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Winning the Campaign but Losing the Planet – Environmental NGOs on Their Way Towards a Grown-Up Society

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<https://www.degrowth.de/en/dim/>

1. What is the key idea of the environmental movement?

The destruction of nature at the heart of the environmental movement

The roots of the environmental movement lie in the protection and conservation of nature and heritage; it has fought against the consequences of industrialisation since the beginning of the 19th century and was borne out of a romantic concept of nature. Associations such as the Bund für Vogelschutz (Association for the Protection of Birds), the Bund Naturschutz Bayern (Bavarian Association of Nature Conservation) or the NaturFreunde (Friends of Nature) were founded at the turn of the century. During the 1960s, people's living conditions were also taken into consideration, particularly due to a marked deterioration of natural resources (water, air, ground, etc.). The resulting 'modern' environmental movement progressed through six stages:

1969-1974 Establishment	1975-1982 Polarisation between economy and ecology	1983-1990 Institutionalisation	1991-1995 Debate about positioning	1996-2006 'Sustainable development'	2007-2017 Professional campaigns & mobilisation
Citizens' initiatives particularly engage in improving the living conditions in cities	Gap between environmental problems and the growth policy (oil crisis vs. German model)	High priority among the public due to deforestation and the nuclear reactor disaster in Chernobyl German Ministry for Environmental Protection founded	Growth arguments very successful following the reunification, NGOs on the defensive	International scaling of debates, implemented through local agenda processes Publication of 'Sustainable Germany'	Alliances and large demonstrations against nuclear energy, industrial agriculture, free trade agreement

Historic development of the modern environmental movement; Brand 2008: 219 ff., own addition for the phase from 2007 onwards.

Opposition to nuclear energy has shaped the identity of the environmental movement since the 1960s. During the 1970s and 1980s, environmental NGOs were often associated with an eccentric alternative lifestyle, stylised by sha-

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peless woollen jumpers and wrinkled apples. The ‘modern’ environmental movement has tried to actively distance itself from this view.

Since the sustainability principle was introduced on the back of the Brundtland Report published in 1987, intra- and inter-generational justice have been influencing factors behind the environmental movement. The report *Zukunftsfähiges Deutschland* (‘Sustainable Germany’) and its follow-up publication, *Zukunftsfähiges Deutschland in einer globalisierten Welt* (‘Sustainable Germany in a Globalised World’), published by BUND and Misereor, together with *Brot für die Welt* and the Evangelischen Entwicklungsdienst, shaped the movement’s identity during this time. They were able to break down the concept of sustainability for local applications and personal lifestyles. Both studies described significant concepts that are now understood to be part of the degrowth debate: They outline concepts of ‘dematerialisation’ and ‘self-limitation’, and promote a holistic subsistence strategy while emphasising the living-environment economy. Furthermore, the studies focus on the importance of regional and global public assets as part of shared, responsible use and in contrast with private and state ownership.

The sustainability agenda (Agenda 21) agreed by the UN in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 also generated much food for thought and many positive initiatives, both in politics and in practice. However, looking back, we can ask the question whether the sustainability concepts that were set within a global economic system, which focuses on the circulation of goods and consumerism, could ever be expected to be of use.

The latest developments in environmental NGOs highlight one thing in particular: The movement is differentiated and many organisations act in a highly professional manner, which is particularly reflected in their campaigns and ability to mobilise. This is proven by large demonstrations: e.g. 100,000 people campaigning for a nuclear phase-out in 2010; 20,000-50,000 people involved in a campaign over the past six years demanding a new, sustainable agriculture; and 250,000 people supporting the broad coalition between trade unions and critics of globalisation against undemocratic free trade (TTIP). These events also prove the fundamental malaise within society in relation to practices that threaten our existence and the policies that support these practices.

