

Debates: Degrowth and the perspectives about it from the South

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Degrowth is a political, economic, and social movement [1] based on ecological economics, anti-consumerist and anti-capitalist ideas that seek to address the limits-to-growth dilemma. Key to the concept of degrowth is that reducing consumption does not mean a decrease in well-being. Rather, the aim is to maximise well-being through non-consumptive activities like having more time for family, community, art, nature, culture, etc.

There are now Degrowth Summer Schools and various annual conferences being held all over Europe, as well as a growing number of publications on the concept. It is also endorsed in the Pope's second encyclical *Laudato Si* [2], which was published in 2015 wherein the Catholic church's critiques on consumerism and irresponsible development that leads to environmental degradation and global warming was expounded.

It shares several seemingly similar calls with systemic alternative approaches supported by climate and environmental justice movements in the global south. Most importantly these approaches critique the idea of growth itself, advocate the fundamental need for social transformation to address inequality, and emphasise the urgency of stopping rising emissions and increasing depletion of non-renewable resources. These principles are aimed at charting approaches towards satisfying the moral obligation of the current generation to preserve future generations' rights to fulfil basic needs.

However, degrowth is not finding the same level of support among movements in the South despite these seeming convergences and the political opportunities there may be for reinforcing each other. A whole raft of arguments exists as to why degrowth is unsuitable and lacks resonance with movements in the South. To understand these arguments, it is important to appreciate how Southern movements position themselves in their resistance to the dominant development concepts and growth model, as well as the systemic alternatives that they are already practicing. From this understanding, reciprocal solidarity can be built.

Southern critique of growth

The critique of growth has already been an intrinsic part of resistance by key social movements and progressive organisations in the South for a long time. In Asia, the analysis on the limits of the growth-oriented model of development and capitalism was even expressed regionally way back in the early 1990s through networks like the People's Plan for the 21st Century or PP21 [3]. The critique is based on the understanding that the economically advanced countries in the region like Japan and South Korea achieved their progress by sacrificing their environment and exploitation of the labour force.

Walden Bello's ideas on Deglobalisation [4] as a systemic alternative to the current development framework further advanced that critique and at the same time identified basic strategies for how to realise a vision for alternative societies that movements, not just in Asia but also globally, can agree on in the early 2000s. For Bello, it does not mean withdrawing from the world economy, but rather a process of restructuring the world economic and political system so that the latter builds the capacity of local and national economies instead of degrading it. Deglobalisation means the transformation of a global economy from one integrated around the needs of transnational corporations to one integrated around the needs of peoples, nations, and communities.

Latin American thinkers and practitioners have been long-time rebels from the Northern or mainstream views on development. The region has offered vibrant debates on the development question since the 1970s and has already shown us a history of experimentation with diverse forms and models of development. These Latin American streams have argued about the direct structural relationship between the underdeveloped and developed, underscoring that the developed countries achieved their economic advancement at the expense of the underdevelopment in other regions. This was explored in the different streams of *Beyond Development* group in the region [5].

Degrowth as part of a matrix of alternatives

Degrowth is viewed in some circles as an addition to the matrix of alternatives because of its adherents' recognition of the limits of capitalism and the unsustainability of the neoliberal dystopia. However, key movements in the South have reservations with the concept. The common argument is that the South still needs sustainable industrialisation. There are tensions between degrowth and just transition discourses from the South as well as some ethical assumptions [6].

For indigenous communities, the question "how to live together and together with nature?" is already central in their practice of *Buen Vivir* or *Vivir bien* ('living well'). In terms of policy it is already institutionalised through, for example, the inclusion of the **Rights of Mother Earth** in the constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador. However, environmental justice movements inside and outside criticise that the economies of these two countries are still very extractive-based and have financed the social reforms they initiated through relatively conventional growth patterns.

One area where the southern critique is strong is on the question of state power. Movements in the South have a common understanding that societal institutions are not neutral and that there is a gross asymmetry of power between the state, corporations and communities/people. Therefore, progressive movements have pushed for state-based solutions when they come to power as shown by the 'pink tide' in Latin America in the 1990s and 2000s. There will always be conflicting values and interests and the state is a domain of power and struggle so the element of transforming the state to effect change in the ownership, access, and management of the commons is a key factor.

Critique of the Western norm of progress and its imposition on the entire planet

There are also streams of Buddhist Economy. It is introduced in Thailand as a philosophy called *Sufficiency Economy* [7], which was developed over three decades by King Bhumibol Adulyadej and the happiness development approach that guides the government of Bhutan. In July 2018, the government of Bhutan established in its constitution that Gross National Happiness will be used to measure the collective well-being of its population. The term Gross National Happiness was coined in 1972 by the then king of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who argued that “Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product”.

These approaches inspired organisations in Laos and Cambodia as well as in China [8], however marginal, around 2010-12. The criticisms against it is that they are top-down approaches coming from monarchs who own and control vast properties and companies.

How will it make sense in the South?

Southern movements often quote Gandhi’s, “Live simply so others may simply live,” in their climate and environmental justice advocacy. With the same logic, they argue that Degrowth will only make sense in the Global South if the economic and political processes will put equitable redistribution of wealth and regulation of big banks and transnational corporations.

Degrowth is not appealing in the South because the reality there is that their ecological footprint is still low and the basic needs of the population have not yet been met. Also, recent examples of states that dealt with poverty in meaningful way like China, Cuba, Brazil, Venezuela, etc., relied on growth.

There is of course a strong tendency to aspire for everything that people in the North enjoy and to follow the cultural domination of the North. In rural and indigenous communities, moderation and traditional cultures based on sufficiency instead of greed is still dominant. The climate and environmental movements in the South do not see the climate crisis as a purely environmental concern. It is political, economic, developmental, gender, cultural and security concerns.

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P.S.

- <https://www.globaljustice.org.uk/blog/2019/sep/19/degrowth-and-perspectives-about-it-south>

Footnotes

[1] <https://web.archive.org/web/20160527163840/http://www.jnu.ac.in/sssp/cssp/What%20is%20degrowth.pdf>

[2] <https://www.degrowth.info/en/2015/06/laudato-si-as-signalling-towards-degrowth/>

- [3] <https://duepublico.uni-duisburg-essen.de/servlets/DerivateServlet/Derivate-5261/dpr5.pdf>
- [4] ESSF (article 50519), [Alternatives – The Paradigm: Deglobalisation](#).
- [5] <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/beyond-development>
- [6] <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0921800918307626>
- [7] <http://tica.thaigov.net/main/contents/files/business-20160904-174653-791776.pdf>
- [8] <https://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/4130--China-must-measure-happiness>