



UPPSALA UNIVERSITET

Master Programme in Sustainable Management
Class of 2020/2021
Master Thesis 15 ECTS

Degrowth: From Utopia to Reality

An action research approach to start the Degrowth dialogue

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Abstract

How can an idea that critiques the global capitalist system persist? How can a concept that opposes growth as indicator of wealth gather more and more supporters inside and outside of academia? How can a radical theory that challenges almost any societal structure convince us that it is something we must pursue? The Degrowth movement is often referred to as utopia, and not without good reason, as it is a relatively new concept that certainly still has its flaws. This thesis aims to start the Degrowth dialogue outside the ivory tower of academia. We use qualitative data gained from five focus groups to determine which components of Degrowth need the most clarification to make a movement evolve into a genuine theory. Our findings, brought forward by engaged discussions during the focus groups, showed potential for improvements of the Degrowth theory in the areas of education, societal norms and values as well as governmental policies and regulations. These insights allowed us to more specifically address the ambiguities of degrowth and counter them with opinions from experts to make Degrowth more accessible.

Keywords: Degrowth, sustainability, climate change, action research, focus group, activism

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

“We have gold. It flows in our rivers. We don’t want it”, says a farmer in Ecuador. “We don’t want the problems you have in the West”, says another. And the one beside him sums up the philosophy of Buen Vivir, which has been laid down in Ecuador’s Constitution in 2008: “If we look after mother Earth, she will look after us.” (Chassagne, 2020, p. 37).

Buen Vivir, which is particularly widespread in South America, connects material and spiritual well-being and is identified with a life of fullness (Macas, 2010, as cited in Caria & Dominguez, 2015). This would certainly not be unfamiliar to many Indian women. They have joined together, forming self-help groups called sanghams, to gain courage to talk about issues they are facing. Swaraj is their mantra. “It means my own autonomy, self-reliance, self-sufficiency, independence” (Kothari et al., 2014). But it is by no means the US-American way of *I can do whatever I want*, emphasizes one of the women who have collectively managed to mature from food seekers to food providers (Kothari et al., 2014). They are now organic farmers, growing dozens of different crops for themselves, their families and their communities. Just like the followers of Ubuntu in Africa, they fight against destructive development, such as dams and mining projects threatening their achievements. Ubuntu is part of the Zulu phrase “Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu”, which roughly translates to “I am, because you are.” Ubuntu is a vague concept of common humanity, from being part of a greater whole, from humanity, togetherness and fighting for the greater good (Eze, 2014).

But it is not only in developing countries that calls are being made for the regulation of economic growth preventing the climate change. Habermann (2012), for instance, points out that in highly developed Germany, too, voices are growing critical of neoliberalism, capitalism and perpetual growth. The concept of *Abwicklung des Nordens*, as Habermann calls it, opposes both the development discourse and its imperative of developing the Global South in general and sustainable development in particular, insofar as it is understood merely as ecological modernization of the existing social system. It sees power relations in global capitalism as the cause of poverty and environmental destruction.

While the Earth has been increasingly stripped of its untouched nature in recent years (Kennedy et al., 2019), more species have become extinct than in millennia before (Lambertini, 2020), and finite resources such as oil and minerals are running out without appropriate alternatives that are usable on a global scale (Heun et al., 2015), the call for action to slow and ideally stop the destruction of the Earth's ecosystem is growing louder as ever. It is already clear that national climate action plans and corresponding CO₂ reduction targets will not be sufficient to achieve the goals set in the 1997 Kyoto Protocol to limit global warming to less than 2°C by year 2100 compared to the level before the start of the industrialization (United Nations Environment Programme, 2020). Instead, an increase of 3.2°C is still expected if the current concepts are adhered to as planned. In addition, Steffen et al. (2018) point out that even the two-degree target may not be sufficient to prevent irreversible feedbacks from tipping elements in the Earth system that would send the Earth's climate into a continuous hot time and raise temperatures by several degrees Celsius. Although in 1974 the means of verification were still immature, Meadows et al. hinted at just that:

“It is not known how much CO₂ or thermal pollution can be released without causing irreversible changes in the Earth's climate, or how much radioactivity, lead, mercury, or pesticides can be absorbed by plants, fish, or human beings before the vital processes are severely interrupted.” (p. 75).

The greatest concern of many people, they say, is inflicting irreparable damage on the Earth that cannot be absorbed and reversed. The *Club of Rome*, an association founded in the 1960s consisting of scientists and activists engaged in growth critique and criticizing the prevailing neoliberal development model of economic growth argue that economics must consider the limits of thermodynamics and therefore cannot grow indefinitely (Meadows et al., 1974). According to Herman Daly (1973), the consequential damages of uneconomic growth would be greater than the benefits. He proposes a steady-state economy not exceeding ecological limits. The idea of Degrowth criticising the aspiration of perpetual growth was thus born.

1.2 Purpose of Research

At times, we feel powerless about averting the climate change that humanity is heading towards. We feel that, as individuals, we appear incapable to do much more than to live without a car, recycling, and to refrain from excessive consumption. Our resignation spreads when we observe people driving SUVs in the cities, littering streets, and generally acting in a selfish way with no regard for sustainability or the planet. We keep hoping for government-imposed restrictions pledging people to live more sustainably and become bitter of the passed laws that are not sufficient to stop the climate change.

A relatively new movement, so far quite unknown outside the ivory tower of academia, criticises exponential growth as well as Western development imperatives and the positive, almost obsessive belief of humankind in the merits of a capitalistic way of living (Hickel, 2020a; Kallis, 2018; Latouche, 2010). This movement combines theories, presuppositions, thought experiments, criticism of the neoliberal status quo, wishful thinking of a utopia, approaches to solutions and samples of already functioning, sustainable implementations under the term Degrowth. Its scholars have been struggling for a broader audience for about two decades, arguing with economists who dismiss their theory as nonsense, yet still manage to constantly make more people aware of their movement and in some cases convince them that *the Degrowth way* is at least one opportunity to prevent lasting harm to planet Earth (Parrique, 2019).

As action researchers we have made it our mission to pull Degrowth out of the ivory tower and onto the streets by opening the dialogue with friends and acquaintances in focus groups, answering questions, mitigating fears, debunking prejudices, but also acknowledging sustainability and calling for critical thinking. As it is a relatively new and abstract concept, it is important to create awareness for the Degrowth movement. Therefore, we have made it our task to create a space for people to discuss and reflect on Degrowth. Consequently, our research question is to inquire what is needed to make Degrowth more tangible. With this paper, and by opening the dialogue, we are actively working to create more awareness in the hopes of establishing this movement.

2 Theoretical Framework

This chapter introduces the concept of Degrowth, which can be quite abstract and complex to grasp, hence we seek to demystify and create clarity for this theory in the following sections. To give the reader a better idea of the novelty of this theory, we focus on the history of Degrowth first. This will be supported by a literature review after which Latouche's virtuous circle of eight R's, that are key to understand Degrowth's aim, will be elaborated on. We close the chapter with nine criticisms that several scholars have expressed regarding the theory of Degrowth.

2.1 Degrowth

2.1.1 History

Having shown at the beginning of this thesis that unlimited growth will probably accelerate the climate change, this chapter serves to introduce Degrowth as a rebuttal, a utopia, with the power to overthrow the ideology of infinite growth. Describing growth as senseless, uneconomic, unjust and unsustainable, Martinez-Alier et al. (2010), Kallis (2015), and D'Alisa et al. (2015), devoted themselves to the task of developing a theory strong enough to serve as a counter to the existing status quo.

Kenneth Boulding coined the term Spaceship Earth in 1966, justifying this metaphor by comparing planet Earth with a spaceship due to its finite resources and the space limited by its spherical shape:

"We travel together, passengers on a little spaceship, dependent on its vulnerable reserves of air and soil; all committed for our safety to its security and peace; preserved from annihilation only by the care, the work, and, I will say, the love we give our fragile craft. We cannot maintain it half fortunate, half miserable, half confident, half despairing, half slave - to the ancient enemies of man - half free in a liberation of resources undreamed of until this day. No craft, no crew can travel safely with such vast contradictions. On their resolution depends the survival of us all."
(Boulding, 1966, p. 1).

The *Club of Rome* used these alarming words as an occasion to publish their report on the limits of growth in 1974, which predicted catastrophic consequences of unlimited economic growth for ecology and society and the exploitation of natural resources (Meadows et al., 1974). This report was received with mixed responses: While influential economists such as Henry Wallich called the report “irresponsible nonsense” (Wallich, 1974, as cited in Frey & Yaneske, 2007) and stated that the future scenarios presented in it would be used to propagate political leftist ideas, it was also the decisive trigger for a *décroissance* movement in France which translates to “Degrowth”. It is undisputed today, however, that *Limits of Growth* contained some inaccuracies: Technological progress, which is nowadays used by many economists to dismiss protests around the climate change as nonsense, was largely ignored in the Meadows et al.’s drawn future scenarios in 1974 but acknowledged in their thirty-year-update in 2004. In addition, a drying up of various raw materials was still predicted within the 20th century, which has demonstrably not occurred (Pinker, 2019).

Nevertheless, it can be argued that Meadows et al.’s report has acted as a catalyser for various environmental movements. The term *décroissance* was first used by philosopher André Amar in 1973 and adopted by André Gorz in 1975 to spread his concepts of political ecology, which question existing economic and social models and seeks to restore the connection between humans and nature at the political level (Latouche, 2010). Gorz has been more explicit in his book *Ecologie et politique*, in which he criticised capitalism for not satisfying basic needs but creating previously non-existent needs to continually stimulate consumers’ desire to purchase. One of his solutions was to centralize the production of goods to meet basic needs and to satisfy other needs in self-production (1980).

Although several movements formed, the critique of growth remained poorly received by the broader society during these years. Arguably, it took until the 21st century and a public recognition by international communities of the ecological crisis and, most importantly, the emerging threat of the climate change for growth critique to experience a renaissance. The first International Conference on Degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity (ICDESS), which took place in Paris in 2008, boosted Degrowth’s popularity. About 130

researchers tried to define Degrowth and came to the following conclusion which is known as the Paris Declaration:

“Degrowth is a voluntary transition towards a just, participatory, and ecologically sustainable society. It calls for a paradigm shift from the general and unlimited pursuit of economic growth to a concept of “right-sizing” the global and national economies.” (Research & Degrowth, 2010, p. 524).

