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ACTION NEXUS

for Economic and Climate Justice

DEGROWTH FOR GLOBAL JUSTICE #2

Directions of Degrowth: The Global North, harmful sectors and concentration of wealth

PRIMER SERIES BY EMILIA REYES



DEGROWTH FOR THE GLOBAL NORTH

Global North countries, composed of just 16% of the population, are responsible for 92% of excess global CO₂ emissions¹ and 74% of the overshoot of material resource use in the world—almost half of it extracted in the Global South for Global North consumption and use.² There is no doubt of the criminal responsibility of Global North countries in the massive destruction of the global ecological balance. Global North countries have also made cynical and blatant efforts to evade their responsibility in global arenas³—indicating not just a territorial colonization, but also an atmospheric colonization and appropriation.⁴

The measures supposedly carried out by the Global North to address their climate impacts through Green New Deals (GNDs) are the same colonial proposals under new disguise. Rather than proposing structural transformation,⁵ these policies rely on the premise that the Global South will deliver the rare minerals and material resources that will be much needed to promote the “transition” from fossil fuels (coal, oil and gas) to renewable energies. And yet, due to the exponential economic growth paradigm, Global North countries are carrying out green colonialism: rather than reducing their energy base by replacing fossil fuels, they are expanding it by adding the generation of energy through renewable sources.⁶

The implications are clear. On one hand, these wealthy countries are continuing to burn the global carbon budget and accelerating the overshoot of the climate change boundary, aggressively promoting policies aimed towards advancing renewable energy that only protect the concentration of profits under the logic of exponential economic growth. On the other hand, the obscene mineral and resource extraction that will be required in the Global South to feed the demand of wealthy countries will annihilate the ecosystems integrity of the South by means of aggressive mega-projects in land and sea, exhausting the remaining and fragile balance in the biodiversity integrity.

As the planetary boundaries framework explains, climate change and biodiversity integrity are the two cross-cutting boundaries that can impact the rest. If these are overshoot, irreversible effects will happen in relation to the other seven planetary boundaries. Through their excessive activities, the wealthy are about to burn almost 70% of the remaining carbon budget before overshooting the environmental tipping point for the climate emergency.⁷

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- 1 Hickel, Jason. [“Quantifying national responsibility for climate breakdown: an equality-based attribution approach for carbon dioxide emissions in excess of the planetary boundary”](#), *The Lancet Planetary Health*, Volume 4, Issue 9, September 2020, Pages e399-e404.
 - 2 Hickel, O’Neil et al. [“National responsibility for ecological breakdown: a fair-shares assessment of resource use, 1970–2017”](#), in *The Lancet Planetary Health*, Volume 6, Issue 4, April 2022, Pages e342-e349.
 - 3 Reyes, Emilia, [“The erosion of multilateralism and the betrayal by the Global North”](#), *Christian Aid*, March 2023. Last seen on August 22nd, 2023.
 - 4 Fanning and Hickel, [“Compensation for atmospheric appropriation”](#), in *Nature Sustainability*, 05 June 2023.
 - 5 See: Mastini, Kallis and Hickel [“A Green New Deal without growth?”](#), *Ecological Economics* Volume 179, January 2021, 106832.
 - 6 See: [Dismantling Green Colonialism. Energy and Climate Justice in the Arab Region](#), edited by Hamouchene and Sandwell, TNI, 2023, and [The Geopolitics of Green Colonialism. Global Justice and Ecosocial Transitions](#), edited by Lang, Manahan and Bringel, TNI, 2024.
 - 7 [“Millionaires will burn through two-thirds of the world’s carbon budget by 2050, scientists warn”](#), By Charlotte Elton, in *Euronews.green*, Published on 22/03/2023.

