

The Degrowth Movement: Alternative Economic Practices and Relevance to Developing Countries

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Abstract

This article explores the degrowth movement's main ideas, policy proposals, and examples of noncapitalist organizations and socially embedded economic networks compatible with degrowth ideas, namely, the Catalan Integral Cooperatives in Spain and Solidarity Economy Networks in Italy. It also explores degrowth's relevance to developing countries that have lower levels of material living standards compared to the European countries where it originated. The main argument of this article is that degrowth has significant potential to advance progressive socioecological transformation. Its advocates have also implemented some interesting alternative economic practices, such as nonmonetary exchanges and recreations of the commons, which prioritize socioecological sustainability over profit maximization. However, the degrowth movement has so far paid little attention to the structural hierarchy of the global political economy and hence has not made sufficient suggestions about how to address uneven development within and between countries, which will likely hinder progressive and ecologically sustainable transitions across the globe. Unfair global trade practices and concentrated control over advanced technologies are contentious points that might prevent widespread support for degrowth ideas in developing countries. Some developing countries and subnational local groups also face more constraints than others if they want to scale-up noncapitalist initiatives that are compatible with the degrowth vision, not to mention that some might lack financial means to drive transformative change. These issues cut across the spheres of production, consumption, trade, and finance, which suggests that structural reforms of the global political economy are called for to address unequal relations between developed and developing countries and also inequality within countries.

Keywords

degrowth, alternative economic practices, Catalan Integral Cooperatives, Solidarity Economy Networks, uneven development, postcapitalist green transformation

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Introduction

There are competing perspectives on whether continuous economic growth and sustainability can both be pursued. In this debate, contributions from ecological economics regarding the causes of present ecological problems and how to achieve sustainability tend to be marginalized in academia and policy circles in many countries. Mainstream environmental discourses and practices influenced by environmental economics usually focus on the roles of the market, the state, and technological fixes,¹ while structural problems of the capitalist economy are left unaddressed. One way to carefully scrutinize mainstream perspectives is to examine critical alternatives, such as the degrowth movement, which prioritizes grassroots initiatives embedded in progressive socioecological goals, concerns over ecological limits, and a democratic egalitarian distribution of resources. Originated in Europe, degrowth advocates “an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions of the local and global level, in the short and long terms” (Schneider, Kallis, & Martínez-Alier, 2010, p. 512). Grounded in ecological economics, the degrowth movement maintains that the pursuit of unlimited economic growth, seen as an imperative of the capitalist system (Kallis, 2017, p. 24), is incompatible with the Earth’s biophysical limits. It is also concerned with rectifying unequal distribution of resources within and between countries (Demaria, Schneider, Sekulova, & Martínez-Alier, 2013, p. 195).

For developing countries, the degrowth movement in Europe might offer a novel and interesting vision of an alternative development path. Some developing countries also have grassroots groups and public intellectuals who voice similar concerns and pursue similar alternative economic practices as that of degrowth, but they are sometimes seen as socially conservative (e.g., the community culture school of thought in Thailand) or lacking in concrete macro-level proposals to achieve more egalitarian and sustainable social transformation (Chiangkul, 2017, pp. 90–91, 118–122). Moreover, extending degrowth ideas and practices to developing countries might generally be unpopular; it is one thing to promote degrowth in advanced capitalist countries with relatively high standards of living and welfare states, but many people will argue that developing countries might require some forms of growth rather than degrowth or significantly more intensive and wide-ranging structural reforms to redistribute wealth and resources.

The first section of this article explores degrowth’s main ideas, policy proposals, and examples of noncapitalist organizations and socially embedded economic networks compatible with its ideas, namely, the Catalan Integral Cooperatives (CIC) in Spain and Solidarity Economy Networks in Italy. The two case studies provide working examples of nonmonetary forms of exchange, recreations of the commons, as well as economic activities and institutions that are driven not solely by profit but primarily by social and environmental concerns. The second section addresses remaining questions regarding the extent of degrowth’s relevance to developing countries and the effects of degrowth in the Global North on the Global South.

Overall, this article argues that the degrowth movement has significant potential to advance progressive socioecological transformation, such as by creating and expanding noncapitalist organizations and alternative economic initiatives. As for its relevance to developing countries, it is not the case that whereas degrowth can be applied to developed countries, only some forms of “green growth” should be applied to developing countries, especially since many people in the middle and upper classes in developing countries have internalized modernization views and consumption patterns not too dissimilar to those in developed countries (Beling et al., 2018, p. 311; Lang, 2017b). Rather, it is argued that, so far, degrowth has not paid enough attention to the entrenchment of structural hierarchy within the global political economy and hence has not made sufficient proposals about how to address uneven development within and between countries, which will likely hinder progressive and ecologically sustainable transitions across the globe. Unfair global trade practices and concentrated control over advanced technologies are contentious points that are

likely to prevent widespread support for degrowth ideas in developing countries. Some developing countries and subnational local groups also face more constraints than others if they want to scale-up noncapitalist initiatives that are compatible with the degrowth vision, not to mention that some might lack financial means to drive transformative change. These issues cut across the spheres of production, consumption, trade, and finance, which suggests that structural reforms of the global political economy are called for to address unequal relations between developed and developing countries and also inequality within countries.