In 2010, Serge Latouche’s book *Farewell to Growth* was published. Latouche is one of the pioneers of modern Degrowth and his work represents one of the most important in the field. At the same time, he admits the utopian nature of this idea, describing it as a “source of hope and dreams” (Latouche, 2010, p. 32). He addresses the unequal distribution of food, water and other basic needs in the Global North and South and devotes his texts to the inevitable effects of production and consumption, arguing that those as well as the addiction to growth are the main drivers of the climate change. At the same time, he points out that Degrowth is not the same as negative growth. The goal is not to shrink the global economy which would inevitably “plunge our societies into disarray, increases the rate of unemployment and hastens the demise of health, social, educational, cultural and environmental projects” (Latouche, 2010, p. 8). According to Latouche (2010), eight inter-dependent changes that reinforce one another must be engaged with to build and maintain an autonomous *de-growth* society: Re-evaluating, Reconceptualising, Restructuring, Redistributing, Relocalising, Reducing, Re-using and Recycling. Due to their relevance in the Degrowth movement those eight R’s will be described in more detail in section 2.1.2.

In 2015, the book *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era* was published by the authors Giacomo D’Alisa, Frederico Demaria and Giorgos Kallis. In it the authors call for “the decolonization of public debate from the idiom of economism and the abolishment of economic growth as a social objective” (2015, p. 3). They regard Degrowth as a pathway to a society that uses fewer natural resources and sees simplicity, conviviality, care and the commons as pillars of its existence (D’Alisa et al., 2015).

In the years that followed, both the international Degrowth conferences in Budapest in 2016 with 600 participants and in Malmö in 2018 with 800 participants as well as open letters (i.e. “Tomorrow it will be too late... What to do in the short and long term?” by a group of French scholars in 2018) and petitions addressing environmental breakdown (i.e. “Europe. It’s Time to End the Growth Dependency”, signed by almost 100,000 people) gained enormous popularity and boosted Degrowth’s popularity even further. Today over 200 English peer-reviewed articles with the keyword Degrowth can be found (Demaria, 2018). There are study programs, PhD programs, courses, summer schools, music festivals and a multitude of other events about Degrowth. With movements like Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future, the Yellow Vest protests in France and environmental activists blocking coal mines in Western Germany as well as speeches to the European Parliament, the British House of Commons and French National Assembly, the term Degrowth is more relevant than ever.

Nevertheless, this topic is often dismissed as dreamy, as a utopia that can and will never become reality (McAfee, 2020). One reason can be seen in the lack of a consensual definition. Its multidimensionality impedes breaking down Degrowth to a definition consisting of a few sentences. Kallis et al. (2015) state that calls for Degrowth are not about negative gross domestic product (GDP) growth, even if this is the likely outcome of actions promoting Degrowth. Instead, a rethinking must take place, as growth is still associated with improvement and well-being (Pinker, 2019). Latouche (2010) is certain that the journey to a Degrowth utopia must begin by dismantling these associations asserting that growth is automatically better. Hickel propagates that this is only possible through an intellectual transformation: Negative initial reactions such as the departure from GDP as the only indicator of wealth give way to contemplation (*Do countries of the global North really have to keep growing?*) and curiosity: *What if we maintain the status quo? Would we be worse off?* If relevant empirical evidence is then sought to answer these questions, this may lead to a change of views and an open-mindedness towards Degrowth (Hickel, 2020b).

Bonaiuti’s view on Degrowth aims to a similar direction: he writes that this concept possesses “the possibility of inverting the tendency towards the dissolution of social ties by re-thinking and downscaling the organization of production and strengthening all non-market forms of

exchange” (2012, p. 530). Kallis and Martinez-Alier (2010) take a similar stance: They call for an “equitable and democratic transition to a smaller economy with less production and consumption” (p. 14). Hickel (2019) complements this with an increase in people’s well-being by “distributing income and resources more fairly”. Temper and Bliss support Hickel’s statement and are more explicit about who they think should pursue Degrowth: “a downscaling of rich countries’ economies, and the global economy, that would also downscale emissions and exploitation” (2019).

The mentioned definitions describe Degrowth as an economic decline. However, this is not sufficient as the sole definition. As long as progress is regarded as an increase, a decline of anything is hardly possible. Thus, when Latouche writes that “Degrowth is only possible in a society of Degrowth” (2010, p. 519), he means that Degrowth is only possible in a society that has emancipated itself from the ideology of growth. Therefore, Martinez-Alier (2019) supplements the demands for decrease with the “escape from the market and the state into increasing communality and conviviality” (XIV). Muraca and Schmelzer (2017) describe the aim of Degrowth as the “development of more equitable and sustainable lifestyles [...] while also challenging its ideological legitimation such as productivism, economism, and developmentalism” (p. 189). Latouche (2010) writes that “Degrowth is a necessity that must be turned into an opportunity”. So where does a reduction of production and consumption, a fair distribution of income and resources, and an emancipation from the ideology of growth lead?

“A way of life where economic expansion is deprioritized, resulting in stronger social bonds between people and within communities, greater economic equality and far less environmental degradation.” (Scheer & Moss, 2019).

This happens to be very close to the definition of a utopia, which evokes positive counter-designs to the contemporary social order, and thus to the definition of Degrowth. Degrowth is defined by what it is supposed to achieve: democracy, well-being, justice, community and equality, or as Hickel (2020b) aptly describes it:

“Degrowth is a planned reduction of energy and resource use designed to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a way that reduces inequality and improve human well-being.” (p. 2).

This definition is in line with the three pillars of sustainability which are economic viability, social equity and environmental protection (Purvis et al., 2019). It highlights its close cohesion of Degrowth and Sustainability and thus gives an adequate overview of the dimensions Degrowth wants to challenge.

2.1.2 Latouche’s eight R’s

In this section, we will take a closer look at Serge Latouche’s virtuous circle of eight R’s to better understand the basis of the Degrowth idea. It provides a taxonomy by proving an “outline of the fundamentals of any sustainable non-productivist society” (Latouche, 2019, as cited in Parrique, 2019) and depicts a strong framework capturing the essence of Degrowth.

Re-evaluate

According to Latouche (2010), the three biggest drivers of our growth are: (1) advertising because it creates the desire to consume, (2) credit to have the opportunity to buy, and (3) products with built-in obsolescence. Therefore, Latouche (2010) names re-evaluating those drivers as the starting point of his circle by replacing “the attitude of the predator with that of the gardener” (p. 35).

Reconceptualise

Nowadays, water is privatized and sold by corporations, the supply of goods is artificially scarce, and new goods of dubious utility flood the markets. Rethinking our values allows us to see the world and its treasures in a new light. To protect nature, the creatures living in it, and to prevent the depletion of natural resources, the concept of wealth, poverty, consumption and production must be reconceptualised (Latouche, 2010).

Restructure

According to Latouche (2010), all systems designed for continuous growth must be restructured. An example from India illustrates the necessity of restructuring in a simple and

impressive way: “It is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves” wrote Mohandas Gandhi in 1909, “but actually [it] goes much deeper”, adds environmentalist Ashish Kothari. He names one’s own autonomy, self-reliance, self-sufficiency and independence as an individual and as a community as points that constitute Swaraj, and not without reason, they resemble Latouche’s virtuous circle of the eight R’s (Kothari et al., 2014).

Redistribute

It is undisputed that an extreme inequality regarding most goods, especially those that form the basis of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and cover physiological and security needs such as food, water and homeostasis is real (Latouche, 2010; Maslow, 1954). Therefore, Latouche (2010) cites the redistribution of wealth not only between the Global North and South, but also within societies. This would result in a positive effect of consumption in two ways: The power, wealth and influence of the leading industrial nations or “the big predators” (Latouche, 2010, p. 37) would be reduced, and consequently, consumption would scale down since it is often motivated by a desire for recognition and the ostentatious display of one’s own status (Veblen, 2019).

Relocalise

Latouche (2010) believes that many of the products that a society needs to survive can be produced locally. That this works to a certain extent is shown by the concept of *sumak kawsay*, which describes a community-centric, ecologically balanced and culturally sensitive way of living that has attained constitutional status in its countries of origin Bolivia and Ecuador, though it sometimes clashes violently with national day-to-day politics. This concept “rejects growth and the idea of development in any of its expressions” (Gudynas, 2017, p. 4). The focus on small-scale production is “more likely to reflect and enhance local culture, to include local people and to protect the local environment” (Gudynas, 2017, p. 4).

Reduce

Advocates of Degrowth are critics of today’s capitalism with its excesses in production and consumption. A reduction would result in a decrease of greenhouse gas emission and waste. In

addition to reducing the use of finite resources, health risks, working hours, mass tourism must also be reduced and brought to a healthy level (Hickel, 2020a).

Re-use & Recycle

“80% of goods on the market are used only once, and then go straight into the dustbin” (Hulot, 2006). The remaining 20% are developed by the manufacturing companies with a certain end-of-life cycle, and thus must be replaced after a certain period.

It becomes clear that Latouche (2010) is calling for a rethinking of society:

“Altruism should replace egotism, and unbridled competition should give way to cooperation. The pleasure of leisure and the ethos of play should replace the obsession with work. The importance of social life should take precedence over endless consumerism, the local over the global, autonomy over heteronomy, an appreciation of good craftsmanship over productivity efficiency, the rational over the material, and so on.” (p. 34).

This “post-development”, as he calls it, would enable mankind to build convivial societies that are autonomous and economical in both the North and the South. Otherwise, the exponential growth and the increased demand would exceed Earth’s capacity for regeneration without us noticing and feeling the irreparable damage in the coming decades.

2.1.3 Criticism

Radical theories like Degrowth often lead to headwinds and equally radical responses. However, criticism towards Degrowth is not necessarily a bad thing. It can provide opportunities to stabilize its foundation. It is important, however, to realise that misconceptions are not the same as criticisms. Parrique (2019) differentiates the two based on their nature. If arguments are made based on a proper understanding of Degrowth they are categorized as criticism. These criticisms indicate weaknesses and contradictions in the theory and should, rightfully so, be addressed. Misconceptions, on the other hand, hinder the movement by keeping the Degrowth debate stuck on claims that are made without truly understanding the concept, be it because of a superficial reading of the literature, or incorrect knowledge. In his PhD thesis, Parrique (2019) identified nine main criticisms: 1) the linguistic critique; 2) the

well-being critique; 3) the denatalist critique; 4) the Marxist critique; 5) the Keynesian critique; 6) the feminist critique; 7) the environmentalist critique; 8) the cosmopolitan critique; 9) the Global South critique (p. 465).

