



How to increase well-being in a context of degrowth



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ABSTRACT

In this paper, a model of well-being, based on the concepts of sphere of needs and capitals, is proposed and used to investigate the effects of degrowth. Reciprocity work, considered here as an element of degrowth, is introduced into the well-being equation and the effects generated on well-being are investigated. A preliminary analysis demonstrates the lack of formal models of degrowth. This is due to, on one hand, an a priori ideological rejection by degrowth supporters and promoters of any formal framing; on the other to the fact that existing approaches fail, for different reasons, to comprehensively represent the definition of degrowth. The framework adopted is valid and viable and a good starting point for future research and developments. The idea of a formal representation of degrowth so that it could be made a concrete research subjects, is strongly supported.

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1. Introduction

The paradigm of sustainable development has for a long time been considered an effective solution to the long-standing issue of reconciling economic growth and environmental degradation [1–3]. Based on technological progress and income elasticity of environmental quality demand, the latter predicts a positive feedback between economy and environment, and elects economic growth as the best way to reduce environmental degradation [4,5]. Consensus, however, does not exist on the fact that growth-oriented solutions will succeed. The main criticism to sustainable development relates to the fact that in all circumstances growth implies a constantly increasing rate of energy and material demand which inevitably produces increasing rates of resource depletion and environmental damage [6–8].

An alternative economic approach based on the theory of degrowth seems to offer interesting contributions to the sustainability debate [9]. The concept of degrowth originates from the critical thinking of [10–19] who first related economy to the entropy law. Based on that, the theory of degrowth considers economy as a subsystem of the environment and propose to reduce the scale of the economic system to fit within the biophysical limits of the planet. Using the definition of [9], degrowth is “an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term”. This implies that, degrowth is not just about a quantitative reduction of growth but also about considering human well-being as a central element of the proposed economic system [18,20–27]. It should be considered that within degrowth, well-being has a specific definition that differs from that of neoclassical economy. While in the latter well-being is generally reduced to consumption opportunities and assumes human relations functional to the economy (producer–consumer relationship), degrowth theory considers that other factors like social relationships, environmental quality and health, influence human well-being [22]. According to the

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extensive body of literature that criticized the largely used approach that reduced well-being to income and GDP [28–38], the theory of degrowth considers that well-being is both determined by satisfaction of basic human needs (as for example clean water access, food, education or social security etc.) generally quantified by objective indicators, and by satisfaction of desires strictly related to individual preferences and largely influenced by subjective evaluation [39,40]. In addition, by considering human relationships per-se as an important element of societies and well-being, degrowth proposes to partially complement the market economy with an economy of reciprocity [9,14,41–44]. While in a market economy, the goods and services used to satisfy the human needs are provided in a profit motivated system regulated by prices [45], in an economy of reciprocity the production and the exchange of goods and services are also intended as means for improving cooperation, conviviality and social relationships [23–25,46]. These newly introduced mechanisms are expected to produce a positive feedback on the satisfaction of the individual and, in a broader sense on his well-being, without heavily impinging on the available resources.

During the last decade an increasing number of social movements, research and political initiatives promoted degrowth as a possible alternative to the existing economic systems [42,43,46,47]. However, a specific degrowth formalization is still lacking. Very few models have been since now proposed and it was only after the 2010 Barcelona Degrowth Conference that a series of working papers have been specifically devoted to investigate degrowth formalization and applicability in a context of broad participation of different social actors [48,49]. One motivation for that can possibly be found in the fact that degrowth is generally considered a philosophy to be embraced on individual or community basis, as “choice of life” based on questioning values, principles and priorities of the present society [50]. It is assumed to be based and involve qualitative aspects that pertain only to the likings of the individual member of the society and personal perception of well-being. Apart from the existing objective difficulty of formalizing concepts like well-being, degrowth intrinsically rejects the idea of being formalized. This is of course possible but, according to us, in this case degrowth will not manage to enter the economic debate with the same dignity as other approaches. After few decades of discussion and debate that effectively put degrowth in focus and still do (see for example special issues on degrowth published [51]), the times are mature to demonstrate or to start to demonstrate that degrowth would be a self-sustainable model. According to this approach, the present paper formally relates well-being to the concept of degrowth. The main objectives are:

- (1) to propose a well-being equation based on the concepts of sphere of needs and capitals;
- (2) to incorporate reciprocity and market works into the well-being equation;
- (3) to use the well-being equation to investigate how the introduction of reciprocity work as an element of degrowth, generates variations on well-being.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the concept of reciprocity and introduces the definition of reciprocity work. In Section 3 a formal representation of well-being is presented and, in Section 4, the introduction of reciprocity work beside market work is used to analyze the variations generated on well-being. In Section 5, summary, conclusions and future research are presented while Section 6 provides critical perspective on the relationship between degrowth and formal representations.

2. Degrowth and reciprocity: concept and examples

The scope of this section is to present the concept of reciprocity and introduce the definition of reciprocity work that will be one of the two independent variables, used in this paper, to investigate the effects on well-being generated by degrowth. Within the theory of degrowth, reciprocity is considered as one of the main mechanisms that favours a sustainable and yet satisfactory economy [21,25]. Since a standard definition of reciprocity does not exist, an exemplification is provided based on the subsidiary production principle and the concept of conviviality. In this paper, the former is intended as a production system that has to satisfy consumption needs nearest to the production sites. Being oriented to reduce the biophysical impacts of economic activities, subsidiary production implies a change from a long distance trade to a local distribution chain. The reduction of the distance between production and consumption activities generally contributes to decreasing the environmental impacts generated by transport. However, when other variables are included into the analysis (as for example water, energy or fertilizers) the overall environmental impacts may also increase. Since now, a clear relationship between environmental impacts and food miles has not been defined, but an increasing number of studies have investigated this aspect [52–54]. However, other benefits can be found at the social level, in a higher degree of traceability of the product origin and quality and an improved relation of trust between producer and consumer. The improved relation indirectly produces a constant request for higher quality products with positive impacts on human health and environment [55–58]. In addition, another important element defined within the subsidiary production principle is the self-production activity. Examples of subsidiary production are Transition Towns [59] and Farmers' Markets [60,61].

Conviviality is defined as a system of social relationships based on community support, social unpaid work, reciprocity, voluntary work, favour and community exchange, household and informal care work. Within the development of non-market relationships to satisfy human-needs, conviviality is intended as a mean of improving cooperation and social relationships [14,23,25,62,63]. Cohousing is a practical example of conviviality. It is a deliberate urban housing model that promotes a combination of private and common facilities in response to the social and practical needs of urban citizens.

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