



Analysis

Is eco-village/urban village the future of a degrowth society? An urban planner's perspective



Jin Xue

Department of Development and Planning, Aalborg University, Skibbrogade 5, 9000 Aalborg, Denmark

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ABSTRACT

In the degrowth literature, relocalization is widely considered as a strategic approach to transition to a degrowth society, and eco-village/urban village is argued to be the spatial organization suitable for implementing localism. These debates on eco-village/urban village as a vision for long-term sustainability have profound implications for the spatial development of our society. This paper aims to challenge this proposition from an urban planner's perspective by dwelling on spatial implications and planning process. It is argued that spatial decentralization can lead to various social and environmental consequences contradicting the multi-goals of a degrowth society. Localizing and decentralizing decision making in the planning process does not necessarily lead to a just and sustainable society. Instead, it is of importance to have multi-scalar strategies in the planning context to pursue degrowth. The paper concludes by pointing out the complex relation between paradigmatic societal transformation and spatial development, and the significant role that urban planning can play in the transition to degrowth.

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1. Introduction

A degrowth society is defined as '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' (Schneider et al., 2010). More broadly, as degrowth is an alternative to the present growth society, it challenges the dominant growth ideology and its social mentality, economic rationality, political institutions and ethical premises. The degrowth paradigm, therefore, embraces more than just reduction in economic output in the economic sphere, but calls for a fundamental change in the economic, social and political systems that can liberate humanity from economism in order to achieve social justice, quality of life, democracy and ecological sustainability (Martinez-Alier et al., 2010).

In the degrowth debates, relocalization is widely accepted as a degrowth approach (Fotopoulos, 2007; Latouche, 2009; Trainer, 2012). It means not only producing and consuming goods and services on a local basis, but also organizing life and making political and cultural decisions at the local level. Relocalization refers to relocalization of economy, understood as highly self-sufficient local economies, and relocalization of politics, understood as a decentralization of decision making with an emphasis on greater democracy.

There is a tendency among degrowth advocates to believe that the best visions of a degrowth society that can embed the ideas of localism are the eco-village and the urban village. From an urban planner's perspective, the development of eco-village/urban village as well as the fundamental idea of localism has a spatial dimension, which is a main concern of the urban planning profession. In addition, decentralization of decision making to the local level influences the planning process through which spatial strategies intervening and changing reality are produced. Derived from the degrowth debates on localism, the paper aims to critically discuss whether eco-village/urban village can fulfill the multi-objectives of a degrowth society by scrutinizing the impacts in the planning context. By criticizing from the perspective of urban planning, the paper contributes to enhancing the coherence, consistence and complementarity of the degrowth debates.

In Section 2, the roots of eco-village/urban village as a vision for a degrowth society are traced. The discussion will revolve around the sources of the degrowth concept and how localism and eco-village/urban village have been considered being able to meet the degrowth perspectives. Sections 3 and 4 will argue, from the perspective of urban planning, that there are conflicts and gaps between the eco-village/urban village vision and the desirable degrowth paradigm. Section 3 will expound the spatial implications of eco-village/urban village which lead to various social and environmental consequences. Section 4 will discuss the risks of localizing and decentralizing decision making in the planning process and argue for a multi-scalar strategy

E-mail address: jin@plan.aau.dk.

combining certain centralization of power and local participation. The final section will conclude by a general discussion on the relation between societal paradigm and space, and on the necessity of interdisciplinarity in the degrowth movement as well as the significant contribution that urban planning can make.

2. The Roots of Eco-village/Urban Village as a Vision for a Degrowth Society

As stated before, degrowth is an encompassing concept deriving from different philosophical currents and disciplinary fields. According to Demaria et al. (2013), degrowth is first a concern to the ecology that is perceived as having intrinsic values rather than instrumental values for human production and consumption. Degrowth through reduction in energy and material throughput is a path to preserve ecosystems and keep human activities within the biophysical capacity. Secondly, degrowth criticizes economism which pursues utility maximization and creates market-based social relation and consumer society. Market relations are characterized as impersonal and dissolve the traditional social ties based on giving, receiving, sharing and reciprocity (Bonaiuti, 2012a). The third source of degrowth is the need for redefining meaning of well-being or quality of life, substituting voluntary simplicity for the current dominant notion of working more and consuming more. The fourth stream of thought of degrowth, identified by Demaria et al. (2013), is bioeconomics which addresses the biophysical capacity of providing resources and assimilating waste and believes in the insufficiency and implausibility of decoupling economic growth from environmental impacts through technological fix. In addition, degrowth arises from an aspiration for deeper democracy through autonomy and self-determination, as contemporary economics is seen as colonizing and depoliticizing collective social choice. Finally, degrowth aims to degrow inequality for economic, social and environmental justice. It therefore argues for fair distribution of wealth, ecological resources, and economic and environmental burdens within and between rich and poor countries, and within and between generations (Demaria et al., 2013).