The central focus of the environmental movement continues to be the destruction of natural resources. Thematically, this is now very broadly distributed: from the use of nuclear energy, climate change, loss of biodiversity, resource use, pollution, and consumption patterns. However, the weakness behind this criticism is that it mostly focuses on symptoms of environmental and natural crises, and rarely examines the underlying causes. However, a few organisations have put forward very strong conceptual designs for the

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transition of society. This does not mean, however, that these designs are well-received and followed within the broader movement.

2. Who is part of the environmental movement, what do they do?

Heterogeneity, differentiation and niches

The environmental movement is heterogeneous in every respect –there is both a plethora of institutional stakeholders and diverse legal forms and structures. Research carried out by the science centre in Berlin in 1998 identified 9200 environmental organisations. Statistics for the year 2014 list 8665 associations related to environmental and nature conservation (see Association statistics 2014). Furthermore, approximately 1800 environmental foundations are currently active in Germany, and this figure is increasing rapidly (see The Federal Association of German Foundations 2009: 5). Statistics relating to other legal forms, such as non-profit LLCs and cooperatives, are unavailable. Furthermore, there are citizens' initiatives that have no legal status, yet they often deal with topics relating to the environment, nature conservation, traffic and noise, and town planning, and are estimated to have over one million members (see Wolling/Bräuer 2011: 4 f.). This shows that the environmental movement stretches far beyond the large associations with 5.5 million members, even though these associations are the pacesetters and backbone of the movement.

Throughout Germany, there are many significant associations and foundations, including Greenpeace, the Naturschutzbund Deutschland (NABU–Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union), the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF), the Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland (BUND –Friends of the Earth Germany), the NaturFreunde (Friends of Nature), Robin Wood and the Deutsche Umwelthilfe (DUH–German Environmental Relief). Many associations organise themselves under the auspices of the Deutscher Naturschutzring (DNR–German League for Nature, Animal and Environment Protection), which they set up together in 1950. Yet, the various organisations within this relatively manageable group are still organised very differently: The WWF acts as a foundation without a member/activist base; Greenpeace is coordinated and controlled internationally by a small group of members but has different groups and campaign teams in different Federal States and cities; NABU and BUND work as campaign and project organisations –both on a Federal level and a communal and regional level, and are also organised democratically throughout the Federal States.

The different organisation models are an expression of the differentiation in the environmental movement. Thematically speaking, the large organisations cover almost every single question that is associated with the protection

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of the natural environment and natural resources –yet with different priorities. In contrast, there are smaller organisations that have found a niche within individual themes. As an example, traffic-related matters are covered by Verkehrsclub Deutschland (VCD–Motor Club of Germany) and forestry-related matters are handled by the Schutzgemeinschaft Deutscher Wald–Forest Conservation Society of Germany. As before, traditional nature conservationists form a large part of the environmental movement. With a systematic viewpoint on the environment and sustainability concepts, they have now become a little more modern, however. In addition to traditional nature conservation, modern and pragmatic environmental protection and the political ecology movement have become intertwined. The environmental movement of the 1970s had more of a left-libertarian profile. Nowadays, the movement is also represented by traditionalist-conservative, ecological-capitalist, ecological-socialist and anarchist-libertarian standpoints (see Brand 2008: 231).

It must be mentioned that, although there is a relatively vague common consensus to preserve natural resources within the movement, the reasons for becoming active are highly personal. A large proportion continues to account for personal consternation based on infrastructure developments, or the proverbial ‘love of nature’. This regularly results in friction within the environmental movement in relation to future questions and discussions on societal change, such as discussions on nature conservation versus renewable energy.

3. How do you see the relationship between the environmental movement and Degrowth?

Reflecting on our own efficiency as a starting point for determining common pathways?

