

# 21 Final Chapter



## *Degrowth is Part of the Mosaic of Alternatives for a Social-Ecological Transformation*

### **1. 1. Our goal: Bringing movements together and making them more visible**

**There is a wide range of emancipatory alternatives working towards a social-ecological transformation. It is more important than ever to underline this.**

From Brexit, to the AfD in Germany, to Trump –the current political turmoil is a clear sign of the discontent that exists with the prevailing system, and that expresses itself through a societal shift towards the right and a strengthening or increased visibility of racist, misogynist, homophobic and transphobic worldviews and violence. These shifts are often interpreted as a desire or search for an alternative to the dominating political and economic system, as a regressive answer to unfettered globalisation, economisation and impoverishment. But there are also thousands of other alternatives; emancipatory and solidarity-based alternatives which respect the dignity of all human beings. With this collection of texts we seek to offer opposition to both the prevailing paradigm of growth, and to the increase in tendencies disdainful of human life and values. The project *Degrowth in Movement(s)* shows a mosaic of alternatives for a social-ecological transformation –a mosaic that is all the stronger and more fascinating through its diversity.

A few years ago, the trade unionist Hans-Jürgen Urban envisioned the mosaic of left-wing groups as the ‘beacon of hope of the post-neoliberal era’. In his view, this mosaic would be an anti-hegemonistic bloc ranging from trade unions, to movements critical of globalisation, NGOs and social self-help organisations, to critical segments of the cultural left. In this sense, Urban (2009: 77) stated:

„Just as a mosaic can unfold its beauty as a complete work even though every individual piece is still recognisable as such, a newly founded left could be seen and valued as a heterogeneous collective actor.”

The project *Degrowth in Movement(s)* is only a sample of this ‘left-wing mosaic’ that we see as being dynamic and in constant change. The project brings together that part of the mosaic that is working on the development and testing of alternatives, that represents a social-ecological perspective and that is open to questioning capitalism and industrialism. For natural reasons, it is the segment of the mosaic that is interested in both a mutual exchange and cooperation with, and a critical examination of, degrowth.

*Degrowth in Movement(s)* can also be seen as an attempt to strengthen the perception of the corresponding movements and currents of themselves, of others and of their position within the mosaic, and in this way trigger processes of change that can alter the global picture: from learning processes, to mutual support, to actually working together. These texts allow us to see

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with other eyes, to switch perspectives and test how new ideas and views might feel. This creates a basis for reciprocal learning and jointly shaping and further developing the mosaic with all of its parts. Our goal –in the words of Pierre Bourdieu– is

„to (ideally) achieve a synthesis in which the differences are preserved, in order to obtain a *whole*, which more than being defined by its individual components is defined by the connections between them“ (Bourdieu 2001, 118 f.; see Urban 2009).

Independent of the strategic potential or political interpretations of the texts, the answers to the first two questions: ‘What is the central idea?’ and ‘Who is active and what do they do?’ provide us with very clear insights into the different movements and currents. These texts are an ideal source of – possibly initial– orientation regarding the concepts and actors of a social-ecological transformation. Especially in relation to movements with which we are totally or partially unfamiliar, these texts help deconstruct preconceived notions and provide us with unexpected ‘aha’ moments, just as the project intended.

The most important question, however, is how we can advance this mosaic of alternatives for a social-ecological transformation together. In this sense, the authors of the texts also offer important stimuli: They show the differences and similarities between the different movements and degrowth, provide criticism and suggestions, and express their visions clearly. We would like to look further into these aspects here and thereby highlight the strengths of the different perspectives. The degree to which this joint writing and networking process in the context of *Degrowth in Movement(s)* can strengthen emancipatory currents seeking to bring about a social-ecological change as a part of the mosaic will be seen in the years to come. This text also present certain theses in this regard.