The linguistic critique

The first and perhaps most prevalent criticism is the term Degrowth itself. It is said to be unappealing, polarising, excluding, confusing and forcing people to think of growth (Parrique, 2019). It could potentially scare people off with the first impression before they realise that they share some of the beliefs that Degrowth stands for (Cato, 2010; Parrique, 2019). Hopkins (2016) argues that Degrowth polarises the debate by creating an us-and-them attitude. Asem (2020) even goes as far as stating that the creator of the term Degrowth has done the movement a disservice. However, Parrique (2019) states “Degrowth only sounds ugly because we love economic growth so much” (p. 403). Moreover, the beauty of the term is that it makes it impossible for people to misconstrue what Degrowth stands for (Parrique, 2019) as the ‘radical critique is in its very name’ (Dengler & Seebacher, 2018).

The well-being critique

Petschow et al. (2018) criticise Degrowth for its uncertainty regarding the sole quality of life. “It’s possible, of course, that we’d all be perfectly happy without the material comforts of modern capitalism. But having known these comforts as we do, and even as our awareness of their contribution to the climate crisis deepens, will we ever want to let them go?” (Timms, 2020). Herein lies the answer to this critique, “the notion of happiness itself should be discarded” (Parrique, 2019, p. 412). After all, happiness and well-being are vastly different in their meanings. Happiness implies a feeling in a specific moment in time, whereas well-being depicts contentment over a longer period and is more about the quality of life instead of superficial moments of happiness due to excessive consumption (Parrique, 2019).

The denatalist critique

Eco-Malthusians, a “21st century movement advocating a reduction of population via non-coercive measures for the sake of social-ecological justice” (Parrique, 2019, p. 413) postulate that a de-population is needed for ecological sustainability (Sourrouille, 2014, as cited in

Parrique, 2019) and believe that Degrowth neglects the role of demography in environmental degradation (Parrique, 2019). Though Victor (2019) does state that “managing without growth implies a stable population” (p. 317), the issue of demography is rarely mentioned in Degrowth literature (Parrique, 2019).

The Marxist critique

The Marxist critique states that degrowth is not sufficiently critical of power struggles (Parrique, 2019). Barca (2017) assumes that Degrowth cannot progress without a “clearer vision” of how politics can transform Degrowth into reality (p. 2). Milanovic (2018, as cited in Parrique, 2019) states that *Degrowthers* are hesitant to indicate who will endure the consequences of the radical measures and strategies they promote to counteract the effect of the climate change.

The Keynesian critique

The Keynesian critique states that Degrowth deems unaffordable. Vansintjan (2019) questions “How will we fund the degrowth transition, since most profits come from extractive industries?”. Moreover, Brosse (2010, as cited in Parrique, 2019) advocates for economic growth by arguing that it provides the necessary means to address ecological issues. The extent of policy-level changes needed for Degrowth is largely omitted according to Helne and Hirvilammi (2019).

The feminist critique

It is argued that Degrowth ignores issues of gender relations, women, feminism, social reproduction, indigenous peoples, and colonialism (Löw, 2015; Perkins, 2019; Picchio, 2014). These arguments are strengthened by the fact that, out of 109 degrowth publications, only 4 discussed the above-mentioned issues (Hanaček et al., 2020). Duval (2013 as cited in Parrique, 2019) accentuates that especially women will lose personal autonomy and individual liberty that is only possible because of the market economy. “Because degrowth proposes a refusal of work, fewer technological appliances, and a resurgence of unregulated, vernacular activities, certain feminist scholars argue that it may potentially reinforce gender inequalities.” (Parrique, 2019, p. 440).

The environmentalist critique

This argument seems to have two opposing sides from a Degrowth perspective. In one camp there are the environmentally-minded critics of growth and in the other camp are defenders of radical democracy. While the environmentalists argue that “Degrowth is a biophysical necessity”, the radical democrats claim that “it must remain a choice offered to people” (Parrique, 2019, p. 444). Davey (as cited in Kallis, 2017), an environmentalist, believes that it is improbable enough for people to change their lifestyle without a partly involuntary transition.

The cosmopolitan critique

Imagine a house of cards, all these cards are modern values: tolerance, individualism, freedom of speech, rule of law, and egalitarianism. If one of these ‘cards’ would be taken away, will the entire house of cards come tumbling down as a result? Quilley (2011) seems to think so:

“Just about all of those aspects of modern societies that we most cherish – individualism, social liberalism, tolerance, cosmopolitanism, democracy, complexity – emerged in the wake of capitalism and depend absolutely on the circulation of goods, people and information, and so on energy through”
(p. 76)

However, according to Parrique (2019), this argument is partly made with the assumption that absolute scarcity exists and that it is needed to create “self-interest and conflicts” (p. 452). Degrowthers are coming from the perspective of the scarcity myth: “material cause of interpersonal violence is actually inequality, not scarcity” (Parrique, 2019, p. 453).

The Global South critique

Degrowth fails to address the unjust impacts that decreasing GDP will have on certain people and geographic locations (Perkins, 2019). Kothari et al. (2016) argue that Degrowth is not appropriate for people that are still lacking basic needs, i.e. the Global South. It can be argued that the Global South’s perspective is lacking not only in the Degrowth theory but also in Degrowth Scholarship. Something Perkins (2019) also mentions: “Degrowth activists generally maintain that they want Degrowth with equity, but the movement itself to date largely

lacks participation and input from marginalized workers from either the Global North or the Global South, who might be able to represent and integrate those concerns.” (p. 186).

3 Methodology

This chapter, divided into eight sections, provides a description of the methodology. The first section presents the research philosophy guiding this study, including our ontological and epistemological considerations. Followed by the research motivation where the decision to perform an action research approach combined with focus groups is explained. The research design is explained in the third section, followed by the research approach in the fourth section. The fifth section explains the sampling method used as well as an introduction of the chosen participants. The process of data collection is explained in the sixth section, including a description on how the focus groups were designed and carried out. The following seventh section includes first insights in the analysis of the acquired data. The chapter concludes by providing the ethical considerations made throughout this research.

3.1 Research Philosophy

In this study, we are most interested in our participants' first-hand opinions and thoughts on Degrowth. Thus, the research philosophy of interpretivism is most fitting. The interpretivist approach helps us to acquire an empathetic understanding of why our participants act in a certain way and what hinders them to act in a more Degrowth way. Interpretivism departs from the assumption that humans develop subjective and shared meanings, and that these meanings are key to understanding different social worlds and contexts (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016; Saunders et al., 2016). Therefore, we decided on a qualitative data collection via focus groups, a form of group discussion where the focus lies on communication and reflexivity.

Regarding the ontological position of this study, we have taken a constructionist position, which implies that “social phenomena and categories are not only produced through social interaction but that they are in a constant state of revision” (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 22). Furthermore, our own version of social reality is considered as well since we are following the action research approach, thus establishing ourselves as active participants in our own study. By offering a platform to discuss plans, concerns and anxieties we aim to offer new insights and food for thought that is necessary in times where the status quo cannot be maintained anymore.

3.2 Research Motivation

Through its combination of simple proposed solutions such as limiting one's individual consumption on the one hand and systemic critique of long-established economic and social orders such as capitalism on the other, the topic of Degrowth fascinates us to a great extent. As we are convinced that we are not the only ones with this stance we decided to use our Master thesis of the Sustainable Management programme to offer Degrowth another platform to catch attention, to promote its theory, to discuss misconceptions and uncertainties and to gain new insights. Our focus groups helped us tremendously in this endeavour, allowing us to understand "why people feel the way they do" while observing the dynamics of discussions around a relatively new and unknown phenomenon (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 503). Our motivation was not only to show our participants unfamiliar perspectives on the topic of sustainability, but also to generate further knowledge ourselves. In view of the relative unfamiliarity of Degrowth outside of academic circles (Conrad, 2020), the impressions and thoughts of people to whom the topic of Degrowth was previously new seemed particularly appealing to us. Our motivation is mainly fuelled by being part of a Degrowth movement and being actively involved in creating awareness for this movement.

3.3 Research Design

Traditional science tends to describe and explain the status quo, to maintain and reproduce it, to be able to make predictions for the future. Scientists therefore ask *What is happening? How can we control and predict it?* In order to answer our own research question, however, we rather ask ourselves questions like *What am I doing?* and *How can I improve it?*. This is where action research as research design benefits our cause. This approach, in which "the action researcher and a client collaborate in the diagnosis of a problem and in the development of a solution based on the diagnosis" (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 413) is mostly applied to matters of genuine concern (Eden & Huxham, 1996), as it is the case for us regarding the Degrowth movement.

Action research belongs to the practices of living inquiry and like any research its goal is to generate knowledge and theory. Action research however generates a special kind of knowledge: People create and implement their own ideas thus producing practical knowledge

that is useful to the everyday conduct of their lives. They are taking action to improve their personal and social situation (Heron & Reason, 2008). Reason and Bradbury (2008) therefore describe action research as follows:

It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities (p. 4).

Bryman and Bell (2015) add their focus on “re-education and changing patterns of thinking and action” to this definition, thus pointing out that the research aspires to “contribute to both academic theory and practical action” (p. 413). Action researchers circumvent many people’s criticism of academics working in ivory towers producing purely conceptual theories that are of no direct use by generating knowledge that is of greater use than theories that rarely affect people in a meaningful and relevant way (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). They focus on understanding how people interact with each other and their surrounding environment and use these insights to generate new ideas and improve practices that will benefit themselves and others. The potential of action research unfolds when ideas are linked to action. Our research purpose will therefore be to link ideas and practice to convey knowledge on the one hand and to initiate a learning process on the other hand (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Thus, action research is an ideal tool to communicate Degrowth in an appealing way and to facilitate people to engage with this radical theory through discussion.

This process of “observe - reflect - act - evaluate - modify - move in new directions” is known as action-reflection (see figure 1). This cycle is repeated until the desired effect of reflection, learning, development, and action occurs (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). By using this strategy, we want to observe the events of each focus group, analyse the data and evaluate it. This way, we can use the insights we have gained from working with each group to modify the requirements for the next focus group. Answers we obtain in a focus group are the gateway for further questions. This emphasizes the value of being open to new possibilities and understanding learning as never complete. Ultimately, this approach helps us move in new directions and generate further knowledge.

We do not look for a fixed outcome that can be applied everywhere. Instead, we produce our personal theories to show what we have learned, are learning, and will learn. With this work, we invite others to learn with us. We evaluate our work not in terms of whether it has general validity or is repeatable, but in terms of whether it can show how we are living in the direction of our educational and social values.