The Degrowth Movement and Alternative Economic Practices

The French word “*décroissance*” appeared for the first time in 1972 but reemerged as a social movement slogan in the early 2000s and was officially translated into English as “degrowth” in 2008. By 2011, there were many social movements that had organized degrowth activities, including in various countries outside of Europe, such as Brazil, Puerto Rico, and Canada (Demaria et al., 2013, pp. 192, 195). Degrowth supporters include activists who work on bottom-up alternative economic projects or oppositional activism, hundreds of small enterprise clusters that embrace in strong socioecological principles, and academics from various disciplines across the social and natural sciences (Demaria et al., 2013, pp. 201–204; Kallis, 2017, p. 30; Muraca & Schmelzer, 2017, p. 174). While some of them believe that existing institutions can be reformed, others call for fundamental structural transformation of institutions at local, national, and global levels (Demaria et al., 2013, p. 201). In France, there are journals and organizations that have given the degrowth movement a voice, as well as individuals such as Francois Schneider who walked 1,500 km across France to promote degrowth in 2005 (Baykan, 2007, p. 514). Since 2001, some French degrowth activists have ran in local elections, and a Degrowth Party was also established, although it vowed to only ever be an opposition party (Baykan, 2007, pp. 514–515). In Italy, the “*La Decrescita*” association and journal have been established (Baykan, 2007, p. 517), while in Greece and Spain, degrowth receives support from some anarcho-cooperativists and eco-communalists, as well as young voters who support the Syriza and Podemos political parties (Kallis, 2017, p. 33).

The Degrowth Declaration in Paris in 2008 describes the degrowth project as “a voluntary transition toward a just, participatory, and ecologically sustainable society,” starting in wealthy countries which, after they have appropriately adjusted their production–consumption levels downward, maintain these levels in some forms of “steady state” economies (Research & Degrowth France and Spain, 2010, p. 524). Degrowth’s sustainability ideas are informed by ecological economics, which criticizes how conventional economics mistakenly views economic growth as unlimited and instead maintains that economic development must take into account the biophysical limits of the Earth (Kallis, 2017, p. 13; Schneider et al., 2010, p. 516). Unlike some ecological economists, however, degrowthers do not perceive ecological limits as externally imposed constraints but as collective “self-limitations” and as political choices of people who agree to limit production and consumption due to a sense of intergenerational environmental justice (Kallis, 2017, p. 75). Such differences are not surprising, given that degrowth draws on various sources of critical social and political economic thought, including political ecology, ecological Marxism, and the altermondialist movement, which criticizes Western models of development (Muraca & Schmelzer, 2017, pp. 181–183). Degrowth is also inherently anti-capitalist, since the capitalist system has a built-in tendency to continuously accumulate and grow. Nevertheless, degrowth will object to any postcapitalist society that remains productivistic and tries to pursue unlimited growth (Kallis, 2017, pp. 24, 27). Influenced by feminist perspectives, degrowth also points to the importance of caretaking activities that are structurally devalued by the current monetized economy (Martínez-Alier, Pascual, Vivien, & Zaccai, 2010, p. 1744).

Degrowth is not merely an advocacy of negative growth as measured by gross domestic products (GDP). It is mainly a utopian vision of societies where people live better lives while working and consuming less (D'Alisa, Demaria, & Kallis, 2015, p. 4; Latouche, 2009, pp. 8–9). Degrowthers argue that increases in GDP do not lead to increases in happiness above certain thresholds. Instead, social and environmental improvements are more important, and concepts such as well-being, sustainability, and equity should be prioritized over GDP growth (D'Alisa et al., 2015, p. 5; Schneider et al., 2010, p. 512). Localized democratically governed economies that stay within ecological limits, where resources are distributed more equally within and between countries, can be seen as important parts of the degrowth vision (Demaria et al., 2013, p. 195; Kallis, 2017, p. 10; Schneider et al., 2010, p. 511). Moreover, “sobriety” will characterize individuals in a degrowth society. In other words, people will no longer pursue individual accumulation of resources to achieve what they perceive to be “the good life” but center their lives around care, leisure, and democratic participation to collectively decide how to use the society’s economic surpluses (*dépense*) in nonharmful ways, such as by subsidizing education (Kallis, 2017, pp. 22, 39–40, 42–43). Moreover, collective political practices (such as consumption strikes) are preferred to individualistic consumer actions (such as recycling) (Fournier, 2008, pp. 536–537).