The thoughts and views presented here are not only based on the texts of the many authors, but also on a joint meeting in Berlin in October 2016, where we discussed these questions with many different participants. The conclusions drawn, however, come from us, the ‘publishers’. We make no claim to completeness or even to a closure of the project. Rather, we see these conclusions as an intermediate assessment of a continuous process, of which the *Degrowth in Movement(s)* project itself is also only a small part.

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## **2. 2. Movements in plural – overlaps and differences**

### **Entrenched differences, ignored similarities**

*There are many fundamental overlaps between the movements and currents – this is especially clear when viewing them together.*

And yet each one has its own particular orientation and motivations; its

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own specific way of analysing society, crisis processes and its own role; and its own strategies. Viewing them together also shows that some of the movements or currents contain each other to a certain degree. It is not possible to clearly state which one provides the main or crosscutting topic to which the corresponding movements owe their names, and the relationships between them can be thought of in a wide array of directions. For example, the urban gardening movement sees itself as a part of the commons movement; many of the garden projects are for their part excellence points of reference for segments of the degrowth and commons movements; degrowth sees commoning as one of the main pillars of an alternative society; and the commons movement integrates degrowth ideas.

#### *Overlaps*

Some of the shared aspects are especially clear. They are manifested mainly in fundamental, connecting worldviews and values, and thus do not necessarily express the specific focus of all those involved.

- *Orientation towards needs:* The main focus is on concrete needs and a good life for all, instead of on economic concepts, abstract production figures or a logic of exploitation.
- *Humans as complex, relational beings:* Many share a holistic image of human beings, which they express either explicitly or implicitly. In this sense, people are not seen as rational utility maximisers à la Homo oeconomicus, but rather as social and emotional beings living in relationships with each other.
- *A comprehensive analysis:* Most movements share their comprehensive view, which takes into account the many different facets of inequalities and crises and does not reduce its focus to individual aspects.
- *Global justice:* Instead of discussing political questions only in a national context, most have a global perspective from which they derive their social and ecological demands for justice.
- *Rejection of the green economy:* Hardly any movement believes that the multiple crises of the world can be solved through a 'greening' of capitalism, and many criticise the (side) effects of large-scale technological solutions.
- *Democratisation:* Instead of delegating the power of shaping the economy and society to a select few, most movements believe—with differing degrees of explicitness—in an all-encompassing democratisation that ensures the participation of all people. This is also reflected in the way the different networks and organisations work, even if it is not always possible for reality to live up to every aspiration.

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- *Social-ecological transformation*: Instead of playing off social and ecological problems against each other, all movements recognise to a different degree that the two aspects are intertwined, even if one of them may be more important for a movement in particular.
- *Change of paradigm*: Instead of hoping that small changes or political reforms will solve the problems of our world, many movements seek to bring about comprehensive, fundamental changes. In this, they focus not 'merely' on changing societal structures (such as working times, the energy transition or the distribution of wealth), but also on transforming our mental (infra)structures. Thus, many activities are (also) aimed at changing our worldviews and values.
- *Working in the here and now*: Instead of simply demanding the necessary changes, most movements try to start effecting change in the here and now, either in small alternative projects in which utopias are tested, or in social struggles with concrete goals.

#### *Differences*

Regardless of the overlaps, these are still different movements and initiatives with their own analyses, strategies, stories and supporters. There are therefore many differences, mainly in the following areas:

- *Moral frame of reference*: All movements and currents seek justice. The main difference lies in for whom they want to achieve this justice. Although all movements fundamentally and at least implicitly include all human beings in their concept of justice, the focus of their work is often reduced to their particular region and, in many cases, to the Global North. In addition, some movements (such as Buen Vivir, urban gardening and segments of degrowth) also include the rights of nature in their vision. For its part, the animal rights movement fights for justice for all animals, human or nonhuman.
- *Relationship with capitalism*: Some movements place capitalism at the heart of their analysis and criticism; they are decidedly anti-capitalist or critical of capitalism (e.g. *Attac*, degrowth, demonetisation, climate justice, *Peoples Global Action*). Others barely refer to capitalism or do not refer to it at all (e.g. *FUTURZWEI* or environmental associations). Many are analytically critical of capitalism, but are unclear regarding the alternatives (e.g. the ecovillages movement).
- *Transformation strategies*: There are also different views on how society can be changed. One group of movements believes in taking up the struggle of social conflicts (e.g. the anti-coal movement, care revolution, climate justice) or spreading resistance (e.g. activism); whereas another group believes in creating change at the smallest level