3.4 Research Approach

In preparation for this thesis, we first held a pilot project in which we trialled the focus group method. Before the remaining four focus groups took place, we had a meeting with Dr. Timothée Parrique, PhD. His input as an economist specialized in Degrowth gave us a better understanding of how to approach the focus groups and which kind of questions to ask our participants. In the following sections, the focus group method will be explained along with its limitations. Thereafter, we introduce the sampling method and participants.

3.4.1 Focus Groups

Due to the global Covid-19 pandemic humankind was dealing with during the execution of this research, all the focus groups were held online via Zoom. We decided to use this as an advantage and invite participants from different parts of the world. The focus group method is typically used to explore a specific topic in depth. Though focus groups are unstructured, we decided to assign one person to oversee, regulate and guide the sessions. The unstructured

setting can create more intuitive responses (Butler, 1996), lets participants question and probe each other's perceptions, ideas, opinions, thoughts and their reasoning behind it while also giving them the freedom to bring up matters directly and indirectly related to the topic that might be of interest (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This in turn enables us to gather important data by observing the interaction of the group and see how the participants collectively try to understand the topic Degrowth (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Morgan, 1998).

In business and management, the focus group method is recognized as an approach that helps individuals define a problem while working together to find possible solutions (Duggleby, 2005; Hutt, 1979). We decided to experiment with opening the Degrowth dialogue. We were curious to see what would happen if we facilitated a discussion in a respectful, non-judgemental and understanding environment where participants with different backgrounds and views on sustainability share their opinions on Degrowth. Moreover, we were interested in the interaction of the individuals and how they discussed certain issues as members of a group (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Especially for a controversial topic like Degrowth, we were interested in whether certain opinions were formed immediately and whether and to what extent these opinions changed when discussed with other participants who are of other opinions.

3.4.2 Limitations of the focus group

The results of focus groups are not a reliable indicator of the reactions of the wider population, thus, do not lend themselves to generalization (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Furthermore, a person might not be comfortable enough to speak up and share their honest opinions, especially if these opinions are controversial and not in line with the rest of the group (Bryman & Bell, 2015). According to Roller and Lavrakas (2015), this lack of opposing opinions can lead to the belief that there is a group consensus on the matter. Another limitation is the ethical consideration of the focus group (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015) is that we cannot guarantee anonymity of a participant in regard to the other participants.

3.5 Sampling and Participants

Since the focus groups took place online, and to retain some control of the group if needed, we decided to keep the range between four and five participants. We aimed to have enough

participants to generate diversity in information. Another reason for keeping the group on the smaller side is the statement of Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009): “a large group of participants can create an environment where participants do not feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, opinions, beliefs, and experiences” (p. 3). Given the controversies surrounding Degrowth, it was imperative for our research to create a non-judgmental and open environment in which the participants felt safe enough to be authentic and truthful. We did this by emphasising the importance of respect for each other along with the ‘circle of trust’ principle. We made sure to stress that everyone’s opinion was valid and controversial standpoints were welcomed. If we noticed one person was not talking as much as others, the facilitator actively asked for their opinion on the matter.

3.5.1 Purposive Sampling

Our aim was to have a variety of participants in our data collection to capture different experiences and points of view. To achieve this, we chose to apply a purposive sampling method; a non-probability form of sampling that does not require underlying theories or a predetermined number of participants yet stresses saturation (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Etikan et al., 2016). Saturation can be understood as “obtaining a comprehensive understanding by continuing to sample until no new substantive saturation is acquired” (Etikan et al., 2016, p. 4). Another term for purposive sampling is judgmental sampling as it is used when a researcher does not intent to choose participants on a random basis but rather uses their own *judgement* to select the participants that will aid them best in answering the research question, goals, and objectives (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Etikan et al., 2016; Saunders et al., 2019; Sharma, 2017). As for the sampling method we chose to use the maximum variation sampling which is known to facilitate the researchers in collecting data while detecting key themes, documenting uniqueness and emerging patterns are likely to be valuable and of great significance (Saunders et al., 2019).

Having at least one participant with knowledge of Degrowth was an essential criterium for us. It was also important to have a variety in age, life experience, and work situation (student, employed, retired). We aimed to have participants with varying levels of sustainable habits, ranging from recycling to avoiding traveling by plane and eating plant base. All participants are people one of us personally knows. Lastly, we aimed to have an equal amount of female

and male participants in each focus group, unfortunately we failed in this endeavour for focus groups 1 and 4.

3.5.2 Limitations of purposive sampling

Though the heterogeneous sampling method has many advantageous qualities, it is important to consider the limitations. As previously stated, the purposive and thus heterogeneous sampling, is a non-probability approach. This means that the samples are not to be considered as representative for an entire population (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Saunders et al., 2019). Another limitation is the fact that the participants are selected by the researchers. Therefore, this method is sensitive to researcher bias (Etikan et al., 2016; Sharma, 2017). Moreover, the effect of outliers, “a person that does not belong to the data”, can be detrimental in this type of participant selection (Etikan et al., 2016, p. 2). Sharma (2017) argues that it can be challenging for the researcher to “defend the representativeness of the sample and convince the reader that the judgement used in the participant selection was relevant” (p. 752).

3.5.3 Selected Participants

We have conducted five focus groups over the course of six weeks. The total number of participants was 21, of which 9 are female and 12 are male. The youngest participant was 20, the oldest 66 years old. All participants have in an academic background in common, however, 17 of the 21 participants were not or only superficially familiar with Degrowth at the time the focus groups were conducted. Most participants are from the Global North and thus countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, France, Sweden. Three participants came from the Global South, more precisely from Nigeria and India. More information about the participants can be found in Appendix 1.

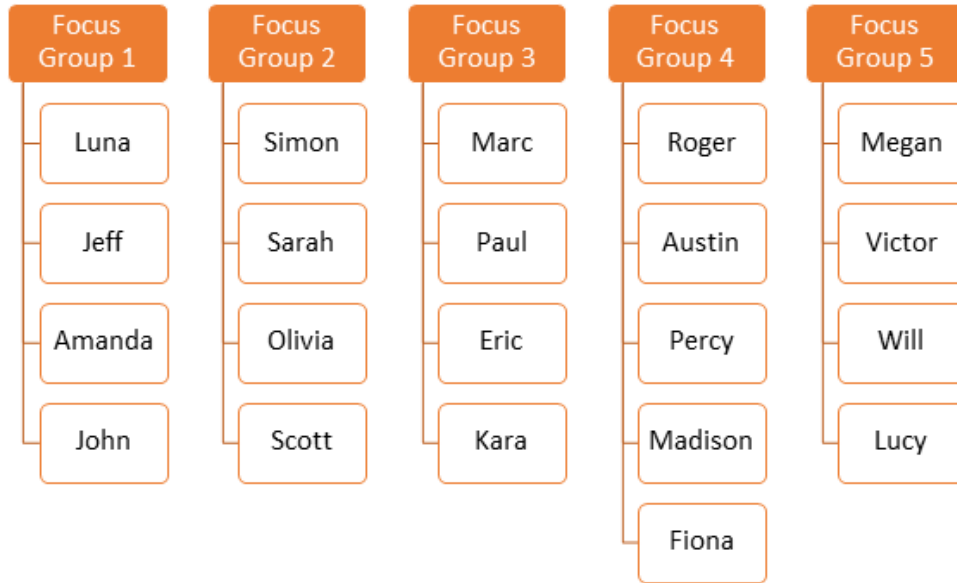


Figure 1. Overview of the focus groups

3.6 Data Generation

Our participants were selected with ulterior motives: An essential prerequisite was a certain open-mindedness towards radical theories like Degrowth. In this respect we were not disappointed, and the participants pointed out weaknesses and inaccuracies, but also chances and possibilities for development. This was done over a period of approximately one hour each. The discussions were recorded over the entire duration of the focus group using the recording function of the video conferencing tool Zoom and subsequently transcribed with otter.ai, a speech-to-text application. The first 15 minutes of each focus group were used to introduce ourselves and the participants. We shortly presented the principles of Degrowth to have a basis for discussion (see Appendix 2). This was followed by the actual discussion, which was facilitated by one of us, while the other researcher joined the discussions. Questions were asked at the beginning and throughout the focus groups to prevent drifting too far off-topic.

The development of questions for the focus groups turned out to be one of the greatest challenges. While questions are answered relatively briefly in an interview with a single person, questions in a group environment can quickly develop into a long discussion due to the human cognitive processes to react to statements of others with their own ideas, memories or thoughts (Krueger & Casey, 2014). According to Krueger & Casey (2014), the most interesting data emerges from the interactions between participants, which we were able to confirm in the

15- to 20-minute debriefings after each of the focus groups. We decided to use the questioning route, a sequence of questions in complete, conversational sentences (Krueger & Casey, 2014), when developing our questions. By means of the questioning route, we were able to predict the progress of the conversation to some extent. Furthermore, it increased consistency in the way we asked questions across the different focus groups.

Each focus group started with an easy *opening question* that each participant was asked to answer. Its purpose is to get everyone to talk early in the discussion. This way we could avoid that someone did not participate in the discussion. After our presentation the *introductory question* was used to get our participants to think about their connection with Degrowth. *Key questions* carry the discussions in the focus groups. They ideally alert participants to the thoughts of other group members and generate the data we are targeting in this study. *Ending questions* bring closure to the discussion and allow participants to reflect on the discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2014). In addition, we prepared further questions in case the discussion stalled. However, this concern was always unfounded, on the contrary - each of our five focus groups could have lasted longer. The opening question, introductory question und ending question were identical in each focus group and can be found in Appendix 3. The key questions were adjusted according to the findings of the previous group. They can be found in Appendix 4. The reason for modifying the questions is due to our action research approach. As already mentioned, the core topic of action research is the combination of “action and reflection, theory and practice” (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 4). Therefore, after the debriefings and initial analyses of the respective focus groups, it seemed only logical to continue the discussions where we saw potential for further insights. We avoided ambiguous questions as we wanted to make sure that our participants did not interpret the question differently. We also designed them to be open-ended to spark discussions between the participants.

3.7 Data Organization

Focus groups as a means of qualitative data collection pose a challenge when it comes to analysing the generated data. Due to its aim to understand and explain the feelings, attitudes and behaviours of individuals and its heavy focus on discussions it is ideally suited to explore the complexity of Degrowth “within the context of lived experience” (Rabiee, 2004, p. 655).

