



Why We Need Degrowth Policies

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[ClimaTalk Contributor](#) [Mar 5, 2023](#)

by JP Arellano

The degrowth movement is gaining momentum and is beginning to make both positive and negative headlines [1,2,3]. As some degrowth policies are starting to enter the popular discourse, ClimaTalk wants to provide our readers with an analysis of this movement and its rationale as we cover more degrowth policies and ideas.

What is degrowth?

First and foremost, degrowth is a critique of capitalism's pursuit of endless growth (i.e., constantly increasing industrial production for the sake of maximising capital accumulation), arguing that this has resulted in severe human exploitation and extensive ecological damage [4,5]. In highlighting capitalism's social, political, economic, and environmental implications, degrowth emphasises the rising inequality between the Global North and Global South. That is to say, the imperial and neo-

colonial arrangements that fuel the North's growth and leave the South to suffer the consequences [5, 6].

Presenting a solution, degrowth advocates for an economy that satisfies the basic needs of everyone whilst remaining within planetary boundaries ([read our article on doughnut economics to learn more](#))[4]. It is defined as a planned and democratic reduction in consumption and production in rich nations [4].

It prioritises production that achieves **happiness, well-being**, and **thriving ecosystems**, instead of corporate profits and excess consumption [4]. Furthermore, degrowth emphasises feminism, democracy, justice, sufficiency, and equality as key ideals for a healthy society [4].

Principles of Degrowth



Sustainability

Never deteriorate supporting ecosystems



Circularity

Waste not, want not



Cooperation

People and planet, not profit



Useful Production

What is not needed should not be made



Sharing

Sufficiency for all, excess for none



Local Production

Produce local, consume local



Work-Life Balance

Work less, play more



Relational Goods

Less stuff, more relationships



Joie De Vivre

If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your economy!

Source: <https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-02499463/document>

Source: ClimateScience – Economics & Climate [18]

Why not green growth?

Opponents, however, consider these ideas far-fetched and unrealistic, arguing that it would be easier to just 'decouple' or separate growth from its ecological impact [7].

This increasingly popular idea is called green growth [8,9]. Through technological innovation and the substitution of ecologically harmful resources, proponents claim we can decouple growth from resource use and pollution, such as greenhouse gas emissions [8,9].

However, empirical evidence suggests that although some nations have decoupled emissions from economic growth, it is highly unlikely to be achieved at a rate fast enough to prevent warming of 1.5 or even 2°C [9]. The main issue is that as economies grow, they use more energy and materials [9]. As we try to decarbonise our societies, having them continue to grow will only make it harder to do so [9]. Green growth also fails to address other consequences of growth, such as inequality, imperialism (appropriation of resources from the Global South), and the shortfalls of measuring our human and ecological well-being with GDP.

These issues call for an economic system that acknowledges its impacts on people and the planet and acts accordingly. The degrowth vision would result in a complete economic change and a cultural shift in what people value and how they spend their time [7]. But why do we really need such change?