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first and by building concrete alternatives (e.g. the ecovillages movement, solidarity economy, urban gardening). Others focus their work on disseminating information on fundamental transformations and alternatives (e.g. demonetisation) or on promoting them (e.g. commons movement, plural economy movement).

- *Criticism of power and domination:* The criticism of power and domination is central to the work of some currents (e.g. Buen Vivir, care revolution, food sovereignty, refugee and migration movement, queer-feminist economic criticism), whereas for others it is not relevant or has a subordinate role (e.g. *FUTURZWEI*, common good economy, plural economy). Correspondingly, the movements vary in their degree of self-reflection regarding their own weaknesses and privileges.
- *Capacity to form alliances:* In all movements there is a general openness towards the other movements and currents. However, the demands placed on potential allies vary greatly: Some groups have very strict criteria (e.g. demonetisation, animal rights movement), whereas others make the case for broad alliances and seek to highlight the overlaps instead of the differences (e.g. open workshops, ecovillages movement).
- *Organisational structure:* The movements and currents differ greatly in terms of their organisation. This applies to their reach (local, national, regional, global) and internal democracy (grassroots versus hierarchical), as well as their level of organisation (highly organised versus flexible structures; formal or informal networks).

Instead of pretending that these differences do not exist and seeking to portray ourselves as a homogenous movement, or blowing them out of proportion and thereby provoking splits and conflicts, we suggest taking advantage of these differences –and the overlaps– in order to better understand the mosaic of alternatives of which they form part. There are many different currents with their own perspectives, analyses, areas of focus and strategies, and they create –sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker– alliances with each other in order to reach different (intermediate) goals. They strengthen each other mutually, and yet there is still a lot of room for common learning.

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### 3. What degrowth is (not)?

The potential and weaknesses of degrowth are a matter of intense debate. As publishers we had written, together with Dennis Eversberg, an introductory text to [degrowth](#), which was available to all authors at the begin-

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#### **ning of the writing process.**

Their texts show, nonetheless, that there are still clearly different and in part contradictory understandings of what degrowth is. Each viewpoint depends essentially on the person's own original perspective and their experiences and points of contact (if any) with degrowth.

In the next section we will show how the different movements including degrowth can enrich each other mutually. However, first we would like to discuss the different views of degrowth based on certain main points of criticism and summarise how the authors themselves interpret the relationship between degrowth and their 'own' movement.

#### *Degrowth equals sufficiency?*

In the German-speaking world there is a certain post-growth discourse that is very present that sees sufficiency and individual sacrifice as its main elements. Many authors equate degrowth with this current and criticise it for not being sufficiently structural or critical of power structures. In addition, many criticise the fact that in their view post-growth/degrowth only seeks a reduction of the gross domestic product and does not have a positive vision or present alternatives for society. As those responsible for this project, and in our work at Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie e. V., we share this criticism and therefore aim at achieving a more comprehensive understanding of degrowth (see [introductory article on degrowth](#)).

#### *Degrowth and growth*

In addition to these points of criticism that we see as misunderstandings, there were also other explicit criticisms of the degrowth concept: for example, its focus on growth and the term 'degrowth' itself. Some argue that the criticism of growth should not be a central element, because according to them growth, even economic growth, is not in itself a bad thing –for example, for people in the Global South or for certain sectors of society such as care. For many people, the concept of growth has a positive connotation (e.g. the refugee movement, queer-feminist economic criticism). Thus, we should not focus on 'less', but on a positive and aspirational 'more' (e.g. care revolution, transition towns). In addition, certain currents that are themselves critical of growth only consider growth to be a secondary problem, i.e.: 'We criticise and reject capitalism, therefore we also see economic growth as a problem' (e.g. *Attac*, demonetisation, post-development).