Furthermore, it promotes positive involvement in the research process to a greater extent than in interviews (Rabiee, 2004). However, this leads to the generation of enormous amounts of data: Each of our five focus groups has generated about 30-35 A-4 pages of data. Therefore, a first step in analysis, according to Robson (2016), is to reduce the data without losing important content. To accomplish this, we go through several stages: examining, categorizing, recombining. The aim is to bring meaning to a situation rather than the search for truth focused on by quantitative research (Rabiee, 2004). In the process, it cannot be avoided that there is an extent of subject selection and interpretation of the generated data. This potential bias however can be minimised by following Krueger & Casey's (2014) four critical qualities of focus group analysis:

Systematic

We implemented a process that is deliberate and planned. This allows us to ensure that our findings reflect what has been shared in the groups (Krueger & Casey, 2014). While we adjusted our processes before each focus group based on the knowledge of the previous groups, they were always systematic and never arbitrary or spontaneous.

Verifiable

An analysis is verifiable if another researcher can take your data and arrive at similar findings. Thus, it is necessary to avoid exclusively selecting comments made in the discussions that confirm the researchers' point of view and ignoring information that is dissonant (Krueger & Casey, 2014). To avoid the trap of selective perception it is crucial to acquire sufficient data to constitute a trail of evidence (Krueger & Casey, 2014). This may include field notes, recordings, debriefs and transcripts.

Sequential

“Good analysis begins with good planning, recruiting, questions, and moderating” (Krueger & Casey, 2014, p. 326). As described in the previous sections, we have carefully planned our focus groups and selected our participants according to purposive sampling. We devised questions that would be conducive to our research question and moderated the focus groups accordingly.

Consequential

The analysis of focus groups does not begin after all groups have been conducted. Instead, debriefings are performed after each focus group and the findings are analysed to be able to use them for the further focus groups. Data collection and analysis are concurrent.

As for the analysis itself we decided to use Glaser and Strauss' constant comparison analysis. It provides a clear series of steps to manage the large amount and complex nature of our qualitative data and is particularly useful when there are multiple focus groups within the same study. During the first stage, the data is divided into small units which are then grouped into categories during the second stage. The third stage includes the selective coding where we develop one or more themes that express the content of each of the groups (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Determining similar themes in several focus groups facilitates data saturation (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). It effectively serves as a proxy for theoretical sampling, which increases the meaningfulness of the themes (Charmaz, 2000, as cited in Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). As for our five focus groups, the following themes emerged:



Figure 2. Overview of the five themes

3.8 Ethical Considerations

This chapter deals with the ethical considerations that were addressed to avoid harming those taking part in our study. Diener and Crandall's (1980) article "Ethics in Social and Behavioural Research" identifies four main areas that should be considered to conduct research ethically.

Avoiding harm to the participants

Harm can be inflicted on participants of studies in a variety of ways: physical harm, harm to participants' development and self-esteem, to their career prospects, or by asking them to perform morally reprehensible actions during the study (Diener & Crandall, 1978, as cited in Bryman & Bell, 2015). Most of these issues could be ruled out in advance due to our target on

focus groups conducted remotely entirely. However, because Degrowth critiques capitalism, statements made to our participants during the focus groups could be negatively construed by corporations, which, after all, benefit from capitalism. Therefore, we have taken reasonable precautions to ensure that no statement made during the focus group could be traced back to either participant. Furthermore, we have ensured a trustful and appreciative atmosphere during the discussions.

Avoiding lack of consent

This applies mainly to experiments that require genuine reactions from their participants for analysis and therefore keeping them largely in the dark about the course of the study. We informed our participants about the nature of the study and the topic, but at the same time we assured them that we would only analyse their statements and occasional facial expressions as well as changes in tonality during their speech using the recording function of the Zoom software mentioned above.

Respecting the participants' privacy

As soon as the data was gathered through the five focus groups, we created pseudonyms for our participants and used them in the transcripts and coding tables as well as in the respective chapters of this thesis. Regarding the other demographic data, such as age, nationality and level of education, we obtained the consent of each of our participants to mention them in this thesis.

Avoiding deception

The fourth and last ethical consideration, avoiding deception, refers to the researchers altering the data or simply presenting something differently than it truly is. No gathered data has been changed in any way during this research project, and the transcript from the interviews can be asked of the researchers in the case any doubt arises.

4 Empirical Results

This chapter presents the results of our five conducted focus groups. All participants agreed that *something* needs to happen regarding the climate change and the hesitant approaches to tackle the global warming of the governments in various countries. For example, Luna says that a theory such as Degrowth is “a very necessary one, if we want to live on this planet a little longer.” Statements like this recur in the other focus groups as well. Eric says that Degrowth, presented as a utopia by Latouche, Hickel and Kallis, would represent “an ideal system”, but does not disregard the fact that reaching this stage is very unlikely due to the predominantly self-centred nature of humankind. Sarah and Lucy would also welcome a shift towards Degrowth, Lucy even raves about it: “When I read all the bullet points that Brechtje showed [in the presentation] in the beginning, I’m like, Yes, yes, that’s what we need! That’s perfect for sustainability reasons, this is how we can sustain our planet”. Percy, puts it similarly: “I became very enthusiastic about this conversation!” However, both agree with many of the other participants that this will be difficult, though not completely impossible, in the coming years due to societal structures geared toward capitalism. Our participants were therefore essentially open-minded about Degrowth, but certainly agreed that, at least now, there is a lack of “a clear offer of ‘how’” (Kara). There was also agreement on several other topics; due to the high number of mentions and the subsequent bracing exchange of opinions and experiences, we created the five clusters mentioned in chapter 3.7. In the following sections, we have summarized the most concise statements from each focus group that are essential for answering our research question and conduct the initial connections between the respective discussions that are important for analysis.

4.1 Education

It was often mentioned in our focus groups that children need to be taught to live sustainably from an early age on, for example by keeping their carbon footprint as small as possible. Simon says that “my average footprint in terms of CO₂ is like two tonnes and comparing that to what we should emit according to the Paris agreement, it’s a huge difference.” Further he says that “spreading awareness definitely seems like a necessary step”. He refers not only to sustainability, but specifically to Degrowth. Scott from the same focus group agrees with him:

“Constant awareness will be like a bedrock. There are a lot of people who do not know what Degrowth is. I sincerely did not know what Degrowth was until I came into this program. [...] So, for starters, it will be good to first get as [many] people as possible to know and understand what Degrowth is.” (Scott)

He believes that the interest in Degrowth would increase as people learn about its “benefits”. Madison sees herself and her peers from the sustainability programmes on Gotland as mentors who can act as facilitators with their newly gained knowledge and their mindset: “You can really motivate each other. I'm just going to keep doing that and try to motivate others who are less in this [sustainability] bubble to do so.” Even Percy, who had no previous knowledge about Degrowth, sees himself now as part of a movement “who wants to make an effort [...] so that it eventually gets better” and is of the opinion that “it is of utmost importance” for this movement to grow.

Paul targets education institutions, mainly primary and secondary schools, and sees them as having a responsibility to educate the coming generation and to “put a seed into their brain, which they keep thinking about from childhood.” Ultimately, it would become a habit. Victor (“It comes down to educate people and creating awareness of the environment, of how you behave.”), Will (“I think it's good to teach and to show them what consequences can be.”) and Percy (“Through education you tell the new generations in the right way how we think about it. And how we can do better together.”) agree with Paul. However, they also point out that there are limits to education. Marc, for example, says that it is certainly possible teaching children a certain open-mindedness towards sustainability, but at the same time he also says that there are contrary influences that exploit young people’s minds in the sense of capitalism: “We also have influencers telling kids that you basically need a new outfit for every day”. Will agrees. To our question whether the well-being of an individual is more important than the well-being of society, he replied:

“The question is: How far should we go? [...] How far should [Degrowth] actually impact us? Take someone in a toxic relationship. If they perceive their well-being to be the highest with those kinds of things, then who are you to tell them it can be better in a different way? And how

*far should you actually influence their decision making in their daily life?
Shouldn't you just leave it up to them and let them decide?" (Will)*

Lucy points out the “knowledge-behaviour-gap”. For her, the focus on education is “a bit of an easy fix”. She gets support from Victor and Eric, who are of the opinion that “human behaviour normally changes really slowly” and that humans are “naturally corrupt and greedy”. Therefore, in addition to education, a change in norms and values is necessary in their opinion. This cluster’s results will be discussed in the next section.

4.2 Norms & Values

Almost all our participants agreed that a shift in terms of norms and values has to happen and that Degrowth offers a solution: “Degrowth is talking about values, well-being, shift from the economic focus”, says Kara. Luna adds that the focus on endless growth ultimately leads to resource depletion and that the reason for this lies in human characteristics like “greed, competitiveness and jealousy”. She strongly supports the agenda of Degrowth to “re-evaluate and re-conceptualise”. Olivia wishes for a more pronounced togetherness like “being in a community and supporting each other”. Scott urges to “care about the environment, other people and the future”. Sarah has the impression that “the shift in mindset in the younger generation is happening. They live according to the Degrowth way, but they don’t know what Degrowth is.” The current and previous generations, on the other hand, are too dependent on the seductions of capitalist societies, she says. Percy agrees with her and points out that “people must also learn to be happy with what they have and not to keep looking for more”. However, he acknowledges that this statement is an expression from a privileged perspective. Indeed, John says that first “a certain set of basic needs have to be met before [the people] are able to focus on everything that has to do with the environment.” Simon agrees with him and advocates for a guaranteed basic income, which would certainly change people’s norms and values due to a decreasing dependence on a job. Paul and Jeff, both from India, make the connection between the Global North and South. They argue that countries like Sweden are “ready for change”, while the situation is more complicated in less developed countries like India:

“You are questioning a fundamental thing here. What is the purpose of our lives? Because many people in the world like in third world countries, the minute they wake up, they work for the food on their plate. So, if you go to such people and ask them about Degrowth, they’re like: ‘Sorry, I don’t have time, I should work for a living’.” (Paul)

Jeff adds that “unless you pull ignorance out of people’s mindset, you can’t expect them to do anything. There are so many hurdles before: population control, then education, then actually making people understand. Because if you ask any random person back in India: ‘How do you get water?’ They’ll just say it’s from the tap.”. John and Amanda, on the other hand, trust in the continued development of these countries: “They are getting progressively more towards first world nations. That’s when a change in focus comes in consumer perspective” and “I’m wondering about the connection between development and Degrowth. People will automatically value sustainability more”.

Our participants are aware of the responsibility of the Global North in the fight against the climate change. They see themselves, the governments of these countries and companies as liable to reform norms and values, sometimes with the help of policies and regulations, which will be covered in the next section.