The environmental movement is increasingly at a loss as to whether it has the right answers to hand for conserving natural resources. This self-criticism is best expressed in the words of a pioneer of the American environmental movement: ‘We have won many victories, but we are losing the planet’ (Speth, 2014). Smart CSOs (2015), an international network of representatives from civic organisations, describes the challenges facing the environmental movement as follows:

- Focus on symptoms rather than causes;
- Professional specialisation on specific topics;
- Adaptation to the system;

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- Focus on specific “bogeymen”, hiding the fact that environmental organisations themselves are part of the system;
- Dependence on donors and project funds, which are mostly geared towards short-term goals rather than long-term systematic change;
- The ‘5-before-12 syndrome’, which leaves no time for reflection and neglects the fact that any kind of change and adjustment takes time.

As the environmental movement is very heterogeneous, the economic positions also differ greatly. This does not necessarily manifest itself in policy papers –these are often surprisingly unanimous. However, cooperation with economic partners, business models, thematic focuses, etc., is very diverse. As a consequence, a policy change towards a degrowth society is not seen as a priority throughout the movement. A belief in technical solutions, also known as green growth strategies, is also enshrined in parts of the environmental movement. However, large swathes of the movement are increasingly of the view that it is crucial for the movement to deal with scenarios for a degrowth period as a growth compulsion often initially creates problems relating to environmental destruction, or exacerbates these problems. Many approaches to this problem area were devised, such as ecological farming, an energy and heat transition, calling for a stop in using additional land, etc. Successes in these areas can be traced back to the environmental movement.

As a consequence, there are also impulses from the environmental and nature conservation scene that correspond with the focus of the degrowth movement. Together with trade unions and churches, member organisations of the German League for Nature, Animal and Environment Protection (DNR) therefore drew wider attention to the debate on social-ecological transition during a Transition Congress in 2012; for visitors, the event almost exclusively dealt with institutionally embedded stakeholders. However, it is important to remember that at the fourth Degrowth Conference –held in Leipzig in 2014– there were surprisingly few representatives from established environmental associations, yet there were many young people in attendance. Apparently there is a structural problem here: Due to their character and constitution, environmental associations are seemingly unattractive to the clientele of the degrowth movement, and the environmental association scene is therefore alien to them.

A few smaller and larger projects that promote social-ecological transition have already originated from environmental associations. Many of these projects want to broach the subject of degrowth, to explore it and to make it tangible, or to offer practical support for local groups undergoing the transition. However, there are only a few isolated examples of dedicated,

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openly expressed criticism of growth in lobbying activities, public outreach work and large campaigns led by federal associations.



BUNDyouth members in front of a 'free' shop; BUND blog City.Country.Happiness: <http://www.bund.net/stadtlandglueck>; photo: Helge Bendl.

The subject of post-growth does not have its origin in the economic and social criticism branch of the environmental movement. It is therefore necessary to seek out alliance partners with the corresponding economic expertise or to forge topic alliances –as was already established at the Transition Congress in 2012 or as part of individual projects. For the degrowth movement in turn, the expertise offered by the environmental movement is worth its weight in gold if detailed concepts are required, such as explaining how sustainable practice can work. Furthermore, larger and smaller environmental organisations alike can use their experience of the political arena, as well as their experience translating difficult matters into manageable routines and understandable messages.

4. Which suggestions do they have to each other?

Could the degrowth perspective act as a compass for the environmental movement?

Our market economy functions for only one reason: It is based on permanent exploitation. Either we are exploiting nature by contaminating it with CO₂, waste or harmful substances; or we are exploiting people by letting them work for starvation wages; or we act at the expense of people in the

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future by leaving behind an ecological and social debt the size of a mountain. None of these three variants are viable for the future.

The symptoms of this exploitation system have pointed to several different stakeholders. Exploitation of resources became a problem handled by environmental associations and social injustices of recognition and redistribution were handled by trade unions as well as social associations. This contracting division of responsibilities must be overruled by a systematic approach to environmental problems. The weight behind the environmental movement can be of use since environmental associations were once in a position to initiate large social projects, such as the nuclear phase-out and energy transition. However, they were only successful when they joined forces with other social powers.

