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**Working group 23: Environmental justice, the environmentalism of the poor and degrowth**  
How can degrowth “translate” to non-western contexts and who would be its allies in the “Global South”?

**'STIRRING PAPER'**

**Degrowth and North-South Justice**

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**Growth is inseparable from North-South inequalities**

If around the year 1500 the history of exponential economic growth begins, so too begins the history of North-South inequalities. As the global capitalist system was inaugurated so too was its hierarchical structure born. The model of growth progressively incorporates all territories, a process still underway today, annihilating pre-existing cultural, social and economic structures in benefit of countries at the centre as well as the model of unlimited growth. Increasing inequality, the loss of autonomy and the confiscation of ecological spaces (ecospaces) in the periphery are all indispensable conditions of economic growth. These thus must be central dimensions in both the analysis and proposals around degrowth.

**Responsibility for the systemic crisis in an unequal world**

The systemic crisis that we are going through demands an analysis of the responsibility of societies according to existing inequality. Overshooting the carrying capacity of the biosphere is the responsibility of Northern countries and elites of the South, as 20% of the global population consumes more than 83% of the world's resources. The large majority of the human population – the remaining 80% – does not live beyond the planet's carrying capacity. To universalise the lifestyle of an average American we would need more than 5 planets, and 3 in the case of a Spaniard. The majority of countries, on the other hand, continue to maintain their ecological footprint well below the natural limits.

Although they do not have responsibility for the ecological crisis nor for overshooting the biosphere's carrying capacity, populations of the global South are the main victims of its consequences, such as climate change, increasing extreme natural events, etc. The overload on the planet increases the pressure on ecospaces in the South. As the accumulation of capital and growth to continue in a situation of scarcity, the pressure on material, energy, biodiversity, arable land, genetic material etc. increases in the global South. The resource exploitation peaks have a direct influence on the appearance of new frontiers of exploitation, which worsen the life conditions and heighten social conflicts in societies of the South.

## **Ecological determinism vs. degrowth as a political project**

Recognising that we have overshot the biosphere's carrying capacity can bring with it the risk of falling into some form of ecological determinism. There are limits, but within these limits human societies are social and political constructions, not only the reflection of an ecological reality. Making evident ecological limits should not distance us from politics but rather should move us towards politically assuming the creation of just and sustainable societies. In order for degrowth in the future not to translate into an essentially ecological, scientific or anti-human adjustment, we need to put in first place our values: care for life, for nature and for human beings. Egalitarianism and the fight against inequality, in particular in its North-South dimension, need to be a central element in degrowth.

## **Ecological debt: the defense of North-South justice towards degrowth**

We propose the concept of *ecological debt* as one possible focus to give the North-South dimension political content in the framework of degrowth proposals. In view of the ecological unsustainability reached by humanity, growing material and energy degradation and the resulting increase in inequity and social injustices, countries of the North and elites from the South are growth debtors while Southern countries are growth creditors. We consider that the growth debt should be incorporated into the collection of debts defined through the study of the impacts of the Western economic growth model in countries of the South, such as:

- *Ecological debt*. Carbon debt (the economic growth model from the North generates carbon emissions that surpass the planet's natural absorption capacity, causing ecological impacts such as global warming) *Biopiracy* (transnational companies from the North appropriate cultural and biological diversity, registering the intellectual property of existing resources and traditional knowledge and resources in Southern countries). *Environmental liabilities* (economic growth in the North is fed off the extraction of resources at a very low price and with high ecological costs in Southern countries). *Waste exportation* (waste from the production and consumption model in the North are moved to Southern countries, generating serious ecological impacts).
- *Social debt* (the impact of growth from Northern countries on life and health conditions and on human rights in populations of the South)
- *Cultural debt* (the uniform production and consumption model imposed by economic growth simultaneously advances the destruction of cultures and thousands of year old forms of life in countries of the South)
- *Historic debt* (the roots of economic growth in the North are sunk in colonisation and multiple renewed forms of domination)
- *Economic debt* (the North's economic growth is maintained by unequal exchange with countries of the South)
- Etc.

Although the 'payment' of the growth debt occurs in essence through changes in the North (degrowth), it also carries with it compensation responsibilities at all levels: social, environmental, economic, cultural...

## **International cooperation: a concrete field to impact the North-South degrowth perspective**

International cooperation towards development splits substantially from an economic imaginary (that of unlimited growth) and sees itself infected by the incapacity of the Western model to account for the biosphere. Two main features of the cooperation discourse can be the object of a critical revision on the part of degrowth:

1. Cooperation is fundamentally understood as a response to the deficiencies of countries of the South. Until the 1980s, the lack of economic growth was identified as the main deficiency of Southern countries, and for that reason economic growth was the principle objective of cooperation for decades. From the 1980s an analysis giving a central role also to deficiencies situated in social or other dimensions not strictly economic (promotion of human capital, capacity and human opportunity, etc.) has been gaining strength. However economic growth continues to be an essential condition to achieve human development.