In terms of policy, degrowthers support the implementation of collective limits on environmentally harmful activities such as pollution caps, nontradable caps on the extraction of natural resources, and other forms of eco-taxes. In addition, they propose a variety of supportive regulations such as restrictions on advertising and socioecological production standards, as well as “self-limitations” to reduce consumption of goods per household (Kallis, 2017, pp. 12, 21; Sekulova, Kallis, Rodríguez-Labajos, & Schneider, 2013, p. 5). Degrowthers are also wary of green megastructures (such as industrial-scale wind farms) that encourage increasingly centralized, less democratic, and less egalitarian control over technologies by technocrats (Kallis, 2017, p. 12). Moreover, essential to the degrowth proposal is the creation of new welfare institutions and policies to reduce inequality. Progressive taxation can be used by the state to finance welfare and public work programs, as well as provide subsidies to noncapitalist institutions or other socially and environmentally beneficial projects. Maximum income caps, reduction in working hours, and work sharing are also supported by degrowthers (Kallis, 2017, p. 23). It is argued that freeing up time from paid employment allows people to have more leisure time and participate more in communal, caretaking, and other noncapitalist activities (D'Alisa et al., 2015, p. 4; Kallis, 2017, pp. 112–113).

The degrowth movement puts a lot of emphasis on engaging in “everyday lives” resistance and grassroots campaigns, such as on anti-advertising, cyclist and pedestrian rights campaigns, and also agroecological farming practices (Demaria et al., 2013, pp. 194, 202, 210). Decentralized small-scale and participatory economic alternatives are encouraged, including consumer, credit, and renewable energy cooperatives (Demaria et al., 2013, p. 202; Trainer, 2012, p. 590). Cooperative health and school systems can also operate alongside public services instead of privatized health and education services (D'Alisa et al., 2015, p. 12). Moreover, relocalization of production that helps to reduce intermediaries in supply chains is encouraged (Sekulova et al., 2013, p. 5), as well as local exchange trading systems and other nonmonetary exchange systems such as time banks (exchange systems based on service time) (D'Alisa et al., 2015, p. 13). Community or local currencies are seen as complementary attempts to relocalize the economy, and they can also help people who might be disadvantaged in the conventional monetized market economy. It is recognized, however, that local currencies are insufficient and that state financing is important for the degrowth project (D'Alisa et al., 2015, p. 13). Some of the most frequently cited examples of such alternative economic projects include the Catalan Integral Cooperative in Spain and the Solidarity Economy Networks in Italy, which are discussed in the subsections below.

The CIC in Spain

The CIC in the Catalonian region of Spain was founded in May 2010 and is organized according to principles of democratic membership and self-management (Dafermos, 2017; Demaria et al., 2013, p. 203). It promotes local currencies, acts as an umbrella organization for independent producers and consumers of organic food and artisanal products, and also pursues other activities such as eco-commune housing (Demaria et al., 2013, p. 203; Kallis, 2017, p. 30). The use of “integral” in the organization’s name denotes an attempt to include all the “basic elements of an economy such as production, consumption, funding, and a local currency” in its work, which includes provision of those goods necessary for a minimally decent life, such as food, housing, health, education, energy, and transport (Catalan Integral Cooperatives [CIC], 2015, p. 5). In 2014, it was estimated that it comprised approximately 300 projects, 30 local nodes and eco-networks, and 15 communal living projects (Bauwens, Gorenflo, & Restakis, 2014).

The CIC emphasizes “self-management, self-organization, and direct democracy,” as well as equal conditions and opportunities in which “everyone c[an] flourish” (CIC, 2015, p. 5). It organizes open assemblies every fortnight so that members can take part in the decision-making process and review the work of existing committees and working groups or create new ones (CIC, 2015, p. 11). An example of an existing committee is the Committee on Network of Science Technique and Technology (XCTIT), which focuses on the development of tools and machineries to meet the needs of commons-oriented cooperative projects within the CIC network. It also organizes training workshops and undertakes an open design license called XCTIT-General Public License (GPL) to allow end users the right to modify and distribute its technologies, as part of its attempt to freely share knowledge (Dafermos, 2017, p. 14). Solidarity and sharing principles are also reflected in how, for health care and education projects, participants contribute according to their own economic means based on the criteria such as their income levels and number of dependents, to help cover total expenses in a kind of pooled system (Bauwens et al., 2014).

