



Review

Assessing the degrowth discourse: A review and analysis of academic degrowth policy proposals

Inês Cosme^{a, *}, Rui Santos^a, Daniel W. O'Neill^{b, c}^a CENSE – Center for Environmental and Sustainability Research, Departamento de Ciências e Engenharia do Ambiente, Faculdade de Ciências e Tecnologia, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, 2829-516, Caparica, Portugal^b Sustainability Research Institute, School of Earth and Environment, University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT, UK^c Center for the Advancement of the Steady State Economy, 5101 S. 11th Street, Arlington, VA, 22204, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 December 2015

Received in revised form

13 December 2016

Accepted 3 February 2017

Available online 3 February 2017

Keywords:

Degrowth

Policy

Top-down

Bottom-up

Sustainable scale

Fair distribution

ABSTRACT

Debates on ecological and social limits to economic growth, and new ways to deal with resource scarcity without compromising human well-being, have re-emerged in the last few years. Central to many of these is a call for a degrowth approach. In this paper, a framework is developed to support a systematic analysis of degrowth in the academic literature. This article attempts to present a clearer notion of what the academic degrowth literature explores by identifying, organising, and analysing a set of proposals for action retrieved from a selection of articles. The framework is applied to classify proposals according to their alignment to ecological economics policy objectives (sustainable scale, fair distribution, and efficient allocation), type of approach (top-down versus bottom-up), and geographical focus (local, national, or international). A total of 128 peer-reviewed articles focused on degrowth were reviewed, and 54 that include proposals for action were analysed. The proposals identified align with three broad goals: (1) Reduce the environmental impact of human activities; (2) Redistribute income and wealth both within and between countries; and (3) Promote the transition from a materialistic to a convivial and participatory society. The findings indicate that the majority of degrowth proposals are national top-down approaches, focusing on government as a major driver of change, rather than local bottom-up approaches, as advocated by many degrowth proponents. The most emphasised aspects in the degrowth literature are related to social equity, closely followed by environmental sustainability. Topics such as population growth and the implications of degrowth for developing nations are largely neglected, and represent an important area for future research. Moreover, there is a need for a deeper analysis of how degrowth proposals would act in combination.

© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Contents

1. Introduction	322
2. The evolution of the degrowth perspective: from the emergence of the idea to the debate of concrete proposals	322
3. Degrowth and ecological economics policy objectives	323
4. Analytical framework for discussing the degrowth debate	324
4.1. Step 1: Identification of degrowth-focused articles	324
4.2. Step 2: Screening articles for policy proposals	325
4.3. Step 3: Identification and categorisation of broad degrowth goals and topics	325
4.4. Step 4: Categorisation of degrowth proposals according to main goals and topics	325
4.5. Step 5: Categorisation of degrowth proposals according to their geographical focus, type of approach, and relation to ecological economics policy objectives	325
5. From degrowth theory to policy: main findings and discussion	325

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: inescosme@fct.unl.pt (I. Cosme), rfs@fct.unl.pt (R. Santos), d.oneill@leeds.ac.uk (D.W. O'Neill).

5.1. Main findings from the analysis of degrowth proposals	326
5.2. Discussion of findings	327
5.3. Limitations of the analysis and future research	331
6. Conclusion	331
Acknowledgments	332
Acknowledgments	332
References	332

1. Introduction

Many authors (e.g. Barnett and Morse, 1963; Jevons, 1865; Malthus, 1798) have discussed the idea that human activity will eventually confront limits associated with the availability of natural resources; however, it was not until 1972 that this debate turned global, with the publication of *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972). The authors of this report warned that there are limits, not only on the extraction of natural resources, but also on the capacity of ecosystems to absorb pollution from the processes of land and material transformation.

More recent research suggests that many physical limits will eventually arise if people continue to pursue the same development path. Such limits may relate to arable land, extraction of some metals and minerals, freshwater availability, and climate stability, to name a few (Heinberg, 2010). Moreover, the work of Rockström et al. (2009) suggests that the period of stability that Earth's environment experienced during the last millennia is endangered by human activities. The authors have defined a safe operating space for humanity for which some boundaries should not be crossed. Four of these boundaries (related to climate change, loss of biosphere integrity, land-system change, and altered biogeochemical cycles) have already been transgressed (Steffen et al., 2015). Humans have become a global geophysical force, leading humanity into the Anthropocene, an age of uncertain global changes caused by anthropogenic activities (Steffen et al., 2007).

