

Degrowth for transformational alternatives as radical social work practice

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Abstract:

Historically, and in modern times, social workers have been culpable in perpetuating the very systems of oppression that we seek to eliminate. This happens as we are part of cultures and economies that operate out of the growth ideology. Acting in accordance with the growth ideology does not lead to the outcomes that we strive for as professional social workers. Rather, the growth ideology results in growing social inequalities and increasing ecological injustices around the world. Social work can, instead, embrace an ecosocial lens and promote degrowth approaches for transformational alternatives. Rather than reinforcing the existing systems of injustice and oppression, radical social work can take an activist role and bring about urgent and radical changes to promote ecological justice through social and ecological well-being. Examples from radical social work in local and international communities demonstrate the possibility of degrowth for transformational alternatives as radical social work practice.

Keywords: degrowth | ecological justice | ecosocial | ecosocial work | transformation

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SPECIAL ISSUE • Revolutionary social work: Promoting sustainable justice

article

Degrowth for transformational alternatives as radical social work practice

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Historically, and in modern times, social workers have been culpable in perpetuating the very systems of oppression that we seek to eliminate. This happens as we are part of cultures and economies that operate out of the growth ideology. Acting in accordance with the growth ideology does not lead to the outcomes that we strive for as professional social workers. Rather, the growth ideology results in growing social inequalities and increasing ecological injustices around the world. Social work can, instead, embrace an ecosocial lens and promote degrowth approaches for transformational alternatives. Rather than reinforcing the existing systems of injustice and oppression, radical social work can take an activist role and bring about urgent and radical changes to promote ecological justice through social and ecological well-being. Examples from radical social work in local and international communities demonstrate the possibility of degrowth for transformational alternatives as radical social work practice.

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Introduction

With growing global disparities and injustices in the world, both politicians and economists usually argue for the need for economic growth. They are often joined by journalists, leaders within the United Nations (UN) (for example, the Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs]) and other professionals, including some social workers. This is because, historically,

within the growth ideology, economic growth has been revered as good and the answer to our social problems. However, for almost 50 years now, this concept has been challenged as ecological economists have confirmed that growth does not actually lead to the outcomes that create justice, but rather contributes to growing social inequalities and increasing ecological injustices around the world (Meadows et al, 1972). In addition, this notion is challenged in the commentary of the global definition of social work, which states that it ‘does not subscribe to conventional wisdom that economic growth is a prerequisite for social development’ (IFSW, 2014). Indeed, many cultures and societies operating out of an *ecosocial* world view or lens have always rejected the growth ideology, and have instead promoted economies of reciprocity and shared well-being, with an emphasis on justice for the entire ecological system and future generations (that is, *ecological justice*), rather than focusing only on justice for humans (that is, *environmental justice*) (Boetto et al, 2018; Rinkel and Mataria, 2018; Scott, 2018). Situated within this *ecosocial* lens, the degrowth approach, or simply *degrowth*, seeks ecological justice as it is conceptualised beyond mere economics to include meaning and relationships, as Kallis, (2018, 117–18) notes: ‘human activity and work in a degrowth imaginary are centred around care for other humans, sentient beings and their (our) habitats, and they serve the “unproductive” expenditures through which we make meaning’. In essence, degrowth is a form of radical social work as it seeks to critique the growth ideology and implement an array of transformational alternatives within society at large to promote sustainable, social and ecological change.

Through a degrowth approach social workers can better achieve ecological justice, without the underlying problem of perpetuating the very systems that create such injustices in the first place. Increasingly, social work is embracing the *ecosocial* lens as it seeks to promote ecological justice and critiques the growth ideology (Närhi and Matthies, 2001; Besthorn, 2002; Gray et al, 2013; Miller et al, 2012; McKinnon, 2013; Boetto et al, 2018; Krings et al, 2018; Powers and Rinkel, 2018; Rambare et al, 2019). Within this *ecosocial* lens, we acknowledge that our reality consists of interwoven and inextricable links of well-being between people and planet. Thus, seeking ecological justice cannot only focus on being ‘sustainable’ in the sense of sustaining or perpetuating social justice for humans in an anthropocentric lens; rather, it must be broadened to an *ecosocial* lens, with a focus on sustainability for future generations of humans and non-humans alike (Boetto et al, 2018).

This article offers a conceptual exploration of degrowth, not only as a critique of the growth ideology, but also as the alternative path forward to global, ecological justice. We present our ideas from our positions as practitioners and professors of social work and social policy in both Western and non-Western traditions of social work in the US, Sweden and Mauritius, and Belgium. In what follows, we will discuss how, historically, as well as in modern times, social workers have often been culpable in contributing to and perpetuating the very structures and systems within the growth ideology. These structures are ultimately preventing us from achieving ecological justice. Then, we will elaborate on degrowth as both a critique of the growth ideology and an approach that opens space for new *ecosocial* practices. Finally, we will offer examples of ways in which social workers are using degrowth as we explore the possibility of degrowth for transformational alternatives within radical social work practice.

