



PERSPECTIVE

Only for the Global North? Questioning the ‘who should degrow’ issue

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The idea of degrowth, while critiquing the dominant ideas of economic growth, also proposes an alternative paradigm to organize society and the economy while prioritizing nature and care. One of the major streams of thought that contributed to the emergence of degrowth is the criticism of development that originated in the 1970s and 1980s (Demaria et al., 2013). Despite this, engaging with degrowth from Global South contexts becomes challenging. The political and economic elites in most developing nations often assume that degrowth is a proposal for the Global North (Dengler & Seebacher, 2019). This happens even though degrowth scholars often state the implications of degrowth in terms of ‘creating ecological space’ for Southern economies to improve people’s lives in alternative ways (Hickel 2020; Kallis et al., 2015; Martínez-Alier, 2012). What ramifications does such a superficial reading have for the dominant development discourse and associated political debates in the Global South? We suggest that an argument that degrowth is only relevant for certain nation-states and not elsewhere will lead to digression from the transformative outlook of degrowth.

The position of restricting degrowth to the Global North will reproduce the ongoing ‘epistemic violence’ in the production of alternative civilisational projects, since it will not be inclusive of the voices from the Global South and their experiences of the existing development discourse that dominates policies in most developing nations. It will therefore further the imperialist developmentalist agenda. In this reflection, we align with questions of the applicability, usefulness and political pertinence of the term ‘degrowth’ for the Global South (Dengler & Seebacher, 2019; Hanaček et al., 2020). We focus on two problems that emerge from restricting degrowth to the Global North: first, the erasure of carbon and income inequalities within nations – both in the Global North and Global South, and second, how this limitation implies the perpetuation of colonial relations as the teleological narrative of growth – or ‘progress’ – gets imposed as a necessary step for all nations to ‘develop’. We illustrate these blindspots by discussing two policy priorities in the ‘developing world’: the energy transition in India and green hydrogen policies in Chile.

We recognise that, sensibly, at the level of planning political actions it is important to focus on the power currently institutionalized in nation-states. Still, we believe that reifying economies as self-contained units only perpetuates the epistemic blindness of our current economic thought. Our reflections come from our experiences engaging with degrowth with peoples from the Global South, in Chile and Latin America, and in India, both in activist and academic contexts. The overlapping and mixing of both these categories are, in particular, an important source for the reflections we share here, and we acknowledge the communities of practice, learning and transformation in which we have engaged in these issues. We have experienced, first hand, the dismissal of degrowth when debating urgent challenges of social-ecological transformation in our own countries under the banner that, even if degrowth is argumentatively sound, ‘our economies still need to grow’.

1. Seeing the Norths in the South and Souths in the North

Economic growth-led development in most parts of the developing world triggers a process of dispossession, as indicated by the number and intensity of violent resource contestations in both fossil-fuel and low-carbon energy projects (Scheidel et al., 2018; Temper et al., 2020).

While this idea of development was proposed and well accepted by the political elites in most parts of the developing world to address the problem of poverty and improve people's well-being, there is emerging evidence that indicates otherwise. The poverty line or the benchmark against which poverty is measured has been criticized for being extremely low (Alston, 2020). At the same time, the rate of reduction of poverty has slowed down and the aspiration to eliminate poverty by 2030 remains unlikely to be achieved (Reddy, 2021). Income inequality has been rising in most developed and middle-income countries like India and China since 1990 (United Nations, 2020). Along with this, the per capita carbon emissions of the poorest half of the population in rich countries has also declined compared to wealthier groups (Chancel, 2021). Recent evidence also suggests that globally, over the last three decades, between-country carbon inequality has been declining and within-country inequality has been rising (Chancel, 2021, p.23).

Against the backdrop of these changes, where it is evident that rich people – their ways of living and aspirations across all nations – are the ones producing the most ecological damage, focusing primarily on nation-states as a determining category for action is deeply flawed. As a form of methodological nationalism, it makes conversations on degrowth imperceptive of the transnational nature of the shifting of cost of environmental externalities in an increasingly globalized world. This cost-shifting gets operationalized in real life through globalized corporations located in both developed and developing nations, extending the extractive processes of dispossession and relations of production to countries of the Global South. The eventual changes in human-nature relations as part of this widely accepted path of development has been argued to create poverty instead of addressing it (Shiva, 2018). In India, the promise of development and employment is far from being fulfilled, as unemployment has been on the rise since 2011 and the young and the educated have experienced job losses and reduced work opportunities in this time period (Basole, 2019). As a way forward, it is imperative to begin conversations about degrowth – and put nature and care at the centre of the process of economic development that ought to prioritize poverty alleviation and job creation, but through different means.