As stated above, criticism was also levelled at the term 'degrowth' itself. For some, the mere fact that it is an English word is already a barrier that shows a lack of connection with the people on the ground, and that personifies an elitist approach (right to the city movement). Others think that degrowth embodies an ecological, moralistic view based on personal sacrifice and is therefore discouraging –almost like a dirty word–, and that it is too far re-

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moved from daily life (e.g. activism, trade unions).

In general, the recommendation is not to discard the term but to give it another meaning. Focus should thus be placed instead on principles –such as solidarity, democracy, participation, equal rights and socially-compatible inclusion– that constructively complements the critical perspective (solidarity economy). Others state that degrowth should have a positive narrative (*FUTURZWEI*), or place greater emphasis on creativity and fantasy (artivism).

#### *Emphasis*

Various authors criticise the emphasis of degrowth in the area of strategy – with contradictory results. Thus, some state that degrowth is too theoretical and scientific (e.g. 15M, anti-coal movement, artivism, ecovillages movement, right to the city), whereas others see degrowth as more of an activist group (plural economy). Some say that degrowth should not only carry out a ‘communication offensive’ (refugee movement), but should also take part in practical conflicts (e.g. *Attac*). Still others think that degrowth should be more specific regarding its contents (right to the city).

#### *Closeness to degrowth*

Opinions also vary in terms of how close to degrowth the authors saw their movements, or expressed in other words: where the authors place their own movement and the degrowth movement within the mosaic. The anti-coal movement, for example, sees itself as being very close to degrowth, and the youth environmental movement even sees itself as a part of degrowth. For the free software movement, its efforts are one of the struggles of the degrowth movement. On the other hand, *Attac*, despite stating the many overlaps, does not want to be considered a part of degrowth for various reasons. Degrowth clearly played an important role in the occupations of public squares in Spain (15M), but in the end it was only one perspective out of many in this ‘movement of movements’.

Others see degrowth as being complementary to their current (post-development), as another part of a common whole (post-extractivism), as a common goal (transition towns), as another manifestation of an overarching current (urban gardening), or as a condition for achieving transformation (environmental movement).

Another interesting point of friction seems to be the –actual or desired– role of degrowth within the spectrum of movements. Some are clearly worried that degrowth is too possessive (e.g. animal rights), or that it establishes certain (taboo) topics, thus leading to a monoculture (refugee movement). For their part, the authors of the solidarity economy text posed the general question of whether it is intellectual competition that causes all the movements to (have to) loudly proclaim whatever makes them stand out from the rest.

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#### **4. Learning from each other – impulses from the different movements**

**In the reflective analyses contained in the texts, we do not recognise any signs of competition –at least not in a conspicuous way–, but rather a desire to continue developing together.**

In the context of the *Degrowth in Movement(s)* project, those involved examined both their own initiatives or movements, and degrowth and other currents. This process of (self-)reflection helped many of the actors to enter in contact with one another. Of course, such networks also exist independently of degrowth projects, and yet they were undoubtedly strengthened through this initiative.

To a very different degree and on many different levels, the authors voiced both criticism and suggestions –most of which were directed at degrowth. These impulses are nonetheless of value for all those involved; and their full meaning and scope is only revealed through a careful reading of the texts, when viewed against the backdrop of the specific story and nature of the respective movement or current. We would nevertheless like to highlight certain aspects here.

##### *Degrowth as an impulse and an opportunity*

The authors presented a wide range of suggestions based on their view of degrowth. The content of these suggestions is as varied as the movements themselves. However, there were certain points that repeated themselves throughout many of the texts. An examination of these points might help us to understand why degrowth is currently such an attractive movement for so many people.