One major element of the CIC is its “eco-networks” or local exchange networks (ecoxarxes in Catalan) that promote local-level exchanges of goods, services, and knowledge (CIC, 2015, p. 12; Dafermos, 2017, p. 27). They aim to encourage economic activities that meet local basic needs, foster human relations, and help people develop abilities other than professional ones. Most importantly, they aim to create an economy based on “trust, reciprocity, solidarity, cooperation and ecology” that overcomes “individualism and capitalist competition” (CIC, 2015, p. 12). In 2017, it was estimated that over 2,500 people participate in the CIC’s local exchange networks (Dafermos, 2017, p. 9) and that, in Catalonia alone, there are over 40 such networks (Dafermos, 2017, p. 27). There are also consumer groups that autonomously manage 20 pantries (rebosts) across Catalonia. These pantries are connected through the Catalan Supply Center—a logistics committee coordinating deliveries from producers to the pantries with currently over 1,000 items in its product list (Dafermos, 2017, pp. 9, 13). The CIC and eco-networks in Catalonia also use a Community Exchange System (CES)—a social currency administered through online software that allows each eco-networks to trade (CIC, 2015, p. 18). Aside from their own individual assemblies, these eco-networks are linked through meta-governance institutions or “bioregional assemblies” of south and north Catalonia (Dafermos, 2017, p. 28).² Members receive monetary units per hour spent on work for the commons and, aside from the CES, there is also a second type of community currency that cannot be accumulated beyond 1 month called “eco-basics,” which is meant for basic necessities such as food and housing (Bauwens et al., 2014).

There are also many “autonomous projects of collective initiative” that have some linkages with the CIC (Dafermos, 2017, p. 16). The Social Auto-financing Cooperative Network (CASX), for example, has been set up as a form of interest-free savings bank that helps to fund other CIC projects (CIC, 2015, pp. 20–21). Another example is Calafou, a collectivist commune established in 2011 at an abandoned industrial village in l’Anoia, which is 65 km from Barcelona (CIC, 2015, p. 21). A housing cooperative

has been set up in the commune, granting people tenants' rights, so that they cannot resell or lease the properties. Similar to the CIC, the commune practices a form of direct democracy, with collective decision-making through assemblies and meetings to manage day-to-day tasks (CIC, 2015, pp. 22–23).

The CIC has suggested some measures to resist state authority, calling for “economic disobedience actions,” which include refusal to pay debts and fines, value-added tax, or even total tax resistance (CIC, 2015, pp. 18, 22). However, the CIC is not an insular group as it has tried to build networks with other organizations, encourage integral cooperatives in other regions of Spain, and expand its ideas and practices globally. For example, in July 2014, the CIC established a strategic partnership with the P2P Foundation that promotes peer-to-peer alternatives. Similar to the CIC, P2P also promotes cooperativism and open production of knowledge (CIC, 2014). Together, they established “Faircoop,” which is an online international community for those who want to organize self-managed integral cooperatives based on similar socioecological goals as that of the CIC. “Faircoin” has also been introduced as a digital medium of exchange and store of value (CIC, 2018; FairCoop, 2018). Additionally, spurred by the 15-M movement, which began on May 15, 2011, the management model of the CIC has received wide interest in many parts of the country. In 2014, a meeting hosted by Cooperativa Integral Aragonesa in Zaragoza, Aragón, officially marked the formation of the Network of Integrated Cooperatives in Spain (CIC, 2014).

Solidarity Economy Networks in Italy

Reti di Economia Solidale (Solidarity Economy Networks) in Italy have historical roots going back to the 19th-century civic mutualism tradition (Corbino, 2017).³ There are now over 20 Distretti di Economia Solidale (Solidarity Economy Districts) with clusters of hundreds of small businesses operating under strong socioecological principles (Demaria et al., 2013, p. 203). Two of the most interesting types of institutions within such networks include an ethical bank, Banca Popolare Etica, and networks of the Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale (GAS or Solidarity Purchase Group), which are discussed below.

In 1995, some nongovernmental organization (NGO) activists collaborated to start an ethical bank that would provide credit to nonprofit projects, since only 29% of NGOs in Italy had access to the credit system at that time (Corbino, 2017). Eventually, Banca Popolare Etica was established in 1999, and it now has 40,975 members and 1,294,197,000 euro of savings (Banca Etica, 2018f). Some of the bank's partners include, for example, the Consortium of Gino Mattarelli (the main Italian consortium of social cooperatives), Associazione Delle Ong Italiane (the association of Italian NGOs, which represents 160 NGOs working on development and humanitarian aid), and Fairtrade (TransFair) Italy (Banca Etica, 2018d). Banco Popolare Etica only finances organizations in the “third sector,” such as voluntary, community organizations, self-help groups, cooperatives, and associations, or social institutions whose work encourages social cooperation, international cooperation and aid, environmental sustainability, and artistic and cultural heritage (Banca Etica, 2018b). It also tries to encourage the development of ethical banks in other European countries, including by cofounding the European Federation of Ethical and Alternative Banks. This in turn led to the creation of the European Company for Alternative Ethical Finance, which aims to “strengthen and increase ethical and social finance organizations throughout Europe” (Banca Etica, 2018c). Other socially conscious projects include, for example, supporting microfinance in Sri Lanka after the Tsunami disaster in 2004 (Banca Etica, 2018a, 2018c, 2018e).

