

Breaking it down

Riccardo Mastini explains the four pillars of degrowth

In the summer of 2019 several countries in Europe broke their all-time temperature records in a series of heatwaves. It is clear for everyone to see that the climate emergency – one of the many facets of the ecological breakdown – is now a concrete reality.

Yet global carbon emissions are on the rise and hit record levels in 2018 because of sustained increases in energy demand worldwide. Energy demand is in turn driven by economic growth. The ecomodernist credo is predicated upon decoupling GDP growth from energy consumption, and decoupling energy consumption from carbon emissions. But does this theory stand closer scrutiny? The empirical data demonstrate that while absolute decoupling of GDP from emissions is possible and is already happening in some regions, it is unlikely to happen fast enough to respect the carbon budgets for 1.5°C and 2°C against a background of continued economic growth.

But a lower rate of growth requires a lower rate of decarbonisation. In the recent peer-reviewed article ‘Is Green Growth Possible?’ researchers demonstrated that at the global level a growth rate of 0% requires decarbonisation of 6.8% per year in order to limit emissions to 1.5°C, and of 4% per year to limit emissions to 2°C. There is no empirical evidence that 6.8% can be achieved on a global scale, but 4% could be achievable if the most aggressive mitigation policies possible were to be adopted immediately.

We therefore face a choice: either we keep on growing the global economy, or we get serious about the climate emergency. We can't do both.

But within a capitalist economy lack of growth can be very problematic, so we need to think of how to change the economy to ensure prosperity for all without growth. Here are four essential tenets of a degrowth transformation:

1. From employment creation to redistribution

When productivity increases, less human labour is needed to produce the same amount of goods and services each year. As long as the economy grows fast enough to offset increases in labour productivity, there is no problem. But if the economy does not grow, people lose their jobs.

A straightforward solution is to redistribute available working hours more equally among people. Work time reduction is necessary for work sharing: everyone

should work fewer hours so that everyone can work. But as long as productivity remains a venerated totem, we will keep falling back into the same dynamic. We should then look beyond, valuing work by the quality and durability of the goods we make rather than by how efficiently time is used.

In this way society could consume goods more slowly while redefining the meaning of being a materialist as someone who values the craft poured into the making of an object.

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2. From production to reproduction

The decrease in material production also needs to be accompanied by an increase in reproduction: repair, recycling and other activities meant to expand the life-cycle of products.

Similarly there are some service sectors where chasing productivity growth does not make sense. Certain kinds of task rely inherently on taking time and giving attention. Good examples of this are caring professions such as medicine, social work and education.

Since care activities are built around human services rather than the relentless outpouring of material stuff, they offer a chance to make the economy more environmentally sustainable.

We should also deploy labour in ecological restoration: rewilding habitats, tackling hydrogeological instability, and transitioning towards small-scale agro-ecological farming.

The sources of prosperity creation need to shift from industrial production to social and environmental reproduction: maintenance, repair and restoration of environmental and infrastructural resources, as well as the education, care and culture sectors.

3. From private wealth to public affluence

The welfare state transfers the allocation of some goods and services from the market to political determination, often in the form of social rights of citizenship. This amounts to a process of decommodification.