In parallel to the ecological debate on limits to growth, there has also been a parallel debate about social limits to growth. While economic growth after World War II was a key factor in reducing inequalities, this path is now leading to an increase in inequality, as half of the wealth in the world is estimated to belong to a scarce 1% of the population (Oxfam, 2014; Piketty, 2014). More inequality in societies tends to increase the importance of social status, leading to a decrease in social cohesion and sense of community (Pickett and Wilkinson, 2011). In addition to these consequences of unbounded economic growth, some studies (e.g. Jackson, 2009; Layard, 2006) have shown that human well-being, arguably the ultimate goal of wealth accumulation, has not been increasing in wealthy nations in recent decades, despite very significant economic growth.

Given the failure of strategies to decouple economic activity from environmental impacts (Wiedmann et al., 2015), and the broken promise of increasing well-being with economic growth, *degrowth* is increasingly being viewed as a solution to achieve sustainability at all its levels (D'Alisa et al., 2015a; Huefing, 2010; Martínez-Alier et al., 2010; Schneider et al., 2010).

The degrowth perspective is focused on enhancing human well-being, and reducing the importance of economic growth in attaining this goal (Bilancini and D'Alessandro, 2012). Degrowth may be considered a "provocative slogan" (Latouche, 2010); but it can also be interpreted as a more defined concept that already has many policy concerns behind it, such as work-sharing or new paradigms of local living (Kallis et al., 2012).

This article discusses where the degrowth movement currently stands in the academic debate. In the context of a selection of the academic literature, this article aims to answer three important questions: (i) What does the sustainable degrowth perspective mean in a policy-making context? (ii) How do its goals align with ecological economics policy objectives? (iii) What are the main types of approaches embedded in degrowth proposals?

To answer these questions, a total of 128 peer-reviewed articles were surveyed in the academic literature on degrowth. To facilitate the analysis, a framework was constructed to select policy-relevant articles, to understand the main goals of degrowth, and to determine how the proposals in the degrowth literature help to reach these goals. Following this categorisation, an analysis was performed on the geographical focus of the proposals and the degree to which they contribute to three ecological economics policy objectives: sustainable scale, fair distribution, and efficient allocation. The proposals were also divided into bottom-up and top-down approaches. Following this step, it was possible to understand which areas are most explored in the literature and which need more research, as well as some of the more prominent challenges for academic research on degrowth.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. Section 2 constructs the path between old and new concerns in the degrowth debate, the movement's origins, and also the divergence in its current conceptualisation. Section 3 discusses the link between degrowth and the three ecological economics policy objectives. Section 4 shows the methods used for the analysis of the degrowth debate. Section 5 presents and discusses the main results of the analysis, as well as ideas for future research. Finally, Section 6 concludes.

2. The evolution of the degrowth perspective: from the emergence of the idea to the debate of concrete proposals

There are a number of alternative visions of how a post-growth society could be achieved. It is important to clarify from the beginning that degrowth is not a synonym for negative growth (economic recession) and it is not a goal in itself (Schneider et al., 2010). A degrowth path might include a period of negative growth, but only during the time needed for a transition to an economic system that does not collapse with economic contraction. Degrowth also goes beyond the "a-growth" perspective, in which political decisions would become agnostic to growth (Van den Bergh and Kallis, 2012), largely by ignoring GDP as an indicator of social welfare due to the various problems associated with it (Van den Bergh, 2009). Another perspective is the steady-state economy (SSE), which argues that the goal should be to achieve a constant population and a "constant stock of capital, maintained by a low rate of throughput that is within the regenerative and assimilative capacity of the ecosystem" (Daly, 2008, p. 3). Degrowth can be seen as a possible pathway to a SSE. This idea is proposed by Kerschner (2010) and defended by O'Neill (2012), who both argue that the two concepts are complementary. This vision proposes

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5480736>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5480736>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)