As for GAS, they are grassroots networks that collectively organize direct purchases of basic items such as food, toiletries, and clothes. They also provide services such as renewable energy and sustainable tourism (Grasseni, Forno, and Signori, 2013, p. 1). Other experimental examples of their services include car insurance, dental care, and telecommunication services (Grasseni, 2014, p. 180). The first GAS was established by Mauro Serventi in Parma in 1994, and by 2013, over one thousand GAS had registered with the national network “Retegas,” although it should be noted that many

more GAS might not have formally register (Grasseni et al., 2013, pp. 2, 8). Retegas has a “National Charter” that outlines its ideals and principles, including with regard to environmental sustainability and solidarity (Grasseni, 2014, p. 180). Each GAS consists of an average of 20 households who are strongly motivated by health and environmental concerns. Many also value the establishment of trusting consumer–producer relationships where both sides participate in the decision-making process, sharing benefits as well as risks (Corbino, 2017; Grasseni et al., 2013, p. 4). Costs and difficulties facing small producers are taken into consideration, and many GAS pay for agricultural products in advance to help farmers. Moreover, GAS purchase from trusted producers who do not exploit indentured or illegal labor and encourage organic farming and the shortening of supply chains (Grasseni, 2014, p. 180; Grasseni et al., 2013, pp. 1, 13). In Sicily, supporting agri-food products from GAS also implicitly supports a mafia-free local economy (Grasseni et al., 2013, pp. 8–9).

Lombardy region has the largest number of GAS (around 400) comprising a total of approximately 7,100 families (Forno, Grasseni, & Signori, 2013, pp. 12–48; cited in Grasseni, 2014, p. 181). Most groups are organized according to “volunteered task sharing,” communicate through mailing list, and only meet once a month to make management decisions (Grasseni et al., 2013, p. 6). In Lombardy, there are also “second-order networks,” often described as “Districts of Solidarity Economy (Biolghini, 2017; cited in Grasseni et al., 2013, p. 12) that connect GAS with other grassroots solidarity-driven initiatives such as agricultural cooperatives and ethical banks (Grasseni et al., 2013, p. 12). The main problems facing GAS are that it is difficult to involve all members in the time-consuming management tasks, while there are sometimes logistical problems forcing GAS to abandon some producers (Grasseni et al., 2013, p. 6). In addition, a study suggests that more than half (56%) of Lombardy’s GAS members interviewed did not engage in ethical banking (Grasseni et al., 2013, p. 13).

Degrowth’s Relevance to Developing Countries

The previous section discussed degrowth’s main ideas, policy proposals, and alternative economic practices. Informed by a combination of ecological economics and critical social and political economic thought, degrowth provides a strong foundation to support socioecological progressive goals. The examples of noncapitalist organizations and socially embedded economic networks in Spain and Italy also demonstrated the potential of the movement. The movement recognizes, however, that global economic interdependence makes it impossible for a single or a group of countries to implement the degrowth transition on its or their own. Not only will there be retaliations, for example, in the forms of capital flight and political isolation, there will also be rebound consumption in other countries that do not participate; if one country or group of countries implement degrowth transitions, driving down prices of resources, the rest may choose to increase consumption. Therefore, it can be argued that achieving ecological sustainability is a “global collective action problem” (Kallis, 2017, p. 25), and that creating transnational alliances is undeniably necessary. An important question is whether degrowth is only applicable to developed countries with high levels of material living standards but has little relevance to developing countries where large proportions of the population still struggle to achieve decent living standards. If this issue is not sufficiently addressed, it might hinder degrowth’s chances of gaining wider popularity and international alliances. This section attempts to tackle the issue by first discussing how degrowth might be beneficial for developing countries, before suggesting that there are many structural issues that ought to be studied in greater depth.

It has been argued that degrowth in developed countries will reduce demand and prices of resources, which will be beneficial to those in developing countries, while it might encourage developing countries to find their own alternative paths to sustainable development (D’Alisa