2. The persistent coloniality of 'stages of development'

The idea of having to reach a certain threshold of economic development before considering degrowth as a policy perspective is oblivious and myopic. It is driven by a false promise of progress and inclusion, and a logic of sacrifice (Kallis et al, 2020) that ignores ecocidal acts. Indeed, sacrifice is often invoked to hide the destruction of some bodies and territories in support of a wider, public good that is 'the national economy' and its growth (Rodríguez-Giralt & Tironi 2020). The often interchangeable use of 'post-growth' and degrowth in academic and policy contexts confirms that degrowth is often seen just as the next natural step of being a 'mature economy'. But many of the challenges of transforming into a reasonable form of living comes from decades of installing and naturalizing a (growth-dependent) imperial mode of living (Brand & Wissen, 2018); a high-energy wasteful society that is so ingrained in our infrastructures that now seems impossible to change. Keeping the perspective of degrowth out of political debate in the South means pushing us onto that same failed path – the one which delivered income and carbon inequalities in the developed world.

The notion of different evolutionary periods corresponding to sequential changes in economic arrangements is not new. The second half of the twentieth century relied on this narrative as a justification of invasive interventions and adjustments of 'traditional' or 'premodern' societies that were seen as trapped in the past. Rostow's (1960) stages of economic growth are a classic example, still useful to understand developmentalist interventions today. In contrast to this narrative, the fields of archeology and anthropology are offering new ways of looking at questions we thought long-answered, such as lineal evolutions from 'simple' to 'complex' societies (Graeber & Wengrow 2021). In the light of this evidence, such evolutionary categorisations are loaded with racism and eurocentrism, ignore the creative capacities of human beings, and only serve a 'there is no alternative' narrative.

Our key insight, inspired in the diagnosis of degrowth, is that a focus on technical improvements as a panacea to solve the contradictions of growth reproduces centuries-long colonial relations, now hidden and reproduced inside national borders, under the banner of the 'green economy' (Verweijen & Dunlap 2021). But green colonialism will still be colonialism. The relative displacement, the exploitation of people and land that created the

wealthy world that we now identify with the Global North, can only be achieved by Global South countries if they themselves privilege the enrichment of their urban elites at the expense of the emptying and destruction of other territories and peoples. Restricting degrowth as a moral imperative for certain nations ignores the intricacy of the globalized economy and allows Global South countries to keep legitimizing a growth-centered agenda, reproducing at a different level the exploitative relations cemented in transnational colonial periods.

We are concerned by how renovated discourses of green growth are mobilizing hopes and political energies into improving 'clean technologies' so the basic tenets of growth-centred civilization can remain untouched. These create unrealistic expectations of recycling or 'circular economies' and notions around clean and green technology that often hide the reproduction of damaging processes into yet untapped territories. We now illustrate this by examining two policy imperatives from the developing world: energy transition in India and green hydrogen in Chile.

3. Energy transition in India

India has one the most emission-intensive power generation sector in the world (Cozzi & Gould, 2021). Against the backdrop of a global clean energy transition, the pressure to rapidly change the country's power generation sector to less carbon intensive or renewable sources is quite high. India has set the target of achieving a 50% clean energy share by 2030, post the COP 26 Climate Conference in Glasgow, which includes a mix of solar, wind and hydroelectric projects. This urgency to transition, however, leaves issues related to ecological justice unaddressed. There is evidence that suggests high levels of material usage in wind and solar energy technology (IEA, 2021) and a lack of consideration of material availability aspects in projections related to renewable energy transition (Grandell et al., 2016). This also means that the desired decoupling of economic growth ambitions and material footprint would remain unachievable even in energy transition scenarios. In addition to this, recent studies have also highlighted the reproduction of similar extractive processes of dispossession in renewable energy projects, for example, in the wind power project in Western Ghats of Maharashtra (Lakhanpal, 2019), and on hydropower sites as well (Bene, 2018). Similar to coal