So that degrowth is not seen as an elite project for a reduced group of environmentalists, distributing resources fairly is an essential requirement. A wider social majority will only accept change if this change does not result in yet more injustices. This represents the political dimension. We must therefore be united, but we also imperatively need a new language and way of thinking that makes it possible for other social groups to connect with this change. Degrowth, shrinking, negative growth, décroissance –the environmental movement is also seeking a language that makes the transition of the economic system comprehensible. In contrast with successful campaigns led by environmental associations, there are currently too few concrete political or conceptual alternatives. Degrowth does not represent an alternative concept, it simply criticises an existing one. The problem is that as soon as we negate an idea, we unintentionally reinforce it. This is particularly dramatic in the case of growth criticism since the notion of growth is –culturally speaking– positively charged. Up is better than down; more is better than less. Negating these ideas creates fear, particularly among those who already feel left behind.

The environmental movement was founded on the basis of preventing anything worse from happening and to offset existing environmental damage. In this sense, the movement has acted educationally for a long time. But it now needs to successfully undergo two transitions to become systematically effective: It must become an agenda-setting movement and it must consider the entire society. To do so, the movement must know where it wants to see Germany, Europe and the state of the planet in ten, twenty or even fifty years' time.

The environmental movement urgently needs a compass that points to those activities that support the introduction of systematic change. There are therefore several opportunities waiting to be seized by the environmental movement by following the growth critique: Degrowth has a mission state-

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ment and could therefore further crystallise the sustainability triangle –based on economy, society and environment– and the very vague notion of a great transition. This means that the topic of distributive justice, which has been left ignored for a long time now, and questions of social participation could be combined. This would give rise to an important, macrosocial discourse and also has the potential to make the lifestyle attempts of the environmental movement attractive, liveable and financially viable for many more people.

The fractures within the change are a significant acid test for the environmental movement, particularly in the case of the energy transition. Certain renowned conservationists, for example, have publicly declared that they are leaving large environmental associations to found their own monotheistic associations for nature conservation, as they no longer feel there is a balance between nature conservation and environmentally friendly energy production. Here, it is clear how it makes (excessive) demands on some people that one cannot be allowed to play out against the other with the aim of using limited planetary resources sustainably. The degrowth movement calling for more sufficiency could have a unifying effect here. Because not every kilowatt hour from coal-fired electricity nor every barrel of oil that is used today can and should be replaced by wind turbines and more bioethanol in the future at the expense of people and nature. In some parts of the movement, this complexity leads to a defensive stance ('The only thing that matters is species conservation'), but excessive demands ('What should we do?') and appeasement ('But we're already doing all that') can also be seen.

What can now be expected of the environmental movement? While certain organisations have set themselves the task of communicating the social-ecological transition to their members, supporters and donors, others are continuing to follow the well-worn path. A review and readjustment of the work carried out by organisations, large and small, is required: Of the work we are doing, what is transformative? In contrast, what supports an economic system based on growth? In an ideal world, these questions would be contemplated at the beginning. This change of perspective can also change views of your own efficacy and trigger a change in the organisations.

The biggest question still remains: How will degrowth be received from now on within the broader movement? Is it translatable and is it a completely new turning point for the environmental movement as well –beyond academic discussions and nice niche projects that will be accused of tending towards a new, apolitical eco-conservatism?

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5. Outlook: Space for visions, suggestions or wishes