To transition to a degrowth society, Latouche (2009) puts forward a “virtuous circle” comprising eight ‘R’s as a trigger of degrowth process: reevaluate, reconceptualize, restructure, redistribute, relocalize, reduce, reuse and recycle. Among others, ‘relocalize’ is considered one of the most important approaches and assumes a strategic role. This proposition is shared by many degrowth proponents (e.g. Fournier, 2008; Frankova and Johanisova, 2011; Kallis, 2011). The argument for localization is primarily motivated by the negative social and environmental impacts of globalization and neoliberal capitalism. As already mentioned, the idea of relocalization in the degrowth debate is not confined to economic relocalization though it is an important aspect, but also means political and ecological relocalization.

Developing local economy as a counter-force of economic globalization is to seek for local economic autonomy which includes making economic decisions at the local level, developing locally owned business by preferably using local resources, employing local workers, satisfying the needs of local consumers, and supporting local finance like community banks. The intention is to become more self-sufficient in production and consumption. Initiatives in this vein also include e.g. relocalizing food production and consumption, and development of local complementary currencies in order to keep the wealth within the community. Latouche argues that the benefits of economic localization include:

“Less transport, transparent production lines, incentivizing sustainable production and consumption, reducing dependency upon capital flow and multinationals, and greater security in every sense of the world. Regionalizing the economy and embedding it in local societies protects the environment, and the environment is ... the basis for any

economy. Regionalization facilitates a more democratic approach to the economy, reduces unemployment, increases participation (and therefore integration), encourages solidarity, opens up new perspectives for the developing countries, and finally, improves the health of citizens in the rich countries by encouraging sobriety and reducing stress.” (Latouche, 2009, p.50)

Another dimension of relocalization complementary to or as a consequence of economic localization is bioregionalism. A bioregion is a region defined by natural boundaries with a geographic, climatic, hydrological and ecological character capable of supporting unique human and non-human living communities (Cato, 2011). The unique products and cultures given rise to by the ecological features are also essential elements of a bioregion. A bioregion has a high capacity for ecological self-sufficiency in terms of basic resources and for self-sustainability in terms of being in perfect harmony with the ecosystem and ensuring awareness of where resources come from and where wastes go. Local agriculture should be protected and local renewable energies are encouraged to develop (Latouche, 2009). The potential benefits of embedding human activities within a bioregion are high energy efficiency, enhanced environmental sensitivity and accountability, and strong human social relationships (Cato, 2011).

The bioregional vision entails a decentralized society which is self-reliant, small scale and ecologically harmonious. Cities are usually regarded as inappropriate to apply a bioregion approach, as a large city makes employment of local renewables difficult and hence has to rely largely on immense quantities of fossil fuels (Cato, 2011). Moreover, cities usually overconsume resources that overshoot their biological capacity, and thus cannot maintain themselves without supply from outside their bioregions. By contrast, decentralized small-scale human settlements tailored to the characteristics and resources of a region, low-density and spacious residential area are better able to utilize local resources and realize self-sufficiency (Owen, 2012).

A third vital dimension of relocalization in the degrowth debates is political relocalization which means that decision making and authority should be decentralized to small-scale systems. Political relocalization is closely related to the concern on democracy. Degrowth proponents consider contemporary society undermines democracy. Many studies on urban governance have revealed that socio-economic and political-institutional spaces are increasingly shaped by capital under present global neoliberalism (Brenner, 1999; Peck, 1998), whereas democratic choices of citizens are undermined. Urban governing institutions are continuously restructured to cater for the need of capital accumulation and are less accountable to citizens. It is often seen that representative democracy is compatible with such neoliberal form of capitalism. To some degrowth proponents, e.g. Fotopoulos (2007), capitalist market mechanism and liberal representative democracy system have led to the concentration of political power at the hands of political and economic elites. This is seen as problematic from a degrowth perspective which seeks to a more democratic society. For this reason, other types of democracy, such as deliberative democracy, direct democracy, participatory democracy or improved representative democracy are proposed (Asara et al., 2013). All these are aimed at regaining citizens' power in making political decisions about economies, organization and social activities. There is a strong belief among degrowth advocates in that reclaiming the right to make choices and having more democratic decision-making process require decentralizing governance to lower scales, such as small towns, suburban villages and neighborhoods. The primary reason for this ‘local level preference’ is that localism creates conditions and has the capacity to allow for participation and direct control in the decision-making process (Bonaiuti, 2012b; Johanisova and Wolf, 2012).

Apart from becoming a more democratic society through political relocalization, it is believed that regaining citizens' power in decision making is of importance to escape from the growth imperative and tackle ecological crisis. Due to reliance on locality and its ecological

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