2. Official Development Assistance (ODA) does not constitute an obligation of States but rather is voluntary and optional. The same terminology of the cooperation model ('assistance', 'donation' etc.) refers to its voluntary and non-obligatory nature. In no moment does the right of countries of the South to reclaim or demand flows of ODA appear. The cooperation model is fed on the unilateral decision of the North regarding where, how and the quantity of 'assistance'.

Returning to the analysis of degrowth expounded earlier, we can extract some conclusions about the critical revision of the two main features of cooperation international by pointing out:

1. Cooperation as redistribution. 'Poverty', the supposed 'underdevelopment' of Southern countries, does not mainly concern the problems related to their own deficiencies but rather the confiscation of its ecospace by Northern countries. The problem is not the growth of Southern countries (in strictly economic terms or from a capacity point of view). The fundamental problem is one of redistribution of resource use and of submission to natural limits. It is not that the South does not grow or does not 'develop' but rather that it does so in function of the needs and interests of Northern countries and elites of the South. The reflection would take us toward the necessity or rethinking the model of cooperation, centring on social and ecological adjustment strategies of the North that permits equitable redistribution of the planet's resources among its inhabitants, such as returning to respect the limits set by the biosphere and the regenerative capacities of the planet. It would not involve confronting the deficiencies of the South but instead the excesses of the global North.

2. Cooperation as responsibility and obligation. Contemplating cooperation from the perspective of growth debt would take us towards substituting willfulness for obligation, deficiency for responsibility. We should then reformulate a model of international cooperation based on a double obligation: those of giving back and to not surpass. Compensating and repairing, on one hand all the negative impacts that our model has had in Southern countries. Ecological and socially adjusting our model, on the other hand, so that the West does not live at the cost of the biospaces of the population of the South or exceeding the carrying capacities of the planet.

## What proposals for /from the South?

If we readjust the excesses and injustices of the overconsumption of the 20% of world elites, 80% of the human population would still have a wide margin of growth for their material, energy, CO2 emission etc. consumption, as long as there is radical degrowth in the global North. Now this discovery does not imply that the global South should follow the path of the productive model and extend 'economism' to all spheres of life. If degrowth essentially concerns the global North, it also implies changes in the South. The questioning of economic growth and of Western growth in the global South and the search for new ways should first of all start from political proposals and existing analysis that emerge from or about the global South, and predict fertile theoretical crossroads with degrowth. We illustrate some perspectives with which degrowth could share its path against mercantilism y for the defense of the care of life as the basic objective of societies:

- *Food sovereignty.* The political proposal of Vía Campesina (a movement that acts as an umbrella organisation with almost 200 million farmers affiliated) defends the right of people to define their own ecologically sustainable food production, distribution and consumption policies, guaranteeing their right to healthy, safe and culturally and environmentally appropriate diet, with full access of farmers' families to earth, water and seeds. Food sovereignty also reclaims the right to protect local and national agricultural production and local markets, considering marketing excess production only after guaranteeing the needs of the local population. It shares the agenda with degrowth in confronting the agroindustrial and free trade model, that condemns the agricultural sector to mercantilism and productivism. They defend agroecology and the multifunctionality of the countryside.
- *Ecofeminism.* Degrowth coincides with ecofeminism and other critical feminist perspectives in denouncing the imaginary that sustains Western modernity and the orthodox economy, an imaginary that carries with it the making invisible of and exploitation of nature and women. Both currents see the hegemonic economy as an obstacle to follow their objectives of care and reproduction of people and of nature.
- *Post-development.* Post-development is a cultural critique of development as a guiding principle of societies. It defends locally adapted cultural models opposing the universal recipes of development and unlimited growth.
- *Good Living (Buen Vivir: Sumak Kausay).* Various countries, such as Ecuador or Peru, have incorporated indigenous visions or world-views in their constitutions that break with the productivism and environmental unsustainability anchored in Western culture. In the Ecuatorian constitution, for example, nature (Pachamama) comes to have her own rights. Good living has many similarities to degrowth in understanding of social and ecological sustainability, social justice and the rights of nature. From the South these concrete political proposals reach us to put the breaks on the mercantalisation of nature, such as the ITT Initiative proposed in 2007 to no exploit petroleum in Yasauní National Park, appealing to the co-responsibility of the international community and situating Ecuador as the world's political vanguard to reach post-oil societies and in denouncing the social and environmental effects of the unlimited growth model.