



Group Assembly Process (GAP) - Stirring Paper

Scaling up collective action and advancing knowledge on degrowth from the grassroots

by Gualter Barbas Baptista, Research & Degrowth / Förderverein Wachstumswende e.V.
Additional contributors: François Schneider, Research & Degrowth; includes parts of text collaboratively written by several partners of the GROWL project (<http://co-munity.net/growl>)

Rationale

Practices which can be related to degrowth already exist in multiple areas and fields of intervention, ranging from autonomous and grassroots political movements, to transition initiatives or permaculture projects. However, such projects often lack the capacity to scale up to serve as multipliers and, even more critically, to engage with each other in collective action around a coherent framework, such as that provided by the degrowth academic literature.

On the other hand, our fruitful theoretical findings may run the danger of being divorced from the day-to-day reality of people. There is a strong need for practical everyday measures that speak to individuals suffering from the difficult realities of unemployment or underemployment, home evictions and cuts in social services, among others. We must act quickly and decisively to find ways to make our lifestyles congruent with the ability of the planet to support them. The concept of socially sustainable degrowth offers a pertinent approach for today's world, confronted by a world economic crisis, the threat of reduced availability and increased cost of key resources like oil and deep ecological and social crises.

To date, proposed solutions typically remain within the orthodox framework that created the problem in the first place. More debt to solve the debt crisis, extraction of ever more natural resources with ever higher environmental impacts (like oil in the Amazon or shale gas/oil), destruction of ecosystems that provide basic resources and dedicating precious land to agrofuel production are only a few examples. At the same time, the practical approaches that we do have, have remained perhaps too limited to certain specific

techniques or topics (e.g., vegetarianism or cycling). We must develop a broader understanding of how to link and expand specific techniques to achieve cross-cutting practical solutions (e.g., localized food production systems or neighborhood re-zoning to reduce the need for automobiles).

The movement as it currently exists, ranges from numerous small initiatives to high-level academic research. Some pursue theoretical approaches, others more practical ones, still others focus on dissemination, some focus on political opposition and some on alternatives and change within existing institutions. The lack of an institutional framework and processes capable of addressing these rapidly expanding and diversifying clusters of change, often results in a lack of understanding or recognition of the complementarity of degrowth strategies. This eventually results in an atomization of discourses, practices and identities that and consequent frustration of the implemented initiatives.

This presents an important challenge around how to develop a common educational framework directed at ordinary individuals throughout Europe. The inadequate exchange between practice and theory must be bridged. Experiences accumulated during projects, which brought together small, local civil society organisations (CSOs) with individual practitioners, community educators and academic theoreticians, provide a valuable foundation and insights into how this could best be accomplished.

Scaling up the collective action on degrowth requires alliance building and the translation of different languages of expression and valuation. The diversity of strategies and praxis present in the broad degrowth movement has to rely on a coherent set of actions for knowledge building mechanisms based on a multilateral exchange between practitioners, political activists and academics. This in turn has to be supported by a set of infrastructures (physical and virtual, temporary and permanent) that work as connecting hubs.

Strategy 1: Creating spaces of convergence

Creating of a network of degrowth hubs across Europe, as convergence, support and learning centres for activists, practitioners and independent researchers, promoting mutual learning and development of personal bonds.

These hubs can be permanent (e.g. the degrowth centre of Can Decreix in France) or temporary (e.g. camps, conferences) and provide the basic physical infrastructures for supporting the below mentioned strategies for learning/education, political campaigning and research.

For discussion: which features should degrowth hubs have, in order to efficiently support the strategies for scaling up degrowth?

- meetings
- virtual communities

Strategy 2: Building free and open knowledge

- online collaboration tools
- open licenses
- critical participatory action research
- modular materials for training

online collaboration software focused on the creation of open knowledge and open science

Technology-based decentralized education can boost the skill sharing across communities at different scales. Online learning communities like Duolingo and CodeAcademy have established peer networks to help people learn from each other. These examples can serve as inspiration to build a coordinated, but diverse, network for longlife learning for degrowth that operates at multiple scales.

- critical participatory action research

Degrowth requires an epistemological and methodological framework capable of critically assessing the steps taken by the movement or movements that build up around the concept, as well as which technologies and communication processes are relevant and useful for degrowth.

- How can academics, political activists and practitioners engage in a collective process of knowledge creation?
- What processes and institutions have the potential to overcome the growth hegemony? Which ones have been successful, which ones have failed and why?
- What is the role of convivial tools and technologies in supporting the interaction between and within degrowth communities on knowledge creation? Where have they supported the objectives of degrowth, and where have they failed, contributing to the further advancement of cognitive capitalism?
- What is the role of local peer communities in fostering re-skilling for degrowth? Are they contributing to a "degrowth political" or a vulnerable source for the threats of over-localist thought, protectionism and fascism?
- What types of interactions and mechanisms can bridge the expert-lay gap and put

- different values, languages and worldviews on a common playground?
- How can knowledge flow across scales, between local-local, local-global and global-global,
 - How can a global identity supporting collective action for degrowth be built without hindering and even destroying the diversity of strategies for degrowth and leading to the creation of new cultural hegemonies?
 - How can we take into account the fair critiques of technological knowledge: the individualisation, its link to a progress that is not questioned, the difficulty to master many parts of the technological system, the lack of critiques of technological knowledge.
 - How to give all the recognitions to the "manual techniques", which require the collective, that are fully understandable, that are difficult to learn, that relate to training and nomadism for its dissemination

This process of reflection and self-criticism of the theory and praxis of degrowth should work together and potentiate the learning and open knowledge production.

Strategy 3: providing training opportunities and multiplication

- courses
- train-the-trainer

The broadly defined degrowth movement has a lack of learning structures, processes and materials for an adequate dissemination and deep understanding of the concept. Although a lot of practice-based materials exist (for example in the fields of permaculture, DIY, etc.), it is rare to find articulations between the concrete skills being learned and their (potential) contribution to degrowth. An effective praxis of degrowth can only be established by enveloping the diversity of local actions within the historical, economical, political and sociological knowledge.

Learning opportunities can take place within the local communities, provided both by skilled trainers (e.g. craftsmen) or in peer learning regime (e.g. exchanging good practices and experiences among initiatives)