At the same time, the generation of massive inequalities in these processes has been clearly mapped by degrowthers. The creation of “green sacrifice zones”⁸ (similar to what a UN human rights expert described as “racial sacrifice zones”⁹) in both Global North and Global South territories due to the extreme destruction of territories and biodiversity and the deepening of social inequalities are direct effects of the irrationality of the current mode of production and consumption in the Global North. This is where many Indigenous Peoples’ agendas and demands are fully aligned with the degrowth tradition, since there are strong efforts to question mega-projects in local territories, even those carried out in the name of supposedly positive agendas, such as the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement.¹⁰

Wealthy countries continue their quest for exponential economic growth under the argument that there is a possibility to de-link or decouple carbon economies from economic growth. Degrowthers have debunked this issue in many studies.¹¹ There is no possibility to “green the economy” and carry on with business-as-usual logic. **“Greening”¹² is a smokescreen that has been used to maintain the same predatory and extractive economic dynamic to the benefit of elites. Calls for “green economies” have been unveiled by degrowthers as mere aspirations and discursive delays that have criminal impacts worldwide.**

DEGROWTH OF HARMFUL SECTORS IN GLOBAL NORTH AND SOUTH

Degrowthers are proposing a paradigm that promotes accelerated transformations of harmful practices in our current economic systems. Degrowth is in principle anti-capitalist, with a framing based on an analysis of the urgent steps required to depart from the capitalist system, and how that transition can be made. Therefore, a focus on degrowing specific sectors to promote the economic planning of the development of other sectors is part of the rational planning that degrowthers propose for a speedy transformation of economic dynamics, bearing in mind planetary boundaries.¹³ As Matthias Schmelzer writes:

“[T]he arms industry and the military, advertising, lobbying, planned obsolescence, fast fashion, border security, and large parts of the financial industry, will have to be scaled down. The same goes for any economic activity that cannot be restructured socioecologically, such as a large part of motorized individual transport (above all in cities), air transport, and globalized trade, as well as industrial agriculture and industrial animal farming.”¹⁴

8 Zografos, Christos and Robbins, Paul, “Green Sacrifice Zones, or Why a Green New Deal Cannot Ignore the Cost Shifts of Just Transitions”, *One earth*, 2020, v.3 no.5 pp. 543-546.

9 Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, E. Tendayi Achiume, on “[Ecological crisis, climate justice and racial justice](#)”, 25 October 2022.

10 Hickel, Jason, “[The contradiction of the sustainable development goals: Growth versus ecology on a finite planet](#)”, *Sustainable Development*, 2019; 27: 873–884.

11 Parrique, Timothée, “[Decoupling](#)”, in *Uneven Earth. Where the ecological meets the political*, June 29, 2020. also, “[Decoupling is dead! Long live degrowth!](#)”, in *Degrowth*, 10th July, 2019.

12 Hickel and Kallis, “[Is Green Growth Possible?](#)”, in *New Political Economy*, Volume 25, 2020 - Issue 4, Pages 469-486 | Published online: 17 Apr 2019.

13 Schmelzer and Hofferberth, Elena, “Democratic Planning for Degrowth”, Op. cit.

14 Ibid.

Divesting from fossil fuel industries is at the center of degrowth proposals, and degrowth activists actively endorse a Fossil Fuels Non-Proliferation Treaty based on a fair phase-out, bearing in mind historic responsibilities.¹⁵ This planning takes into consideration labor rights, through calls for a just and equitable transition with gender equality. Interestingly, degrowthers are highlighting the policies that can help accelerate this transition, especially those policies “to effectuate phase-out and downscaling include caps on resource use, moratoria, ecological tax reform, or even expropriations, and they will have to result in processes of deaccumulation,”¹⁶ all while considering macroeconomic dynamics.

To achieve these measures quickly, degrowthers have emphasized monetary and financial reforms at global and national level. While recognizing that selective investment and divestment will be needed, there have been efforts on discussing monetary-fiscal coordination, including by suggesting sovereign money creation (following the premises of Modern Monetary Theory¹⁷). It is also evident that degrowing certain sectors aligns directly with the efforts to degrow the concentration of wealth and monopolies.

Selective divestment will be useful in shifting to focalized investment in promoting decent material living to the entire global population while respecting planetary boundaries, centering key elements of decent living like food, housing, water and sanitation, clothing, education, health care, mobility, communications, time use and decent work, among others.

The proposal to degrow certain sectors to invest in others proposes a radical reform impacting daily life globally, while also influencing trade, fiscal and financial dynamics. The transformation in daily life is emphasized by also promoting universal protection floors, job guarantees, work-time reduction to support decreased consumption of energy and material resources, as well as a redistribution of work in line with a just and equitable transition. Of course, this element concerns feminists because of its clear intersection with the sexual division of labor and the dimension of unpaid domestic and care work, as well as the impact of time use policies.¹⁸

¹⁵ See: <https://fossilfuel treaty.org/>

¹⁶ Schmelzer and Hofferberth, Elena, “Democratic Planning for Degrowth”, Op. cit.