4.3 Policies, Rules & Regulations

All participants agreed that Degrowth could be applied much easier in countries of the Global North as those countries have achieved a level of prosperity where basic and higher-level needs are thoroughly met. Roger admits that underdeveloped countries should advance to the same level as developed countries and that it would be crazy if they could only get there by repeating the same mistakes the Global North has made. They realise it is easy to impose your will upon others and forcing “the governments in the Global South to produce more sustainably to fit the trends but if consumers do not adjust demand, we cannot expect these countries to take the blows” (Fiona).

Some participants wondered: “Who is responsible to achieve Degrowth or any other positive step towards a more sustainable society?” (John). The government needs to “lead by good

example” (Luna), stimulate companies and incentivize consumers to adapt more sustainable habits (John, Luna & Amanda). Eric and Marc agree and would like to see companies include the true costs of resources in the economic model or a polluter-pays-principle and a happiness index next to the GDP. Percy and Roger say that it is easy to point fingers to the government and companies and think you should point “three fingers at yourself and take responsibility with your actions” (Percy). Madison however believes the individual is only partly responsible as the imbalance of power between government and multinational companies could be considered as an endless cycle of nepotism and corruption. Other participants bring up this power imbalance as well, such as Victor, who expresses his concerns about the influence of the multinationals on policies and regulations. Simon adds that “we need to get the appropriate people in the office because, as long as those in power have the economic growth mindset, nothing will change”. He is fed up with the “business as usual” of the political establishment and feels like “they are leading us to a situation we cannot break free from via democratic means”. Megan agrees and states, “we cannot solve this problem on our own” and doubts government will change without an environmental catastrophe.

Madison argues that Degrowth is more about changing the whole system than acting on an individual level and implementing this would mean a system change which can only be done by working together with other countries. She advocates for a combination of bottom-up and top-down approaches. Nonetheless, John thinks “we should all start to live by the idea of Degrowth”.

4.4 Personal

Apart from future rules and regulations to which people would be forced to submit, we were particularly interested in what our participants are actively doing for the preservation of the environment out of a sense of duty or altruism. Almost all participants were able to contribute something and, after our discussions, showed a willingness to promote it more strongly in their surroundings.

Some mentioned things that they themselves considered rather insignificant in the big scope. These included vegetarian, vegan or less meat-based diets (Sarah, Olivia, Madison, Fiona), consuming more consciously, for example by buying locally produced products, purchasing

from second-hand stores, avoiding multinational companies like Amazon, and extending the product life cycle of electronic devices (Luna, Sarah, Simon, Scott, Olivia, Madison, Percy). In addition, they engage in community gardening, trash hunts, and food rescue initiatives (Olivia, Fiona, Lucy) or draw their energy from solar panels (Amanda, Percy, Roger). Austin, Jeff, and Marc argue that most people may be either not aware or not able to behave more sustainably due to their living conditions. Most of our participants shared that they travel less than before. One reason for this was the Covid-19 pandemic, but also the increased awareness of air traffic pollution made a lot of our participants consider using trains or busses over airplanes. However, we could also note that this only happens to a certain point: John noted that in the future, he will travel by car for a few hours a day and will likely travel by airplane frequently due to his job as a consultant, Amanda who owns a guest house in the Maldives indicated that for many young people a vacation in Australia may be more appealing than a vacation in the Netherlands.

In this context, well-being and envy of other people were discussed particularly often. Jeff says that it is considered normal in India to represent oneself through status symbols, which John, confirms is also true in the Netherlands: “You compare yourself to what everybody else is doing”. He states that in his opinion this is not the way to define your own happiness. Sarah often feels alone in her choices when she is with friends that do not live like she does. She sees this as an obstacle of sustainable movements like Degrowth: “I am only individual here and it feels like no one else cares”, and Simon underlines this statement with the fact that many people have a cognitive dissonance towards their behaviour. Olivia’s opinion is particularly interesting: She states that she lives sustainably out of guilt and thus keeps her impact as low as possible: “As a human being I’m kind of a parasite on Earth”. She states that this attitude motivates her: “It depends on how you deal with [the guilt]. And what you gain out of it. [Some people] freeze and feel hopeless. But you can turn it around, gain energy out of that, and it can facilitate and motivate you”. Eric, on the other hand, states that while he is amenable to changing his lifestyle, he demands the entirety of our society to do so. Otherwise, he would be plagued by the thought “Why me? Why not the others?”. But then again, this would require the aforementioned laws and policies, even though Fiona (4) optimistically believes that it is

enough “to inspire each other make each other enthusiastic.” The last cluster will go over the critique the participants had regarding Degrowth.

4.5 Critique

Focus group 5 has been the only group asking questions about Hickel’s definition of Degrowth that we presented at the start of each focus group. Will asked “Do you consider environmental sustainability as an important part of Degrowth? Is the environment only important to Degrowth to improve human well-being or does it have an inherent value for itself?”. Megan questioned which resources would be capped and who would decide the rate at which each resource would be capped. Victor asked if Degrowth is “more like a general motivation of how people should behave?”. The phrasing of Degrowth itself was also criticised, it was seen as a broad term (Amanda) and as problematic (Sarah). Many agree that the concept of Degrowth may be seen as unclear (Kara, Will, Victor, Lucy). Will is not “sure what the aim is of Degrowth” and points out that the focus on well-being can be problematic as “it’s difficult to assess well-being”.

Another issue brought up in terms of Degrowth is the narrative of nationalism. Percy said he thought it was good to lessen globalisation and focus more on local production to which Madison replied that though she is in favour of more local production, she is afraid that if it would be with the idea of “we have to keep everything to ourselves that it would increase the nationalistic bubble”.

When asked about their main issue with Degrowth, Megan says she thinks it will “stifle entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation”. She said that the notion of “the sky is the limit” as well as the pursuit for wealth proved to pose a big motivator for entrepreneurs. “Does Degrowth then believe that just the intrinsic idea of helping society and helping others is enough motivation for people to start to innovate?” questions Will, “and that enhances their well-being enough or that I think there's different kinds of substance or whatever that will increase people's well-being if they help out and they start innovating”. Lucy adds that there have been many sustainability innovations to deal with the climate change effects, for example devices for cleaning the oceans and rivers of plastic stating that “it would be a shame if people are not motivated to continue developing”. “One thing that I think is problematic with

Degrowth is it seems to offer a picture of utopia” said Kara, “and in order to move Degrowth forward, it needs to stop being a static thing, and become more of a social discussion on certain values”. Roger and Austin agree that it is important to not just stop producing in the Global South and let the economy there completely fall back to the point where poverty increases even more but rather to have a replacement of sorts. They both have a hard time believing this change can and will happen.

Megan points out that Degrowth has no timeline. She wondered “what are they thinking, timing wise? Are they planning to make this change within one generation? Or is this a multi-generational? If you’re planning to do it within one generation, like it’s just not realistic”. To which Victor said: “the answer would probably be as soon as possible”. Their rationale lies in the possibility and space to worry about sustainability issues while many people around the world simply do not have this luxury.

When we inquired how to bring about change, Madison says that if we somehow manage to answer that question, “we will win the jackpot”. Paul says there “should be some balance between the system which is already going on and the system which you want to introduce. Because people are not that ready for change”. Austin does not think that humans can change and the only reason to live more sustainably is for “your own feelings so you can feel good about yourself”. Lucy puts it nicely:

“Then to have all the criticism that we just brought up, it’s not a perfect concept, it’s this ideal that we would like to work towards. But maybe we are not ready yet. All we need to take tiny baby steps. And then we can slowly adapt.”

5 Analysis

After our debriefings subsequent to each focus group and initial reviews of the transcripts, we were able to identify the five clusters listed in the results section. The constant comparison analysis, described in 3.7, gave us further insights into the topics within the clusters that our participants discussed the most. The action research approach was of great benefit to our analysis. Since we decided to make Degrowth the core of our master's thesis, this topic has been on our minds almost constantly. We have read countless books, articles and blogposts about it and acquired a certain way of thinking, which is sometimes strongly subjective. By participating in the focus groups, we benefited from our participants' unclouded view on Degrowth and were thus able to better understand the concerns of our participants, question our own perceptions, and thus view the Degrowth movement more objectively. The fact that we already recognized at the beginning that Degrowth has potential for improvement provided the necessary authenticity and space for an honest exchange also about the downsides of Degrowth.

Our participants discussed many of the criticisms of experts against Degrowth that were disclosed in Chapter 2. At first, they described Degrowth as a "broad term", "problematic", "unclear", and implying "that something needs to stop growing while it is actually seeking good growth." The well-being critique was brought up several times. It was said that the "constant hunt for economic growth" should be stopped and "the focus on well-being can be problematic" as it is "difficult to assess well-being". The denatalist critique was touched briefly by one participant recommending population control mechanisms in developing countries. The Marxist critique was addressed with the questions "Which resources would be capped?", "Who would decide the rate of the capping?" and "What is the end goal [of Degrowth]? Something like an international government who will regulate everything?". Degrowth was also thought of as "stifling entrepreneurship, creativity, and innovation". Other questions asked were "What are they thinking timing wise? Is it multi-generational or within one generation?" which both belong to the Keynesian critique. The environmentalist critique was touched upon with the comment that "it might already be too late". Regarding the Global South critique it was stated that the Global North has the "possibility and space to worry about sustainability issues" whereas these issues are "simply not a priority for the Global South". It was also agreed upon

that the Global North cannot suddenly stop the entirety of their production and leave the Global South to deal with the consequences. Though the participants supplied us with plenty arguments to critique Degrowth, they did not discuss the feminist and cosmopolitan critiques.

Despite these concerns, our participants engaged with the topic and discussed it based on the information we gave them via the PowerPoint presentation. The discussion between Jeff, Luna and John within the first Focus Group was particularly meaningful:

Jeff: When it comes for degrowth, economies are supposed to rise to a certain point, but then it will flatline automatically because there's nothing more we can get because the planet has limited resources. [...] **We need to shift [from fossil fuels] to something else which can power civilization at the same part.**

Luna: We as society have this massive increase in our needs, may it be electricity or food or other products. **But degrowth is working on decreasing those demands. We don't need to treat our planet as badly.**

Jeff: But we have this one tiny problem that you're overlooking: population. We are still increasing. [...] The higher the number of people, the more they demand. **We won't reach Degrowth unless we stabilise our population.**

Luna: The more developed a society gets, the less people have children and the less population growth there is. The last stage is actually a decrease in population like in Japan and Germany. **So if we help the whole planet, then that wouldn't be such a problem anymore.**

John: **I think the more an economy develops, the bigger the focus on degrowth gets.** A lot of economies, for example India or China, are getting progressively more towards first world nations. That's when a change in focus comes in consumer perceptive.