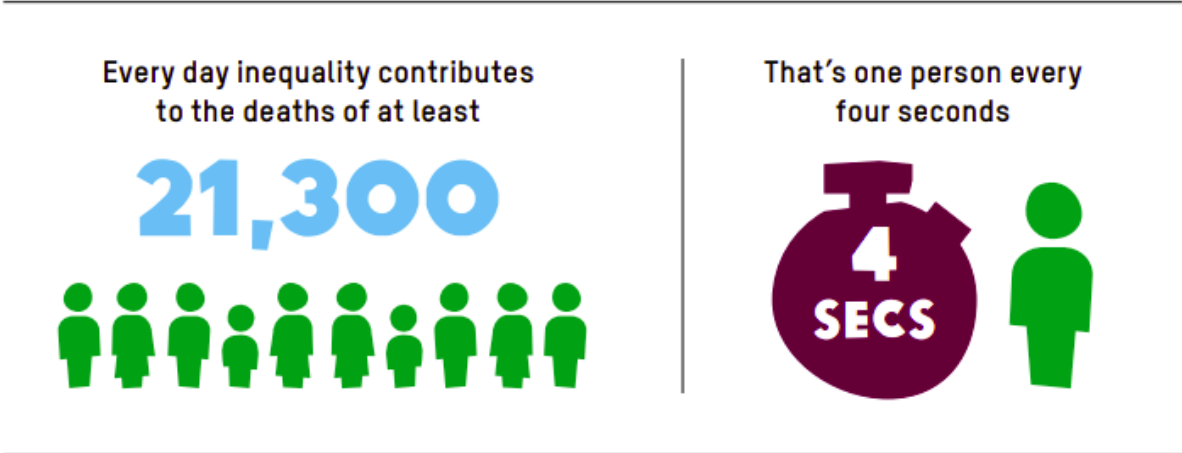
Inequality

Capitalism (which hides green growth under its umbrella) is a system that requires the accumulation of capital [5]. The only way for this to happen is for it to take more from people's work and from nature than it gives back [5]. Although capitalism is not the only extractive system out there, it is special and in need of an overhaul because it is dependent on perpetual growth [5]. This continued growth (read: capital accumulation) eventually results in a few people (the owners of capital) accumulating significantly more wealth than everyone else [5]. This inequality in wealth also leads to an inequality in ecological consequences [11].

The scale of inequality in our world has never been worse [10]. According to a recent report by Oxfam, capitalism continues to concentrate wealth in the hands of the very few and has resulted in the **richest ten men in the world now owning more wealth than the poorest 3 billion individuals combined** [10]. In fact, since 1995, the top 1% have captured nearly 20 times more of the global wealth than the bottom 50% of humanity [10].

Unfair and unjust inequality is also dangerous. Studies estimate that inequality contributes to the **death of at least one person every four seconds** due to factors like

lack of access to healthcare, malnutrition and violence against women, to name a few
[1 0]



Source: Oxfam – Inequality Kills Summary Report [10]

Inequality is also not limited to individuals. Rich countries' growth relies on the unequal appropriation of resources, labour, and land from poorer countries [11]. This means that the Global South nations lose significantly more resources, energy, and wealth than they receive by trading with the Global North [11]. This is due to unfair trade agreements and the control of patents and complex supply chains by Global North corporations (which are a direct result of the current capitalist system that requires wealth to accumulate in a few massive corporations) [11]. In 2015 the Global South lost an estimated 10.8 trillion USD in unequal trade with the North, **enough to end global poverty 70 times over** [11].

Inequality also contributes massively to greenhouse gas emissions and resource extraction. In fact, twenty of the wealthiest billionaires emit about 8,000 times more carbon than the billion poorest individuals [10]. Studies have estimated that the growth in the number of millionaires and their emissions would use up 77% of the remaining carbon budget, severely reducing our chances of meeting the 1.5°C target [17].

Considering population sizes, Global North nations have also been responsible for 92% of emissions that exceed a safe concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere (350ppm)[12]. Most Global South nations, including India and China, have yet to release enough CO₂ to exceed this safe limit (with respect to their population)[12]. Existing IPCC climate mitigation scenarios perpetuate these inequalities. In order to maintain growth in rich countries and reconcile this with the Paris Agreement goals, they constrain energy use in the global South. In these scenarios, the average person

from the Global North continues to consume 2-3 times more energy than someone from the Global South [15]. Meanwhile, the South suffers 90% of climate costs (losses and damages caused by climate-related disasters) and 98% of climate-related deaths [14].

A way forward

Our dominant economic system of capitalism and growth perpetuates inequalities that make the few richer at the expense of everyone else and the environment. Now more than ever, there is a need for a system that provides for both people and the environment. Degrowth may bring just that.

Policies such as reducing less-necessary production, improving public services, introducing a job guarantee programme, reducing work time, cancelling unfair debts of low-and middle-income countries, and limiting unequal exchange between countries are just a few of the many proposals from degrowth that could bring us to a stable, healthy and fair world [16]. However, lack of funding and political opposition are seen as the largest barriers, posing a challenge to the implementation of these policies.

This article will be the first of a series of articles exploring different degrowth policies and their potential for implementation.

Authors note: If you want to learn more about degrowth, I recommend you explore the <https://degrowth.info/en> website. They have a wide range of resources that can help increase your understanding of this vital topic:)

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