

Mapping sustainable wellbeing
viewpoints on two dimensions:
technical and socio-cultural decoupling

Timo Järvensivu, D.Sc. (Econ.)

Researcher and consultant

Aalto University School of Business, Finland

nommoC seugolaiD cooperative, Finland

What is the purpose of my article/presentation?

- Often, in heated debates on “sustainability of economic growth”, we seem to look at “sustainability” from perspectives that are, or seem to be, incommensurable or from different worlds.
- As a result, we seem to not really listen to each other, and we keep talking past each other
- I have made an attempt to put two key “dimensions” of these discussions onto a map that can collectively be used as a reference point for a better dialogue

The socio-cultural decoupling question:

Does sustainable wellbeing require primarily a reform of...

...the economic system...

...or the socio-cultural system?

Yes

**1.
Economic
growth**

**2. Green
growth**

***A society dependent
on the economy
(Status quo –
and a blind spot)***

**3. Green economy
(economy detached
from growth, yet
strives for growth)**

**5. Green society
(detached from the
growth economy)**

**4. Green degrowth
(economy detached
from growth, and
does not strive for
growth)**

**6. Deep green society
(detached from
economic valuation)**

No

**The technical decoupling
question:**

**Can economic growth be
decoupled from its
environmental ills
effectively and rapidly
enough?**

1. Economic growth as the foundation of wellbeing

- “Economic growth increases wellbeing.
- The resources provided by the natural environment are limited, but in practice, through technological development, those limits will not hinder economic growth.
 - For example, advantage can be taken of technology in the mitigation of climate change, and there will be enough solar energy to meet practically all our needs.
- The wellbeing of the natural environment must be respected. However, this is a task for environmental policy rather than economic policy.”

2. Green growth (aka immaterial growth)

- “Many of the limits of the natural environment are about to be exceeded.
 - The key challenges include climate change and the deterioration in biological diversity.
- These challenges must be resolved quickly.
- The technology necessary for de-coupling is already here, or soon will be, and therefore environmental problems will not stand in the way of economic growth.
- Green, or immaterial, economic growth must be set as an economic policy goal. Co-ordination between economic policy and environmental policy will be required in order to achieve this.”

3. Green economy detached from economic growth, but strives for growth

- “The limits of the natural environment have been reached. Environmental policies must be put into practice in order to ensure the avoidance of global environmental problems swiftly and effectively.
- By taking advantage of technology, economic growth can be made greener.
- In an optimistic scenario, global green economic growth becomes a reality. This should be the goal.
- There is also a more pessimistic scenario: as the result of strict environmental standards, economic growth could slow down, stop or even turn into degrowth in the coming decades.
- Green growth should be pursued but, at the same time, to be on the safe side, the economic system’s dependence on growth should be reduced.”

4. **Green degrowth** detached from economic growth, does not strive for growth, but strives for sustainable economy

- “Economic activities must be green.
- It is highly probable that detaching economic growth from harmful environmental effects cannot be done as effectively as necessary within the required time limit.
- In all probability, making the economy greener will, therefore, bring economic growth to a halt and possibly lead to decades of degrowth.
- Degrowth is not an objective; it is the outcome of strict environmental standards. For this reason, the emphasis must be on building a type of economic system that can also maintain its socially sustainable functionality during the periods of degrowth, eliminating the need to strive for economic growth.”

5. Green society detached from growth

- “Environmental and societal policies are prioritised over economic policy. The economy is merely a tool.
- Green societal policy is necessary in building natural and human wellbeing.
- The benefits of economic growth are recognised and the green economy is valued, but the economy is very clearly viewed as a tool.
- Preparations are made for the pessimistic scenario that the detachment of harmful environmental effects from economic growth fails, resulting in stagnation or degrowth.
- The focus is, therefore, on building a green society in which wellbeing can be sustained without economic growth.”

6. Deep green society detached from economic valuation

- “The relationship between humans and nature is unhealthy and it is unlikely that it can be revived in a society based on economic-centric ideologies.
- In an economic-centric thinking pattern, too much emphasis is put on measuring the economic efficiency of activities, thus restricting societal creativity. Being economically efficient does not, however, mean the same as being environmentally or humanly healthy.
- The goal should be set at achieving human wellbeing that respects the natural environment, in the most holistic and diverse form possible.
- The domination of economic policy should be actively demolished in order to make more room for discussion of societal values and for policies in which life is the crucial factor.”

And a **blind spot**

- A person with the “blind spot” is any discussant that has no urge or capability to look at sustainable wellbeing as anything but an economical question, or a technical question within the economical paradigm. In other words, a person that does not consider sustainable well-being as a socio-cultural phenomenon
- A person who starts and ends sustainability discussions with: “Just fix the economy, no need to look elsewhere.”

Who is right?

- We *do* have "absence of evidence":
 - Indeed, we do not have evidence that absolute decoupling is possible (in global terms)
- However, "absence of evidence" *does not* mean that there is "evidence of absence"!
 - Indeed, we do *not* have evidence that absolute decoupling has a *zero percent* possibility
- So absolute decoupling *is* possible, although one might be pessimistic personally (as I am)
- Hence, I would argue that we just do not know for certain