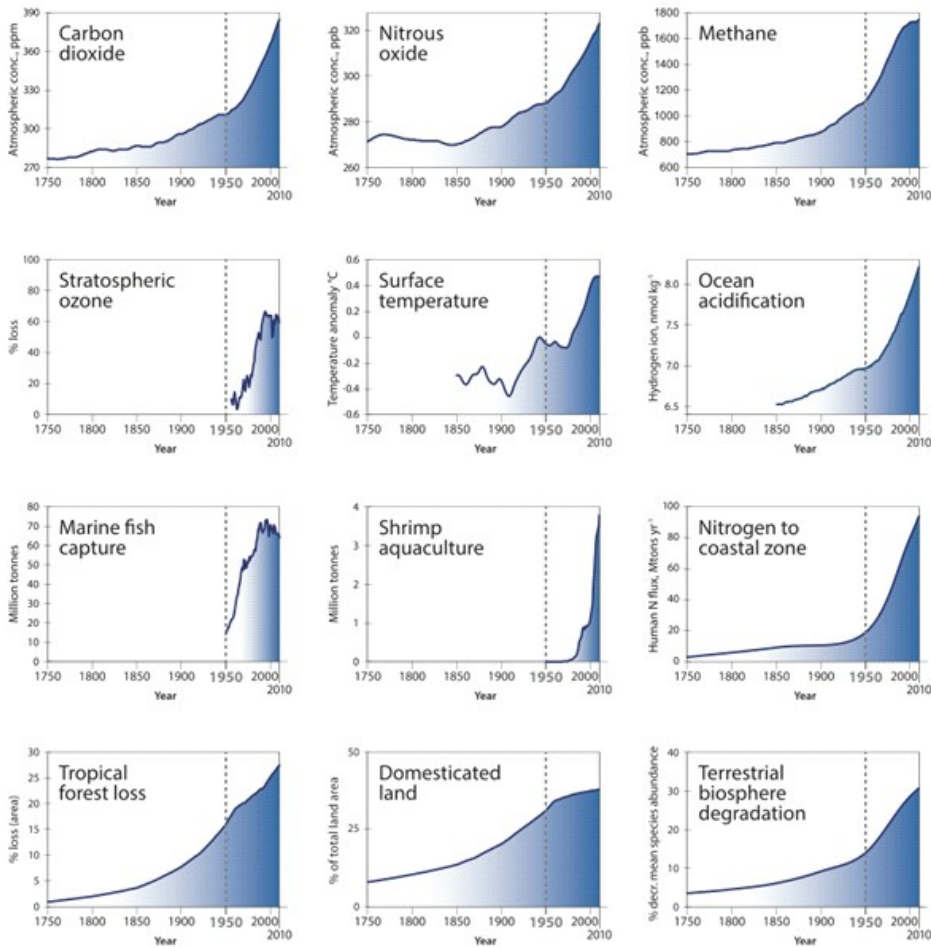
The aim? To create a sustainable Anthropocene

The environmental movement has achieved a lot in recent decades: It has increased the number of designated conservation areas in Germany, it has enshrined animal protection as a national objective within the constitution and has successfully phased out nuclear energy. It has managed to turn environmental, nature and animal protection issues into an integral part of the public debate as policies for a better future. At the same time, however, we are experiencing how –as a consequence of unrestricted growth– biodiversity has declined dramatically in Germany; far too much land is being used; and there are still no answers to Peak Oil (the maximum rate of oil extraction), which we have already exceeded. These developments show that we still need –perhaps now more than ever– forward-thinking people in environmental, nature and animal protection. But their task has now changed. Nowadays, it is no longer imperative for them to push for recognition that environmental, nature and animal protection policies have a place in society. Instead, it is more important to transform the movement into an agenda-setting movement and to fight for effective long-term environmental, nature and animal protection. But how can environmental NGOs become an effective agenda-setting power?

In 2016, the Anthropocene Working Group within the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) found enough evidence to prove that we have left the last interglacial period known as the Holocene and entered the epoch of mankind, the Anthropocene. The official recognition that humans are a geological force –together with the physical impossibility of never-ending growth– could result in a political acceptance of mankind's responsibility towards the environment. The rapid acceleration of (over)using natural resources is key to people realising their power to both influence the world and to cause destruction: Since the 1950s, all data has shown a sharp increase in the exploitation of natural resources (see Steffen et al, 2015). These trends have only been slightly slowed by smaller and larger economic crises. Environmental, nature and animal protection organisations see this as good grounds to create political pressure to act based on science.