et al., 2015, p. 5). As point 7 of the Degrowth Declaration in Paris in 2008 states, “by using more than their legitimate share of global environmental resources, the wealthiest nations are effectively reducing the environmental space available to poorer nations, and imposing adverse environmental impacts on them” (Research & Degrowth France and Spain, 2010, p. 523). Degrowthers also encourage plural, diversified models of alternative development, rejecting a uniform degrowth model that is imposed top-down (Latouche, 2009, p. 62). Although raising living standards to decent levels might require increasing economic activities in some areas, it is seen as more importantly requiring income and wealth redistribution within and between countries (Research & Degrowth France and Spain, 2010, pp. 523–524). It has also been suggested that degrowth and environmental movements in developing countries, such as *Buen Vivir* in Latin America, *Ubuntu* in South Africa, and *Gandhian Economy of Permanence* in India, are similar and can perhaps be allies (D’Alisa et al., 2015, p. 5). *Buen Vivir*, for example, is a philosophy inspired by indigenous societies about “good living(s)” and harmony with nature and cultural diversity (Kothari, Demaria, and Acosta, 2014, pp. 367–368). It is also influenced by global movements that search for postgrowth and, although there are many strands of *Buen Vivir* discourses, *Buen Vivir* can generally be seen as a “new intercultural political project” that seeks to find ways to live in harmony with nature and that also provides a critique of Eurocentric, anthropocentric, and capitalist modernity (Beling et al., 2018, p. 308). Another example is that of radical ecological democracy or “*ecoswaraj*” from India, which has similar core principles to that of degrowth, namely, those of ecological sustainability, social well-being and justice, direct democracy, economic democracy, and also collective knowledge or knowledge commons. Degrowthers may suggest that degrowth in the Global North will benefit the Global South but, at the same time, degrowth can also learn about ecologically sustainable living from alternatives that originated in the Global South (Kothari, 2016).

Degrowth and environmental justice movements in developing countries also take similar positions on many issues. For example, they both support climate debt repayments by industrial countries and are against waste exports from developed to developing countries, biopiracy, and the negative social–environmental impacts of some transnational companies (Schneider et al., 2010, p. 516). Nevertheless, despite optimism that degrowth in the Global North will have positive effects on the Global South and that their respective searches for sustainable development are complementary, there are still many structural political economic issues and possible conflicts of interest between developed and developing countries that ought to be addressed more clearly and more intensively by degrowth, as the following paragraphs elaborate.

First, it can be argued that unfair global trade practices and concentrated control over advanced technologies under the current global political economic system are likely to fuel scepticism of degrowth ideas and practices in developing countries. Many people in developing countries are often wary of green economy and sustainable development discourses that might be used to justify imposing more stringent environmental regulations on their exports, which will limit their trade opportunities and economic development.⁴ Degrowth’s call for economic localization in developed countries (Latouche, 2009, p. 47) also conflicts with the economic interests of many producers in developing countries who rely on agricultural exports for income. Even though degrowth does not reject international trade, if in future it does propose that certain environmental and ethical codes should be met, such as organic and Fairtrade standards, this might adversely affect producers in developing countries as the costs of certifications can be very high. Not all producer groups in developing countries can afford them or have the capacities to make the production transitions in the first place.⁵ To a certain extent, the degrowth movement’s enthusiasm to exchange ideas with developing countries and its commitment to plural visions of alternatives might prevent this problem. Nevertheless, it is worth fleshing out in clearer detail the degrowth movement’s view(s) on socially just and ecologically sustainable international trade.

Degrowth's call for self-sufficiency in food production at the local level might also remind developing countries of the long-standing practices of agricultural subsidies in the United States and the European Union that persist even under the World Trade Organization (WTO)'s free trade regime. Such subsidies cost developing countries income from their agricultural exports, while developing countries are pressured to liberalize their agricultural sectors.⁶ In addition, given the intellectual property rights regime under the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) of the WTO, developing countries will find it extremely (if not impossibly) difficult to catch up technologically with developed countries (Bieler & Morton, 2014, p. 42; Fischer, 2015, p. 714; Wade, 2005, p. 29). This also affects their ability to use green technologies to comply with stricter environmental regulations and to make genuine transitions toward ecological sustainability. Patents of climate change mitigation technologies, for example, are dominated by developed countries that are members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. Although it can be argued that a few high performers such as China have considerably caught up, there is still a significant gap between these countries and most developing countries in terms of green technology patents (Abdel-Latif, 2015, p. 111). The focus on developing countries' access to green technologies does not imply that indigenous scientific knowledge and technologies are discounted, but rather that there is an uneven playing field when it comes to green technologies that might prevent more rapid green transformations across the globe. Overall, given the currently problematic WTO's free trade regime, TRIPS, and technological gaps between developed and developing countries, it can be argued that progressive reforms of international trade and intellectual property rights are called for if one is, like the degrowth movement, serious about rectifying global inequality and supporting large-scale progressive and sustainable transitions across the globe.