¹⁷ Boait, Fran, and Graham Hodgson, “[Escaping Growth Dependency: Why reforming money will reduce the need to pursue economic growth at any cost to the environment](#)”, Positive Money, 2018.

¹⁸ For more on this, see: Picchio, Antonella. 2015. “Feminist Economics.” In *Degrowth: Vocabulary for a New Era*, edited by Giacomo D’Alisa, Federico Demaria, and Giorgos Kallis, 208–11. New York: Routledge. See also the first paper in this series, *What is Degrowth?*, which outlines the main parameters of this analysis.

DEGROWTH FOR THE WEALTHY IN THE GLOBAL NORTH AND SOUTH

Concentration of wealth goes hand in hand with the continual drive for profit of an exponential economic growth paradigm. Profit is the utmost aspiration of neoliberal economic actors, and in this quest, life and the health of the planet are being sacrificed.¹⁹ Oxfam's report comparing those who concentrate most of global wealth to the rest of the population reveals astounding disparities.²⁰ The wealthy maintain monopolized control of the larger dynamics of exchange and extraction, and benefit from the unfair global economic and legal architecture. Multinational corporations as well as the financial sector, including asset managers, accumulate capital, carrying out mega-projects linked to extractive and exploitative practices.

There is an alliance between Global North governments and the wealthiest one percent of the population hoarding most of the wealth generated globally, and colonial dynamics extend worldwide as the root cause of the predatory behavior of wealthy actors, facilitating the extraction and exploitation of the Global South by means of capture of the elites. For this reason, it is not enough to promote degrowth in the Global North alone. Targeting the reproduction of economic dynamics that generate concentration of wealth in the Global South and create irreversible harm for entire populations and ecosystems is also fundamental.

This specific proposal of degrowth for the wealthy is closely linked to their practices, and therefore many proposals to cut down their impacts are also related to sectorial efforts. However, there are also direct measures that can be promoted, such as scaling down luxury goods, such as private jets, yachts, luxury vehicles, cruises, large mansions, and the production of positional goods. This is where proposals of tax justice, trade justice, resource justice and other global struggles should be applied, as outlined in the third brief in this series.

From a degrowth framework, however, taxing the rich is not enough. For example, the proposal for a 2% wealth tax (leaving the rest of the fortunes of the wealthy intact), in an effort to deliver enough money to eradicate poverty or to fund public services, is not only errant but also complicit in the destruction of the ecological balance. Tax is not only about "raising money." Tax justice should be framed as part of a larger strategy of systems change with many other components, recognizing that the existence of multibillionaires is a threat to life on the planet. In this manner, the degrowth framing can be helpful to analyze the extent of the impacts of some proposals in the current context of planetary emergencies.

¹⁹ "The bottom line is that an ecological crisis that has its roots in the overconsumption of natural resources must be addressed not just by improving the efficiency of our economies, but also by reducing the amount of material stuff that the wealthiest 20 per cent of people on the planet consume", Klein, Naomi, *On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal*, Penguin, 2029, p. 100.

²⁰ "The richest 1 percent grabbed nearly two-thirds of all new wealth worth \$42 trillion created since 2020, almost twice as much money as the bottom 99 percent of the world's population", [Oxfam](#), 16th January 2023.

The agenda of degrowing concentration of wealth is also where the major fights against fundamentalism take place. The wealthiest one percent of the population maintains deep alliances with political, cultural, military and religious actors who promote and uphold fundamentalisms of all kinds, which block efforts of collectivities and individuals to promote organized action, alternative dynamics of living, human rights and a life with dignity and freedom, as well as gender equality. In these contexts, upholding ecological integrity is dismissed as an after-thought as well.

LOCAL VERSUS GLOBAL FOR THE GLOBAL NORTH

The thorough and sophisticated analysis of degrowthers would seem to lead to a very clear agenda for action to change the economic system. As mentioned in the first paper of this series, there are trends within the degrowth community that would seem to imply that the proposal by degrowthers for the Global North implies going back to small-scale economies, local production and consumption and democratic involvement in collective efforts of small reach. There is a rise of many collectives in the Global North organizing to intervene locally in initiatives related to small/affordable housing, communities that are energy autonomous, territories that produce for self-consumption and other collective initiatives.