For many currents –especially those working on a local, practical basis– degrowth has a horizon-broadening effect, helping ideas and perspectives related to their own practices become more visible. In these cases, degrowth presents a more comprehensive perspective of, and helps to provide a framework for, their own activities (e.g. free software movement, open workshops, ecovillages movement, animal rights movement, environmental movement). For others, degrowth provides a theoretical basis for debate (e.g. right to the city), makes it possible to reach new target groups (e.g. anti-coal movement), or helps to repoliticise critical consumption (e.g. youth environmental movement). For those groups and actors with a greater social emphasis, degrowth opens up a horizon of ecological questions (e.g. 15M, commons movement, demonetisation, right to the city). In contrast, it provides the more ecologically oriented movements with an economic-political and social framework (e.g. animal rights movement, environmental movement, urban gardening). Movements that are both social and ecological

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thus have an a priori connection to degrowth (e.g. food sovereignty, common good economy, solidarity economy). For their part, movements from or with connections to the Global South (Buen Vivir, refugee movement, radical ecological democracy) see degrowth as a valuable partner in the Global North in their quest for alternative development and transformation perspectives.

#### *Relationship with the Global South*

Many authors are highly critical of the relationship between the Global South and the Global North and demand that all groups and actors address this subject. Friederike Habermann (*Peoples Global Action*) argues in favour of South-North cooperation, because without it there is the risk of climate colonialism and environmental racism. In her view, we must seek a true and broad coming together, instead of a mere exchange of individual intellectuals. From the texts on Buen Vivir and post-extractivism we can learn just how important the international perspective is; as a true social-ecological transformation is only worth the name if the change in political, social-economic and cultural conditions occurs globally. In the words of Ulrich Brand (post-extractivism):

‘For the degrowth perspective ... it is fundamental to make clear how the dominant forms of society and production are enmeshed with other regions of the world. If not, degrowth risks becoming too provincial and overseeing the destructive basis of its own alternatives.’

Ashish Kothari ([radical ecological democracy](#)) and Alberto Acosta (Buen Vivir) stress the fact that alternatives are always rooted in their context and cannot be applied in the same way everywhere. At the same time, all actors should acknowledge the alternatives and struggles in other parts of the world and take them into account in their approaches.

#### *Resistance and criticism of domination*

One demand that is repeated very clearly throughout the texts is to be or become –everything can be learned– critical of domination structures as well as a source of resistance. As Friederike Habermann (*Peoples Global Action*) states, in the course of our struggles we must not forget all the other existing power structures that restrict people’s lives, and that we must also fight against. The *Trouble Everyday Collective* (queer-feminists economic criticism), for example, warns us against closing our eyes to questions of domination and believing that a seamless transformation without conflict is possible. John Jordan (artivism) calls for a culture of resistance; i.e. that resistance be supported by a broad segment of society.

Even though a vision of transformation and a good life for all is important, movements also need a concrete field of conflict with clear antagonistic structures. The joint work between degrowth and the movement for climate

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justice is an example of such a field of practice: resistance against opencast coal mining (climate justice). Do other areas harbour such a potential, areas such as care or the politics around refugee and migration?

#### *A different view of nature*

Some movements and currents invite us to question our western, rationalist and dichotomous understanding of nature and to replace it with a more comprehensive view of the world complemented by a different system of values. The main question here is: How is it possible to organise a society that meets human needs and preserves the ecological foundations of life at the same time? Buen Vivir, for example, propounds an ethical system that does not revolve around human beings: where people are not seen simply as individuals, but as part of a community with nature.

#### *Creating a material space*

Another aspect that is very present is the need for concrete physical spaces that exist on a longer-term. On the one hand, this means creating ‘real labs’ or ‘Reallabore’<sup>1</sup> (open workshops), where the abstract is translated into the concrete and people ‘walk the talk’. On the other hand, it also involves different actors coming together in a concrete place in order to make alternatives more visible and build local relationships beyond specific events (e.g. 15M, ecovillages movement, right to the city, transition towns, urban gardening).