We joined the conversation to explicitly ask Jeff about ways in which Degrowth could be implemented in developed countries. His answer showed similarities to Latouche's concept of Reconceptualising. There has to be a change of thinking on an individual level, Jeff said: "Be the change you want to see. Being a bit more empathetic towards the environment, things can

change”. Also striking in the example mentioned above and in most of our discussions were the frequent mentions of various aspects of Degrowth and sustainability where our participation as action researchers helped to go into more detail on topics that are crucial for a shift to a Degrowth society and to avoid drifting into irrelevance. Within focus group 5, for example, the group discussed an “international Degrowth government” that would take over the use of finite resources on the planet. Here, as in the previous example, the viewpoint of some of our participants was evident, which is currently preventing Degrowth from developing: They were looking for solutions to make the current standard of living sustainable. It was recognized by most of our participants that this currently is impossible as humanity would need 1.6 Earths to cover their annual resource consumption (Global Footprint Network, 2020).

We were able to steer the discussions towards the all-important Degrowth goals mentioned in Latouche’s framework. The confirmation that our participants understood this can be found in the clusters that emerged based on the many mentions of the topics discussed. The **Education** cluster is closely related to Latouche’s goal of Reconceptualising, the insights of our Participants regarding **Policies, Rules & Regulations** are described by Latouche in his chapter about Restructuring. Re-evaluating **Norms & Values** is cited by both Latouche and our Participants as crucial to triggering a process of Degrowth that is “serene, convivial and sustainable” (Latouche, 2010, p. 33). The **Personal** cluster, in which we collected the statements of our participants regarding their personal sustainable deeds, is described by Latouche in the sections about Relocalising, Reducing, Re-using & Re-cycling.

In the following sections, we dive deeper into the analysis of our clusters to better situate the statements made by our participants within Latouche's framework.

Scott and Victor kicked off the discussions about developing a Degrowth society stating that awareness for sustainability must be fostered – either by the government or within society itself. They believe that many people are still not aware of the urgency of advancing to sustainable behaviour. In Paul and Marc’s opinion, sustainable actions need to be taught at an early age by parents as well as in schools to make them a habit.

Martina Wildau (2014) says in her speech at the 2014 Degrowth Conference in Leipzig that “what is needed now is a paradigm shift in education. What is needed now is education that

fosters human values, the good qualities inherent in man”. This kind of teaching has been successfully applied in the Sathya Sai Schools in India for decades. They offer a unique combination of awareness courses that focus on the philosophy of education, religions and faiths, values and life itself, as well as on courses like sustainable development, environmental issues, impact of media, but also value-based management and personality development. Students are evaluated not only on their grades, but also on their social service activities, sports and cultural events. Wildau (2014) states that the Sathya Sai Schools “may well serve as a role model to adopt the philosophy of integrated education to European universities” (p. 2).

Although these schools were not explicitly mentioned by our participants, it was clear from their examples that they envision and desire such a form of education and teaching. They would like to see school lessons in which sustainability is part of the curriculum, thus underlining the call for a transformation into a more convivial society along the lines of Degrowth.

Narberhaus (2016), however, points out that educational institutions often function as stabilizers of the system in place. They are largely resistant to reflection, because they are strongly locked-in by power structures and path dependencies (Narberhaus, 2016). Instead, it is necessary to provide space in which people could learn on critically reflecting their worldviews and to redefine the concepts of wealth and poverty (Latouche, 2010, p. 35). According to Brookfield (2016), this would ensure “awareness of how capitalism shapes belief systems that justify and maintain economic and political inequity” (p. 160). This awareness would ultimately lead to a re-evaluation of norms and values. Many participants of our focus groups presented examples of their own rethinking and were also very vivid about the missing change in thinking of others:

Sarah: I sometimes feel that other people's behaviours affect me or rather my mood. But it only does so when I feel like I'm alone in my choices [...] What's the point of me even doing this while obviously no one else cares.

Olivia: But being a human on this earth is such a privilege that we have this responsibility to cause the least amount of damage. I feel like this is what I should do [...] and it's gratifying [...] to change the mindset of these people.

Sarah: Their mindset is to chase constant happiness, which is not possible. You should be content with your life. Degrowth can make that happen.

In the search for constant happiness, Sarah referred to the social order that monetary wealth and the possession of many goods equates wellbeing. Latouche (2010) calls the overcoming of this and the adjustment of the “productive apparatus and social relations” (p. 36) the most radical but also most important step within his circle of eight R's. It must be made possible that instead of being obsessed and obligated with work people should be able to take the time and freedom “to engage in art and crafts activities, to play, contemplate, meditate, enjoy conversations or quite simply to enjoy being alive” (2010, pp. 40-41). Many of our participants expressed similar thoughts, dreaming of self-supporting farms or small self-sufficient communities and condemning the out-of-control consumption of many of their peers wanting to emulate their idols on social media platforms. Indeed, in focus group 3, Marc warned against the influence of those influencers, especially among younger people who are seen as *the* generation to save planet Earth (Lucy). Instead, according to Sekulova et al. (2017), a change in “reference consumption standards” (p. 173) should take place. The reference norms should shift towards the more frugal levels of a simple lifestyle. However, both our participants (“What's required for real change is actually addressing the human condition” (Eric)) and Sekulova et al. pointed out that this shift cannot be expected to happen on its own. Kopatz (2017) therefore pleads for political incentives to change structures instead of people. This could be done by integrating sustainable content into school lessons. However, our participants also had lively discussions about other ways to implement Degrowth in the larger scope: They exchanged views on the gross domestic product, the very measure that indicates the wealth of a country while their citizen's well-being is largely ignored. Megan gave the example of the

USA, which in her opinion is a country whose inhabitants are not *well* due to the income gap, the fragile health insurance system and the enormous pressure to perform despite the high GDP. This is contrasted by Amanda's experience on the Maldives. Its GDP amounts a fraction of that of the U.S., yet she had the impression that its inhabitants were happier due to their frugal and modest lifestyle. Due to the composition of people from the Global North as well as the Global South in the focus groups 1, 2 and 3 we also observed lively discussions about the role of the developed and developing countries. We witnessed disagreement on this topic:

John: Europe and the USA, Canada, and all these countries: We're already there. But looking at it, that is maybe 15% of the entire world population. There's still 85% then which isn't at their level. We have to focus on that because [...] they're still fighting to meet their daily need. So I think for Degrowth, you should be a lot more focused towards that.

Jeff: Unless you pull out the ignorance out of people's mindset, you can't expect them to do anything. [...] There are so many hurdles before: population control, then education, then actually making people understand. Developed countries can easily reach this, they won't have a hard time.

Luna: But let's say the US reach their natural resource cap. They will just go to a less developed country, for example in Africa, and take their resources.

Amanda: You can see the Western influence on the Maldives as well. Because of the economic development in the country, there are so many resorts, and there's so much money coming in from tourism. There are even new islands built, definitely around 20 new islands a year. They throw sand on top of a coral reef which is definitely not sustainable. Many people don't see this. They just book their holiday and stop thinking.

Our participants agreed that developing countries need the support of developed countries. At the same time, however, they pointed out that this is usually done by imposing Western, and

thus capitalist, values. Madison, on the other hand, said that the countries of the Global North have an obligation to help developing countries build sustainable infrastructure.

Latouche advocates a redistribution of wealth and access to the natural patrimony between the Global North and South. Contrary to the statements of our participants, however, he calls for less intensification of support for developing countries. According to him, it is not about giving more, but about taking less (2010, p. 37).

Ritu Verma (2017) takes a slightly more nuanced view pointing out that the focus on GDP “has led to multiple ecological, social and political-economic crises across the world” (p. 476) and advocates for the dissemination of the Gross National Happiness (GNH) applied in the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan. Verma’s multi-year research led her to express that GNH serves as a holistic development alternative, a living example of Degrowth and capable of addressing the pressing issues around the climate change. This is mainly achieved through Bhutanese citizen’s opportunities “to hold leaders accountable [and] evaluate whether government policies are effective and being fulfilled” (Verma, 2017, p. 482). It enables additional pressure on the country’s politicians to lead sustainably and act as good role models for the country’s citizens (2017, p. 483). To date, it is the only country in the world that is carbon neutral, even absorbing three times more carbon than it emits. Therefore, Latouche (2004), Martinez-Alier et al. (2010), and Hickel (2015), support the call to abandon GDP and replace it with a holistic measure like GNH. This would be welcomed by our participants Luna and John, who also mentioned Bhutan’s unique guiding principles. We could sense their knowledge regarding the framework and principles of GNH was not distinctive. However, in the debriefing of focus group 1, we were surprised that they understood and to some extent internalized the original idea of GNH, societal happiness instead of wealth as primary lens for viewing human progress: Our participants were in favour of actively participating in their own development but also pointed out that there must be certain societal foundations to be able to do so. They would like to see government support such as a basic income, free health care and education, and could thus return well-being to society in various forms like art or by being committed in community projects. In addition, many of our participants discussed their own role in the fight against the climate change. Most interesting were the statements of Scott and Paul, both from developing countries. Scott wants to use his education in Sweden to address the issues around unsustainable living in his home country. He said that mere ignorance of his

peers may be responsible for them living unsustainably and even stated that there are many people who are willing to get involved: “I would like to do something about [sustainability] and I see that there are many who would join me or are interested in bringing this question into the public space.” In his opinion, there is an extreme imbalance of leaders who are primarily interested in their own benefit instead of guiding, explaining and easing their peers’ concerns. We noticed that the other participants in this focus group were momentarily astonished by the fact that many of their peers were not necessarily ignorant, but merely unaware of the issues for which we had come to Sweden to study sustainable management.

Simon: Spreading awareness definitely seems like a necessary condition. It really does need to be organized and planned, because it’s not going to happen overnight. But especially the degrowth agenda can be considered as very radical to some people who are currently in power.

Scott: I’m also looking at the possibility of legislating Degrowth. What if we also have legislations supporting the use of Degrowth and encouraging people to purchase locally produced goods rather than using products from other countries. I believe that will promote circular economy [...] and when that happens people won’t be forced to work for a multinational company but rather within their community.

