). The interim results point to an important characteristic: strong social trends seem to provoke the emergence of countertrends. For example, the ongoing socio-economic acceleration has triggered new mental models and partially new business models helping to counteract the acceleration. For supporting the degrowth debate it is thus important to clearly identify which trends are conducive to degrowth and which are rather impeding it – and to understand how they interact and are interlinked. Learning more on the relevant trends and their causal linkages will therefore also help in identifying intervention points for policies supporting sustainable resource use and degrowth.

Where existing lock-ins prevail and hamper both feasibility and effectiveness of sustainable resource use and degrowth policies, designing top-down options for policy intervention likely will be insufficient. In fact, what will be needed are combinations of policy options to accelerate a trend or slow an undesired trend down. This will have to encompass setting standards, both obliging and incentivising behaviour, supporting research and development and creating enabling framework conditions in multi-governance settings that allow innovative communities and corporate actors to contribute to shifting towards sustainable resource use and degrowth.

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