Culpability: social work's role in perpetuating injustices

‘The global agenda of social work and social development’ incites professional social workers to promote social and economic equalities, the dignity and worth of peoples,

community and environmental sustainability, and to strengthen human relationships (IASSW et al, 2012). However, within mainstream social work, we have become entrapped in the growth ideology, which, as previously noted, does not lead to the outcomes of equality and ecological justice; rather, it perpetuates injustices, conflict and global disparities. This is primarily the result of the historical origins of social work becoming a profession alongside the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution was based on a modernist, industrial economic growth model and neoliberal capitalist thinking, and was often made 'possible' through the injustices of colonisation of both people and planet. For example, during colonisation in the US, the government sought to eliminate entire people groups, and/or the languages, religions and communal farming and nomadic practices of indigenous peoples (which had more propensity towards ecological justice), all in the pursuit of growth (Martin and Quiroga-Menéndez, 2018).

Perhaps unknowingly, current and historical social workers have often been culpable in contributing to and perpetuating the very structures and systems that keep service users and communities oppressed and disenfranchised. Around the world, many social protection programmes, or welfare systems, are coupled with a neoliberal, capitalist economic growth ideology, as such their austere programmes prioritise getting people to become 'self-sufficient', and when they do provide limited welfare, they focus primarily on helping individuals who they consider valued members of their groups (that is, citizens), while excluding others within their borders (that is, refugees) who they consider less valued (Sewpaul, 2015). Additionally, they often disregard how such austerity may negatively impact the rest of the world beyond their borders or how it may jeopardise future generations, let alone the impacts on the ecosystem (Jones et al, 2018). There are problems within such welfare systems as they have the goal of *self-sufficiency*, defined within the growth ideology as maintaining gainful employment so that they can pay their own bills and support themselves and their families. For example, a social worker may be working to help a newly resettled refugee get a job. Yet, the job likely does not offer a living wage, it does not offer benefits and it may be at a factory that is creating additional ecological problems that cause health problems for the employees and the community where these toxins are emitted. These are just a few examples of ecological injustices noticeable from a degrowth critique of the growth ideology. Examples of radical social workers utilising degrowth models of ecosocial innovations, such as urban gardening programmes and upcycling shops for possible employment for service users such as refugees, can be found in the recent work by Matthies, Stamm, Hirvilammi and Närhi (2019).

Let us look at more examples within multiple levels of social work practice to see that even within a radical social work framework, without decoupling our ideas of success from the growth ideology, we are stuck perpetuating ecological injustices. For instance, a radical social worker who is working with a local community centre that has a food bank may create connections with local farmers to secure their produce in order to distribute it to community members facing food insecurity. However, if the farms are not employing ecological justice in their farming practices (for example, unfair labour practices with migrant workers or toxins used for growing food), then, ultimately, they are contributing to the perpetuation of those injustices. Additionally, many dry goods of high calorific and low nutritional value, as well as large ecological footprints, are often secured through corporate donations to food banks. These food items are often a short-term solution to immediate hunger, while the consumption of such foods has been shown to lead to other long-term health problems (for example,

obesity, diabetes and hypertension). (For radical social work seeking to critique and address these ecological injustices in the food systems in Kansas, US, see, for example, the Wichita Area Sustainability Initiative.¹)

Another example is that of a radical social worker who thinks that they are working to improve international fair-trade legislation and create innovative policies that help service users and communities with employment at a structural level. While this may result in a ‘win’ as it creates job opportunities that put more people to work and off welfare, it may not take into account the broader ecological injustices at play. For instance, an organisation may be established for the purpose of marketing and selling fair-trade products. However, these products may be marketed and sold in international venues as novelties or non-essential items. While it provides economic gain, and thus more security, for the person who is selling their products, it feeds into the consumer culture of the purchasing party and may create a burden on the environment and the people in the community where the product is being made if ecologically just practices are not being employed. Thus, this intervention as a radical social work practice is still stuck in perpetuating the growth ideology that results in ecological injustices. Alternatively, a radical social worker using a transformational degrowth approach, such as with Etta Projects in Bolivia, has helped to create a project that trains indigenous women leaders to cultivate medicinal herbs and create products (for example, soaps, lotions, creams, medicines and smoothies) to provide for sale in their own communities. This provides for urgent health care needs, as well as promoting healthy ecosystems through organic gardening.²

From the preceding examples, a social worker, at any level of practice, operating within the growth ideology may, unknowingly or seemingly without options, contribute to the injustices that they are working so tirelessly to address. If social work is to divest itself of this culpability with ecological injustices, it must look at both: alternative ways to look at the labour market, including measures of success; *and* systemic change. Thus, rather than reinforcing the existing systems of injustices situated within the growth ideology, social work can be transformational in bringing about urgent and radical changes to promote ecological justice through social and ecological well-being. In the following, we will provide further examples of such radical social work. However, first, we examine how degrowth offers a radical critique of the growth ideology, and how social work can embrace degrowth as an alternative to the failing growth ideology.