Scott said that governments should create a shift within society to emancipate Degrowth from the concept destined to change the world to part of a constitution, similar to the GNH in Bhutan. Degrowth experts, however, agree only partially. Cosme et al. (2017) analysed 128 peer-reviewed articles about Degrowth published between 2007 and 2014 and found that - despite the grassroots origins of Degrowth - only 26% of the articles followed a bottom-up approach. Most proposals followed a top-down approach (2017). They reason that “many proposals require direct control by governments (e.g. caps, taxes, and regulations)” (2017, p. 327). However, they also point out that this high level of governmental dependence is contradictory to the intrinsic pursuits of individuals to live sustainably, which our participants also mentioned. Kallis et al. (2015), and Muraca (2012) emphasize the importance of civil society

as active agents of change, but they require top-down incentives, such as the unconditional basic income also mentioned by Simon.

Latouche is also in favour of the bottom-up approach; he names reducing, re-using and recycling as responsibilities that every individual should perform, provided they have the right mindset. While these tasks also apply to companies, Latouche's (2010) focus is on curtailing "habitual overconsumption and the incredible amount we waste" (p. 38) as well as reducing health risks, working hours and mass tourism. Again, similarities can be found with the statements of our participants. Especially our fellow students at the University of Uppsala mentioned that they had greatly reduced their consumption. This may have been related to their temporary move to Gotland, but we observed that they plan to maintain this frugal lifestyle beyond their study period. Marc referred to this time of participating remotely in the Sustainable Management Program as a "personal state of Degrowth." He justifies this with a more mindful, conscious consumption of food and other products, and highlights the realisation that living the Degrowth lifestyle may not be as difficult as some of our participants initially made it out to be. This assessment surprised us as researchers and the other participants of the focus group, who each realised that a bottom-up Degrowth process is certainly possible.

By means of the focus groups, we were able to work out potentials for improving Degrowth and to underpin the statements of our participants with concepts from experts. An early education in sustainability is immensely important to instil norms and values such as altruism, justice and respect, and to break through neoliberal orientations such as the focus on money and material goods. Governments as well as companies, each led by people with a certain attitude, must realise that the current course cannot be continued in its present form. To achieve this, a process, similar to Latouche's eight R's must be set in motion. Our participants managed to work through much of this circle themselves, ultimately no longer condemning Degrowth as utopia, but recognising it as a movement with an immensely important concern.

6 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to inquire what is needed to make Degrowth more tangible. To determine this, we started a Degrowth dialogue with people who did not have extensive knowledge of the concept beforehand. We created a safe space, gave the participants more information about Degrowth and discussed with the participants to find the answers together. Through these discussions and all the readings to prepare for the focus groups, we have learned a great deal. We are even more convinced that Degrowth offers a solution to combat the climate change, amend social inequality, restore balance, and improve well-being. It was very important for us to create meaning with our thesis and to be actively involved in the Degrowth dialogue with our participants. Though the action research approach was new to both of us, we agreed that difficult conversations need to happen, and we should not shy away from them. Of course, we prepared questions and the presentation, however, the truly interesting and meaningful conversations were created together with the participants, and we could not have done this without them. During the last minutes of the focus groups, we received comments from the participants we thought were most unlikely to change or be in favour of Degrowth that they became enthusiastic about it and would continue to inform themselves and others. Moreover, we received messages from nearly all participants after the focus groups took place, thanking us for inviting them to be part of the conversation and that they had learned a lot from it. But as discussed in 3.4.2, we must realise that the focus group carries certain limitations. Though we would like to believe that the participants were genuine with these comments and felt safe enough to express controversial opinions, we cannot discount the fact that peer pressure might have played a role.

Without having read the Degrowth literature, the participants naturally broached Latouche's eight R's and most of the critiques. Moreover, they brought up relevant insights about Degrowth such as the importance of making sustainability more prominent in education and a shift in norms and values. They were also critical and pointed out the missing timeline and a clear offer of 'how' to instigate this system change. As mentioned in 3.4.2. the data gathered from these five focus groups are not representative for the entire population. Nonetheless, we are convinced that by having more of these conversations, a snowball effect will take place, the movement will gain more and more popularity which will help make Degrowth more

tangible and thereby increase the likelihood that a Degrowth society will become reality. Based on our theoretical and empirical findings, we argue that further research should include more perspectives from the Global South, more focus on the issue of feminism and equality, the creation of a clear (political) action plan on how and when to implement Degrowth.

The action research approach has intensified our motivation to become Degrowth activists and we will continue creating awareness and educating ourselves long after we have received our degree. But for now, we want to leave you with a question: What role will you take on to bring Degrowth into realisation?

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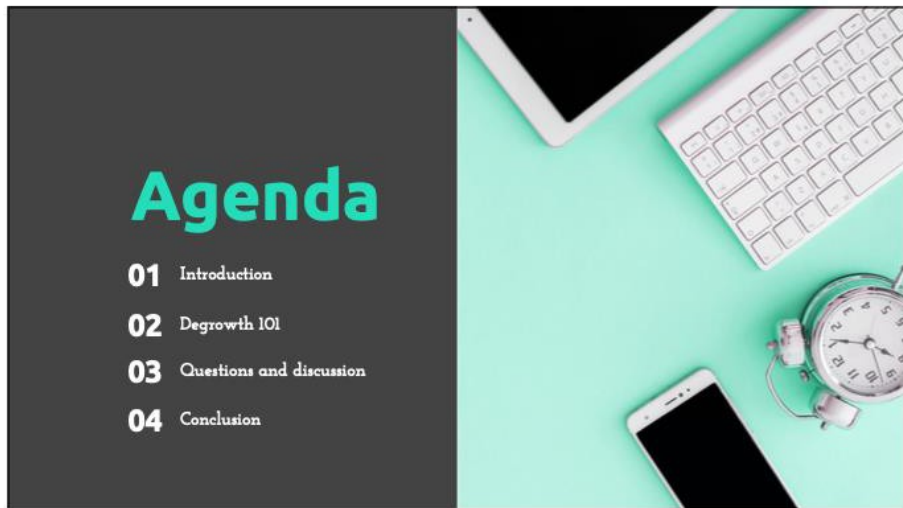
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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Participants

Pseudonym	Nationality	Age	Education Level	Degrowth Knowledge
Focus group 1 – 18 March 2021				
Amanda	Dutch	29	Bachelor	No
Jeff	Indian	29	Master	No
John	Dutch	27	Master	No
Luna	German	20	Bachelor	Yes
Focus group 2 - 12 April 2021				
Scott	Nigerian	43	Master	Yes
Olivia	Hungarian	28	Master	Yes
Sarah	Swedish	23	Master	Yes
Simon	French	23	Master	Yes
Focus group 3 – 15 April 2021				
Kara	American	42	Master	Yes
Eric	British/German	40	Bachelor	No
Marc	Swedish	29	Master	Yes
Paul	Indian	28	PhD	No
Focus group 4 – 19 April 2021				
Percy	Dutch	66	Master	No
Roger	Dutch	46	Bachelor	No
Austin	Dutch	33	Bachelor	No
Madison	Dutch	28	PhD	Yes
Fiona	Dutch	25	Master	No
Focus group 5 – 29 April 2021				
Lucy	German	26	PhD	Yes
Victor	German	26	Master	No
Megan	Canadian/Swedis h	25	Bachelor	No
Will	Dutch	21	Master	Yes





What is degrowth?

Degrowth is a planned reduction of energy and resource use designed to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a way that reduces inequality and improve human well-being (Fickel, 2020).

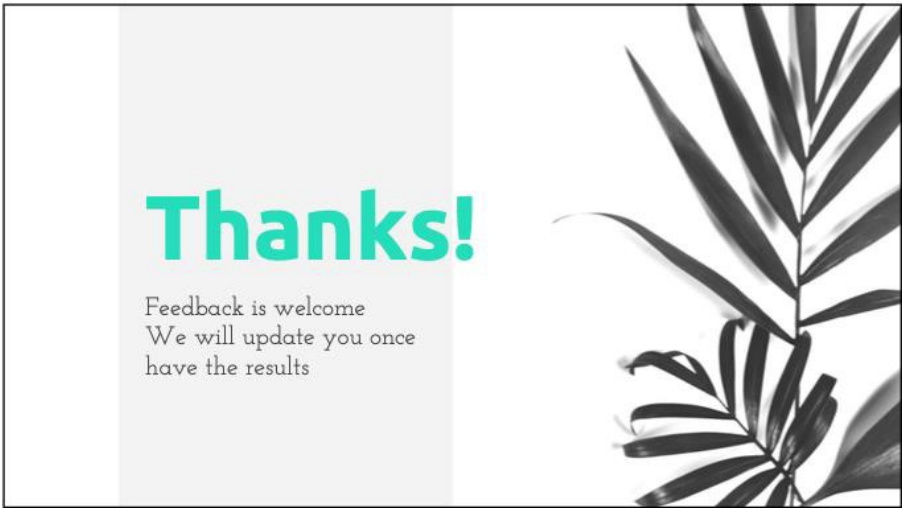
- Focus on well-being and community
- Decolonisation
- Anti capitalism
- A true democracy
- Environmental sustainability

Misconceptions

- Recession
- Anti growth
- Communism

Popular **degrowth** demands

Reduce global consumption & production	Caps on resource use	Maximum income
Work time reduction & Job guarantee	Full reserve banking and local currencies	Dethrone GDP as indicator



Appendix 3 – Opening, introductory & ending question:

Opening question

-
- Please tell us something about yourself. We would like to know where you are from and your academic background.

Introductory question

-
- What is your opinion on Degrowth?

Ending question

-
- Now that you know about degrowth, do you feel ready to change something in your daily behaviour regarding sustainability?
-

Appendix 4 – Key questions

Key questions Focus Group 1

- How would Degrowth be applied in the Global North? How could it be applied in countries of the Global South?
- What role do companies play in terms of Degrowth? What role do individuals play?
- What impact can Degrowth have on domestic and international tourism?

Key questions Focus Group 2

- Personally, what do you do in terms of sustainability? How does it make you feel?
- What do you think about one key aspect of Degrowth being the focus on wellbeing?
- What would have to change in society for Degrowth to be a viable alternative to capitalism?

Key questions Focus Group 3

- What would have to change in society for Degrowth to be a viable alternative to capitalism?
- Does society need a shift in norms & values to become more sustainable?
- Can you think of something different than the gross domestic product to measure wellbeing in a society?

Key questions Focus Group 4

- Personally, what do you do in terms of sustainability? How does it make you feel?
- How can the capitalistic status quo develop into a Degrowth state? What is our task in this?
- How can we change the mindset of people that are focused on capitalism? Is it the task of governments, companies or people themselves?

Key questions Focus Group 5

- Do you have questions about the concept of Degrowth? What are the downsides?
 - Should the Western education system focus more on sustainability?
 - What are the points in the Degrowth theory that can be improved?
-