Communities that are most affected by ecocidal practices need and deserve to center their efforts in their own survival and wellbeing; therefore, racialized communities, migrants and others in the Global North who suffer the effects of these predatory measures will benefit greatly from these practices and collective organizing. And yet, when using the macro lens, we must demand that Global North citizens realize the major responsibility that lies in their hands and the need for them to uphold a systemic view of the entire global problem, including by targeting extraterritoriality, and imperial and colonial dynamics. Now more than ever there is a need to push for radical transformation from within, and that implies facing the decisions that are impacting other countries, especially in the Global South.

It is not enough for degrowthers in wealthy countries to seek local benefits and comfort, or to map local policies that will benefit the population in their territories. The extent of the impact of wealthy countries is such that any agenda that is generating (or has generated) a benefit in their territories is likely to have done so at the expense of an extraterritorial impact somewhere in the South. When degrowthers look inwardly in an effort to ensure their sole wellbeing, this dangerously generates a new type of “conservatives of the left,” a collective of people only mindful of their situations while the rest of the world is facing the impacts of the power structures that are left untouched when local efforts are not linked to broader movements of global solidarity. Scaling down efforts in the Global North need to be paired alongside efforts to dismantle the colonial and imperial dynamics that keep a tight grip around the Global South, and to eradicate their effects.

The global financial architecture is shaped to reproduce unfair dynamics of power that benefit wealthy countries. This is why degrowthers in the Global North need to align themselves with macro

and global demands that target structural reforms for global justice. In this vein, a critical tradition of degrowth proposes “transform[ing] existing institutions through radical reforms that create growth independencies and improve sustainability and justice... [and] that continuously push back against competitive market forces and hierarchical states, and will eventually have to transform global institutions.”²¹ This is the degrowth tradition we see as structural and that is relevant for a global justice framework (as developed further in the third issue of this series).

THE ROLE OF GLOBAL NORTH PEOPLE (NOT JUST GOVERNMENTS)

In principle, when we refer to Global North countries we are talking about governments. But when discussing global justice, we must question the role of Global North citizens who passively accept and benefit from measures imposed globally by their governments, and from the extraction of Global South resources and economies. Public services, for instance, which have been acknowledged worldwide as one of the most important solutions for economic, social and ecological challenges, are delivered in Global North countries thanks to the financial bleeding they impose on Southern territories. Public transportation or infrastructure in the North is made of resources and materials extracted in the South. And whereas in the North there is a debate around energy transition, many territories in the Global South do not even have access to electricity, despite being providers of either fossil fuels or rare minerals for renewable energies.

Therefore, the least citizens in the Global North can do is to call for radical processes to degrow their economies, holding their decision-makers accountable for the impacts in the Global South, promoting reparations and total systems change. And yet, most demands by Global North civil society limit themselves to the reduction of inequalities in their own territories (without any assessment of the extraterritorial impacts of their lifestyles) or to liberal measures to transition away from fossil fuels while the Global South will be depleted completely to provide—through unfair trade agreements—all the commodities needed for this transition. When the South is looked at, it is through the lens of white saviorism and entrenched imperial/colonial and racist dynamics.

Furthermore, the strength of the degrowth tradition is its focus on democratic practices that go beyond electoral logic. With a harsh criticism of capitalistic individuality, degrowth proposals derive from an analysis of democracy that involves many dimensions of social life. In the context of a rapid rise of right-wing extremism and fascism, degrowth in the Global North could also bring fresh practices that can counteract the usual ways in which fascist ideologies take hold of the imaginaries of societies.

Most decision-making spaces related to the global financial architecture are based in Global North countries, and act to benefit Global North hegemony and elites. Global North decision-makers and

²¹ Schmelzer, Matthias and Hofferberth, Elena, “Democratic Planning for Degrowth,” *Monthly Review*, an independent socialist magazine, July 01, 2023. Last seen on August 23rd, 2023, in: <https://monthlyreview.org/2023/07/01/democratic-planning-for-degrowth/>

representatives who act in the name of their citizens in major international negotiations impose horrible and criminal measures in smaller and poorer countries. Therefore, citizens in the Global North have the responsibility to be involved more in global dynamics and hold their governments and representatives accountable.