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Twelve indicators of the earth's system—trends from 1750 to 2010; from: Steffen et al, 2015: 87.

However, rapid acceleration also brings another controversial discovery to light: As scientific evidence shows people are having an exponentially increasing influence on the earth's system, the –somewhat homoeopathic– effect of current policies also becomes clear. Data on the great acceleration clearly shows that current environmental and sustainability policies, which came into effect in the 1970s and gained further momentum at the Earth Summit in Rio at the beginning of the 1990s, would not have made a shred of difference to the level of destruction. Any slow-down in global trends were only ever caused by economic crises: The oil crises in the 1970s, the collapse of the Communist dictatorship in the East and the 2009 financial and economic crisis have all slightly flattened the graphs on resource consumption. The political successes of environmental NGOs associations could, no matter how important they have been locally, not have halted the accelerating rate at which resources have been consumed, and have instead shifted this consumption in time and to a different territory.

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The constraints of shaping social development become clear if the influencing stakeholders only seek to organise within their limited disciplines and spheres: in ministries sorted by policy area; in individual associations (on a civil-society level); in individual specialist areas (within science). As a result, the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Building and Nuclear Safety (BMUB) is trying to improve the quality of the environment with a budget of €4.6 billion, while the German government is spending €52 billion on subsidies harmful to the environment and climate. As long as a lifestyle that destroys nature and the climate is being subsidised, trying to live a sustainable life is like swimming against the stream. And while environmental scientists are describing planetary boundaries in one lecture hall, they have no influence on the business administration students in the neighbouring lecture hall who are still learning about and teaching growth models. A society that can free itself from its growth compulsion and become sustainable cannot become a reality under these conditions.

To have a chance of success, an alternative, positive concept must be devised –both conceptually and linguistically– that not only speaks to satisfied wealthy classes. To do so, environmental NGOs must realise that a focus on social justice, equality, and the rights of low-income earners is also necessary. We do not need an economy that shrinks, nor do we need negative growth. We need a society, and by extension an economy, that understands that it can escape from being dependent on growth –a society that is grown-up.

We will only achieve this if we also change our notion of sustainability. The environmental movement's greatest mistake was to accept a concept of sustainability where ecology, economy and social issues –in supposed equal balance with each other– can be dealt with separately. But the fact is that environmental and social issues are always ultimately consigned to the sidelines in pursuit of economic growth. To break away from being dependent on growth, we must understand sustainable economy as an economy that serves the people of today and tomorrow, and eliminates hunger and poverty. But that can only happen within our planetary boundaries.

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Links

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Stadt.Land.Glück – Blog des BUND über Projekte zur kommunalen Suffizienzpolitik (*‘City.Country.Happiness—BUND blog on projects for communal sufficiency policy’*): <http://www.bund.net/stadtlandglueck>

WELTbewusst erLEBEN – konsumkritische Stadtführungen von Jugendlichen

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für Jugendliche (BUNDjugend) ('Experiencing WORLD awareness—anti-consumption city tours by young people for young people [BUNDyouth]'):

<http://www.bundjugend.de/blog/projekt/weltbewusst-erleben>

Beweg:gründe – Wanderungen zu Orten des sozial-ökologischen Wandels (Naturfreundejugend und BUNDjugend) ('Movement:motivations—walking to places of social and ecological change [Young Friends of Nature and BUNDyouth]'): <http://beweg-gruende.org/>

Portal zur ökologischen Gerechtigkeit/Lust auf Zukunft – Vernetzungsportal von Projekten für sozial-ökologische Gerechtigkeit und Transformation (Deutscher Naturschutzring) ('Portal for ecological justice/desire for the future—networking portal for projects dealing with social/ecological justice and transition [German Society for Nature Conservation]'): <http://www.nachhaltigkeits-check.de>

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