Second, despite some examples of environmental movements and alternative ideas in developing countries similar to that of degrowth, it can still be argued that many of degrowth's ideas and practices are likely to be unpopular among the majority of the population in developing countries. Since "growth" is generally seen as positive, "degrowth" has negative connotations. Relating to the previous point about green technologies, degrowthers do not believe in technological fixes to bring about ecological sustainability and tend to be sceptical of high technologies that require centralized bureaucracy and expert knowledge. In addition, they tend to prefer smaller scale technologies that are meant for local usage, partly as a way to promote autonomy. However, it is very difficult to imagine that developing countries would be satisfied with this option. Mainstream development paradigms (neoliberal and developmental state models) have been internalized by policy makers and many people in developing countries; increasing productivity, innovation, and upgrading to higher value-added levels in the supply chains are seen as beneficial to economic development.⁷ The idea of work sharing, more leisure time, and *dépense* might also sound alien in countries where people believe in the virtue of hardwork, which helps to drive national industrialization and economic growth,⁸ or where labor rights are poorly protected to begin with. This does not mean that the general public's belief in mainstream development paradigms in developing countries cannot be changed. For example, although Eastern European countries used to aspire to match the levels of consumption and capitalist development in Western countries, there are now some intellectuals who have started to search for alternatives similar to that of degrowth (Lang, 2017a). Nevertheless, in terms of strategic planning, it should be recognized that the pace and the extent of change will depend on particular local contexts. Degrowth might quickly receive significant support in some countries where left-wing ideas are already prevalent, whereas in some countries degrowth ideas and practices might need to be "repackaged" to attract wider interest.

The call for localism, food sufficiency, and the revival of indigenous knowledge to guide alternative development paths might be dismissed as conservative throwbacks to the past in developing countries that want to "upgrade" from primary to secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy, just as developed countries did in the past. In Thailand, for example, there is a similar philosophy to

degrowth often referred to as “sufficiency economy” (or community culture school of thought in academia), which calls for self-moderation and has also been interpreted to include ecological sustainability. It receives widespread support from Thais, but also a lot of backlash from critics who are not convinced that the sufficiency economy vision can bring enough prosperity to improve the material well-being of Thais in general (Chiengkul, 2017, pp. 122–124). Overall, at least in the short and medium terms, the degrowth project might not appeal to the majority of people. Alternatively, degrowth can perhaps be repackaged through the use of more positive terms such as “shared planet economics” (Rajesh Makwana, cited in Kallis, 2017, p. 147). In the short term, alternative forms of “a-growth” (Van den Bergh, 2011, pp. 881, 886; Van den Bergh & Kallis, 2012, p. 916) or “selective growth” (Ferguson, 2015, p. 27) might be more preferable from a politically pragmatic point of view, especially for developing countries. Measures to discourage consumerism in wealthier classes of the population, however, should not be neglected, and there should also be continuous campaigns to promote progressive alternative development ideas that take into account insights from ecological economics.

Third, it can be argued that supportive conditions for degrowth initiatives vary depending on local contexts, making it difficult to implement a degrowth transition on a larger scale. The argument here is not simply that it is easier to develop noncapitalist degrowth initiatives in developed countries compared to developing countries, as there is uneven development within both developed and developing countries. Arguably, local noncapitalist initiatives such as the CIC and Italy’s Solidarity Economy Networks involve people who, due to a variety of enabling factors, choose to experiment with noncapitalist autonomous practices. In addition, it is worth investigating whether (and to what extent) members of these local initiatives are also concerned with achieving progressive changes at the national or international level. For example, they could use their local food and energy cooperatives to support class struggle in the capitalist economy, or they might simply be content with having well-run cooperatives and withdrawing from politics altogether (Schwartzman, 2012, p. 122).

There are many reasons why people in developing countries might have even worse prospects of forming networks or successfully engaging in noncapitalist initiatives. Additionally, local groups within a developing country are likely to face different enabling and constraining conditions that make it harder for some groups to form noncapitalist initiatives compared to others. Relative to Europe, developing countries do not have well-established social security systems and well-protected labor rights, nor do many countries have stable democracy. These situations make it more difficult for people to take economic risks and to challenge socioeconomic norms. It is not an exaggeration to say that state repression inhibits or destroys critical social movements in many countries, particularly those that question state authority and private property, or call for economic disobedience like the CIC. Countries with abundant natural resources, such as in Latin America, often have authoritarian states that are being supported by oligarchical extractivist enterprises to facilitate the extraction of nonrenewable resources, often through the use of violence and repression (Acosta, 2013, pp. 75–77).

Many people also have to rely on wage labor because they lack other options, whether due to a lack of farmland or productive capital, or they might currently have high debts that they need to pay off, not to mention that they might also face forms of resource grabs that limit their choices. Additionally, laws might be hostile to establishing ethical banks and communal properties, or they might not be supportive of nonprofit cooperatives. For example, there might be a lack of anti-trust laws to prevent smaller scale cooperative producers from being squeezed out of markets by monopolies. Moreover, many local areas may not have the geographical suitability or other capacities (economic means, political space, social ties, sense of community, knowledge, and management capabilities) to implement their own alternative development paths similar to the degrowth vision. To clarify, the argument here is not that noncapitalist initiatives compatible with degrowth ideas cannot emerge from developing countries or from subnational local groups that face significant

constraints, but that one ought to be sensitive of locally specific supportive conditions and obstacles facing different groups. Moreover, it is argued that, because some groups may face a lot of inhibiting structural constraints, establishing noncapitalist institutions and expanding socially embedded economic networks on a broader scale is likely to require structural reforms in many areas as well as supportive institutions, whether they be state institutions, civil society networks, and/or transnational organizations.