DEGROWTH FOR THE NORTH, POST-EXTRACTIVISM FOR THE SOUTH

The framework to degrow the basis of the economic system is meant primarily for Global North, harmful sectors and wealthy actors—and not, in principle, for Global South territories. Degrowth is a framework that can be useful to alert the Global South that it needs to transition out of the growthist paradigm, but at the same time, it needs to do so bearing in mind its own realities and contexts.

Colonization and imperialism have expanded Western economic practices in every corner of the world, imposing unfair dynamics. The harm that has been done in Global South territories is perhaps unsurmountable; but there is a strong need to promote expedient reparations and restitution, as well as to initiate a transition away from business-as-usual practices. This is where the role of cosmovisions such as *Buen Vivir* or *Ubuntu* find an extremely relevant place, in the promotion of real economies that prioritize the wellbeing of people and the planet and not the circulation of financial flows and materials. These framings support complex processes of food sovereignty, comprehensive health, a non-anthropocentric view of life, and the understanding of a larger belonging into the ecological balance.

But the Global South has also the challenge of larger human settlements, dealing with their own complexities in terms of dynamics of extraction, over-consumption and production, as well as generation of internal inequalities. Furthermore, not every community or collective will be able to transition to ideal framings, and concrete challenges await Global South territories, which are prey to extractive and exploitative industries. This is why a planned transition towards a post-extractivist stage²² is key to obtaining sovereignty in every realm of life: energy, resource, food, health, education, industrial, currency, technology sovereignty and more. Exploring a post-extractivist vision for the Global South exceeds the reach of this paper, but it is a parallel path for the Global South to the degrowth proposals for the Global North and those referred to harmful sectors and concentration of wealth. We can therefore only highlight some elements to articulate in a global justice agenda, as well as some points of entry to continue thinking about post-extractive dynamics.

The right to development and the principles of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) and equity lie at the core of the distinction between measures to be implemented in the North and the

²² See for instance: Acosta, Alberto: "Post-extractivism: From Discourse to Practice—Reflections for Action", in *International Development Policy*, 2017; also: Brand, Ulrich, Boos, Tobias, and Brad, Alina, "Degrowth and post-extractivism: two debates with suggestions for the inclusive development framework", *Current opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, Volume 24. February 2017, pp 36-41.

South. But the specificity of processes to transit out of an extractive logic require specific efforts at local, national, regional and cross-regional levels. For this to be achieved, a delinking²³ process of the Global South from imperial and colonial dynamics imposed by the Global North, in terms of economic, financial and trade logics, is key.

Especially in Global South countries where many populations still lack access to basic water and sanitation, electricity, decent transportation, housing, etc., it is of adamant importance to promote a rational planning of the material resources that are generated in those territories and to center the efforts in delivering quality, accessible and adequate public services for all. This is where a fair share approach is key, as we cannot promote the same demands for Global North and Global South.

A post-extractivist dream for the Global South centers sovereignty, self-sufficiency and autonomy, while South-South cooperation is carried out in a logic of radical solidarity, with a feminist anti-imperial, anti-colonial, and anti-racist lens.

The context for this three-part primer series is the commitment of feminist movements who are part of the Feminist Action Nexus for Economic and Climate Justice (“Action Nexus”) to develop more resources and materials for popular education and advocacy that advance a comprehensive feminist agenda. This feminist agenda is not a separate or new initiative, but an intentionally articulated one that draws on the work of feminist movements over generations. Our 2021 Blueprint for Feminist Economic Justice, a central piece that anchors the Action Nexus, acknowledges how our work mutually reinforces and reaffirms robust feminist agendas of over five decades and connects movements—including, but not limited to, trade justice, debt justice, and a feminist decolonial vision of a gender-just and equitable economic and climate arena. More resources as well as the summary of seven key demands of our work can be found on the Action Nexus [webpage](#).

²³ Delinking is a framework suggested by Samir Amin (1931-2018), as a strategy to transition out of imperial dynamics, of the international division of labor, of oppression and of a hegemonic world. In recent times Global South activists have been trying to bring back to global analysis this notion. This is the case of the South Feminist Solidarity group, a feminist space that engages in the generation of collective knowledge on feminist economy and political articulation for current global justice challenges.