#### *Overcoming the barriers of our own milieux*

In order to turn a social-ecological transformation into a reality, it is indispensable that we set a truly broad movement in motion; one that reaches and involves people beyond educated, middle-class circles. As pointed out in the trade unions text, the –highly educated and relatively well-off– individuals involved in the degrowth and environmental movements lack an understanding of the situation of other groups. According to this, other social groups tend to perceive degrowth as being too ‘eco’ or esoteric and therefore off-putting.

This self-critical reflection process showed that most of the people active in many of the currents and movements are, in fact, well-educated, middle-class and white. Many authors therefore appeal to themselves and to degrowth to leave their own environment. In general, the question of how the movements and currents are composed and who participates (and how much) is perceived as important and positive, although some see it as stressful and unpleasant.

Some movements are better at mobilising diverse groups of people, and they can therefore open up new perspectives for some of the other groups. The trade unions and the Care Revolution network, for example, can teach us

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how to also approach social-ecological questions outside the aforementioned bubble. For its part, the youth environmental movement brings with it the perspective of younger generations; and Buen Vivir, climate justice, post-development, post-extractivism and radical ecological democracy open up perspectives from the Global South. Then many of those active in the food sovereignty or refugee and migration movements have experience with transnational organisations and the common struggles of diverse groups of people, for example where some have experiences of escape and migration and others do not.

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#### 5. The next step?

**One of the aims of *Degrowth in Movement(s)* is to help the different alternatives see themselves as part of a mosaic of social-ecological transformation and thus become jointly active.**

The goal was for the movements involved to better understand each other, and for them to learn from different perspectives, strategies and experiences, thereby creating a better basis for their organisation, projects and activism.

In terms of their vision for the future, many authors expressed the desire to work together, to achieve greater synergy and effectiveness in a context of escalating ecological and social problems. So what is the future of this mosaic? For Ashish Kothari (radical ecological democracy), who is involved in similar alliance-forging processes in India, the most important task for *Degrowth in Movement(s)* is to identify the essence of the different initiatives, and see if their values and principles point towards a coherent framework that can ‘challeng[e] the currently dominant mindset and practice of growth-centred ‘developmentality’.’

We believe that such a framework exists –but the shape we wish to give it is still the subject of much debate. Very many movements refer positively to the idea and term of a ‘social-ecological transformation’ (explicitly stated by: commons movements, degrowth, food sovereignty, *FUTURZWEI*, trade unions, basic income, right to the city, plural economy, post-extractivism and the environmental movement). However, the meaning that is given to this term, and what this transformation should look like and how it is shaped, are questions that must be answered collectively. In addition, all the proposals and approaches for working together should not make us forget that cooperation is not an end in itself. The fact that different groups focus on different topics and projects is unavoidable and justified. The question is therefore: What are the conditions, goals and strategies for us to work to-

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gether?

There is no lack of suggestions for steps towards a common movement, or at least common action. Some wish to conceive and carry out coordinated protests (e.g. anti-coal movement, *Attac*). Others propose developing a common basis of understanding, or at least a series of common goals, as the first step (e.g. commons movement, ecovillages movement), in order to then move to more practical matters. Yet another possibility would be to build up concrete alternatives (e.g. 15M) and then create networks between them (e.g. open workshops). This could happen on a local, regional, national or transnational basis, and each level would have its own possibilities and challenges.

Whatever happens, we believe that it is important to conduct a (self-)critical examination of one's own movement as well as of other movements, to show solidarity with others in general, and to consider –and forge– potential alliances. Common perspectives are the product of an exchange, of working together in the here and now, and of joining common struggles. Can the resulting alliances contribute to a social-ecological transformation, and to opposing the increase in right-wing tendencies? We hope so. What we do know is that we can't do it alone. Whether or not this society is truly able to defend itself through democratic means will depend more than anything on whether or not more people start recognising the signs of the times and begin to actively work for social and ecological justice. There are more than enough places to start.

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### Links and Literature

#### *Literature consulted*

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