mining projects or existing power plants the communities often remain without any improvement in access to electricity or livelihood, despite losing their land. In this relentless quest for sustainability in India, therefore, interests of the local communities get marginalized. These interests have been sacrificed at the altar of development, since independence, and this logic continues under the aegis of sustainable development as well. Moreover, despite promises of energy transition, the quest for coal mining continues (Roy & Schaffartzik, 2021; Gupta & Goyal, 2018).

Discussions within public policy elude the uncomfortable contradiction between the supposed delivery of a sustainable development and the dominant utilitarian logic that actually prevails. In the absence of the much-needed social transformations to ensure greater equality and care for the ecology, transitioning to renewables will at best pay lip service to the ideals of sustainability. Moving forward, it is necessary to devise a careful mix of policies that prioritizes reduction in energy demand while ensuring better distribution and access to energy, thereby debunking the false dichotomy of development versus environment.

4. Green hydrogen: an illustration of the need to escape methodological nationalism

The case of hydrogen and the recent disruption of green hydrogen in green growth proposals and policies illustrates similar points. When it comes to how governments and agencies are thinking about hydrogen, it makes little sense to talk about nation-bounded economic policies. Mappings of the potential production of green hydrogen are global (IRENA, 2022) and calculations of how to sustain domestic demands for this fuel go beyond single countries and continents. This is why countries like Chile are thinking about how to export green hydrogen into European ports (Ministerio de Energía, 2021). If they move forward, these plans for the creation of a new industry would superficially reduce the ecological impact of many activities inside European borders. But the staggering expectation to produce enough energy to sustain current energy demands would bring an unprecedented ecological pressure, because renewable energy infrastructure is extremely intensive both in materials and land requirements (Balayná et al 2021). This is already occurring, with environmental conflicts related to renewable infrastructure, such as wind farms and the extraction of raw

materials like balsa wood on the rise (Durán Sanzana et al 2018; Bravo 2021). Investing in a world-class green hydrogen industry would also transform the need for an energy transition in Chile into an export-oriented business, displacing issues of environmental justice or energy poverty as priorities of action.

Regardless of its current corporate co-optation (Cabaña & Díaz, 2021), hydrogen might still help create a different system that provides all peoples with energy, increasing autonomy and resilience, rather than making communities even more dependent on this new 'fix'. But for this scenario to be realized, the power structures that sustain today's fossil-based system of energy provision that has growth at its centre must be challenged. A good thought experiment to disrupt the growth-centred imaginary of hydrogen would be to ask: how could this technology be put at the service of decreasing, rather than sustaining and increasing, current energy demands?

We argue for the necessity to embrace a centrality of anti-colonial politics within the degrowth conversations (Hickel, 2021). If degrowth is another word for decolonisation, then its analysis must also include relations of internal colonialism (González-Casanova, 2006) and question the ongoing processes of dispossession that include actors and institutions transcending national boundaries. By not doing so, the lived experiences of the people and communities confronting the development processes will remain marginalized, the imperialist ideas of development will continue to dictate policies and any alternative vision will appear backward or lagging behind in the one true accepted path of development. There have been numerous social movements in India and Chile indicative of people's resistance to developmental projects like dams, mining and solar, wind and hydropower plants as well. The ongoing discussions on degrowth in the Global North must converse with these movements.

The economic, social and ecological relations everywhere in the Global South must not need to transform to replicate those in the Global North societies to earn a place in the degrowth conversations. Countries of the Global South, already relatively more vulnerable to climate change impacts, must initiate the process of rethinking the development path that has ravaged the vast majority of its people and ecology. Degrowth must be a trans-national call for solidarity for all peoples in the world, indeed with different political roles and routes of

action. It can inspire urgently needed discursive changes in the development policies of the Global South. Limiting degrowth to a prescriptive path for some countries will keep alternative imaginaries in the periphery of social and economic thought, deepening the inequalities among nations and fail to deliver the radical changes that degrowth has the potential to offer.

Conflict of interest

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