Fourth, relating to previous points is the issue of financial means to drive transformative change. While not merely calling for international monetary aid from developed to developing countries, it is argued here that analyzing the consequences of the concentration of economic surpluses at the global level and the power of global finance is important to the degrowth project. Arguably, global economic surpluses are being concentrated in the hands of the few, hid away in tax havens, wasted in financial speculations, and spent on destructive activities such as nuclear armaments. Finding ways to channel more of these economic surpluses to support noncapitalist initiatives along degrowth lines should be studied and debated in greater depth, to help encourage progressive and green transformations of society on a broader scale.

Some degrowthers have proposed measures to help channel financial resources to developing countries, so that they can pursue more sustainable development paths such as climate debt repayments by industrial countries, tax on financial transactions, unitary tax on profits of transnational corporations, and global wealth tax (Latouche, 2009, p. 72; Schneider et al., 2010, p. 516). However, more analyses of the global financial system and investment patterns are needed, including examination of important issues such as the threat of capital flight that might destabilize small economies. In addition, many developing countries rely on foreign direct investments (FDI) for their economic development, although the majority of total FDI tends to go to developed countries (59% in 2016) (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2017, p. 2). The reliance on FDI, however, often results in “race to the bottom” situations where developing countries compete with each other to attract FDI by making many concessions until they receive only small benefits. Therefore, it is worth investigating further the extent to which having harmonized environmental, social, and trade regulations at the global level could help developing countries solve the race to the bottom problem (Johanisova & Wolf, 2012, p. 564). Moreover, it is worth exploring whether a global standard for international tax and investment policies could be used to curb tax avoidance (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2015, pp. xiii–xiv) that might help developing countries gain extra financial resources for green and welfare policies, which could then be used to further encourage noncapitalist initiatives in these countries. Additional progressive measures that should be seriously considered include, for example, debt moratorium for highly indebted countries and exchanges of knowledge and financial support within and between countries based on solidarity principles, to help enable all countries to raise living standards for those whose basic needs are not met while mitigating, to the greatest extent possible, the burden on the environment.

Conclusion

This article has explored the degrowth movement’s ideas, policy proposals, and their experiments with noncapitalist institutions and socially embedded economic networks. As the first half discussed, degrowth is not merely interested in subjecting economic development to ecological limits to bring about a sustainable economy; it is also concerned with progressive social goals to bring about greater equality and more direct democratic participation. The case studies of the Catalan Integral Cooperative and Italian Solidarity Economy Networks have also provided interesting examples of non-monetary forms of exchange, recreations of the commons, and economic activities and institutions that are driven not solely by profit, but primarily by social and environmental concerns.

The second half of this article discussed arguments that degrowth in developed countries will have positive consequences for developing countries, specifically by lessening the competition for resources and also by indirectly encouraging developing countries to find their own sustainable development paths. However, the second half also discussed concerns regarding degrowth's applicability and relevance to developing countries. The main proposal was that it is important for the degrowth movement to engage more intensively with the problem of structural hierarchy within the global political economy and form clear proposals about how to address uneven development within and between countries. Important structural issues discussed cut across the spheres of production, consumption, trade, and finance, which suggests that effecting global ecological transformation requires structural reforms of the global political economy. Although it is beyond the scope of this article, future areas of research could concentrate on deepening dialogues between degrowth and other similar alternatives. The progressive potential and structural limitations of global economic governance bodies, such as the WTO, in supporting the degrowth project could also be considered. Additionally, it is worth exploring the creation of new global institutions to meet contemporary social and ecological challenges such as a Global Investment Fund to promote renewable energy investments (Harris, 2013, p. 14).

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Notes

1. See the discussion of mainstream market liberal and institutionalist approaches in Clapp & Dauvergne (2005).
2. Also see <http://www.monedasocial.cat> and <https://bioregionalnordcic.blogspot.gr> and <http://bioregiosud.cooperativa.cat>
3. See more information in Italian at <http://www.retecosol.org/> and <http://www.economiasolidale.net/>
4. This point has also been suggested by Anders Wijkman in Kallis (2017, p. 153).
5. For a case study in Thailand, see Chiengkul (2017, pp. 105–108, 122–124).
6. For example, see a discussion in Lawrence & McMichael (2012, p. 135).
7. Examples include China's and Thailand's current models of development that concentrate on promoting high technologies and higher value-added production (Ministry of Industry, 2016; Zeng & Fang, 2014, pp. 1014, 1016).
8. For example, see a discussion of the roles of nationalism and Confucian work ethics in aiding South Korea's industrialization in Kim & Park (2003).

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