Degrowth: critique of the growth ideology

Degrowth transforms the narrative; indeed, it even includes the need to reframe problems with new terms within the ecosocial lens. There is a worldwide emerging degrowth movement of social activists and intellectuals, including some radical social workers, which has been gaining momentum for the past several years, including international scholarly journals, publications, blogs, conferences and trainings. The movement’s academic frontrunners are a group of ecological economists from the Autonomous University of Barcelona with a solid foundation in the environmental justice movement (for example, [Martinez-Alier, 2002](#)). Their 2015 publication *Degrowth* (D’Alisa et al, 2015) is a collection of short essays by scholars worldwide that attempts to outline the vocabulary for an alternative new era (for an overview of the state of the degrowth discussion, see [Kallis, 2018](#)). Here, ‘degrowth’ refers to an

approach at the interface of two lines of thinking: a fundamental change in economics, away from the growth ideology; and the search for a broad shift in world view to embrace the ecosocial lens.

In 1972, the economic growth debate went public, never to disappear from the agenda – albeit with regular ups and downs – through the publication of a report to the Club of Rome, *Limits to growth* (Meadows et al, 1972), which included a plea for ‘zero growth’. The same year, the ecological economist Herman Daly (1972) launched the concept of a steady-state economy, and the term ‘décroissance’ (that is, degrowth) was put forward by the French eco-philosopher André Gorz (later adopted by Serge Latouche, among others). They represent two lines in the criticism of growth: an Anglo-Saxon criticising the economic focus on gross domestic product (GDP) growth from within economics; and a European who starts from a criticism of the way in which economists think about reality (Kallis, 2018). Therefore, from the start, a number of terms appeared referring to an alternative to ‘growth’. Later, more terminology, such as ‘post-growth’, ‘a-growth’ and ‘anti-growth’, was added. After all, a critique of economic growth has a variety of viewpoints and so does the answer to them. While the emphasis in the 1970s was mainly on the limits to the earth’s natural resources, later years also addressed the relation between growth and inequality, its problematic connection with development thinking, and the troublesome link between continued growth and happiness. Unsurprisingly, the use of the term ‘degrowth’ is ambiguous and the corresponding movement is diverse (Eversberg and Schmelzer, 2016).

A constant question in the debate is what exactly is meant by ‘growth’. Does it mean GDP growth, a concept in purely monetary terms, or does it refer to the economy’s material impact? The latter content is what interests ecological economists since they view the economy in terms of matter and energy flows. Their view is based on the work of the Rumanian economist Georgescu-Roegen (1971), who demonstrated that the economic system is embedded in the earth’s biosphere. This explains why the economy cannot evade the laws of thermodynamics and ecology, and therefore that never-ending material growth is impossible and unsustainable. However self-evident the idea may now appear to the majority, they still find it extremely difficult to accept the consequence that the material shrinkage of the economy is a necessity since the limits of biophysical feasibility have already been exceeded.³

There is a clear link between increases in GDP and the increasing ecological impact through energy and resource consumption and the related pressure on the environment. Economic growth advocates put forward a way out by decoupling GDP growth from environmental impact. Here, increased efficiency through technological innovation is of key importance. This is the agenda of the ‘green economy’, which would allow for ‘sustainable growth’. As a matter of fact, improved efficiency is possible and necessary. However, practice has shown that resource reduction through increased efficiency often leads to a rise in consumption volumes known as the ‘rebound effect’ (for example, as cars now consume less gasoline, people may decide to drive more as a result of saving money on fuel).

In order to achieve ecological objectives, decoupling should therefore not only be ‘relative’ (a smaller impact per product unit), but ‘absolute’, which entails a decrease of the total volume of resources used. For example, preventing catastrophic climate change requires the absolute decoupling of economic production from greenhouse gas emissions down to a level that the planet’s ecosystem can sustainably process.

Today's practice is still a long way from reaching that level. Indeed, decoupling should happen fast enough to avoid short-term catastrophic consequences and, at the same time, be significant enough to enable the planet's ecosystem to be restored (Raworth, 2017). There is no doubt that practices can be improved, but there is no empirical evidence that GDP growth can be decoupled from growth in resource and energy consumption (Hickel and Kallis, 2019; Parrique et al, 2019). In other words, the green economy's aim of 'sustainable growth' is an illusion.

This leads us back to those lines of thought that take biophysical limits seriously. Since efficiency (for example, 'green technology') alone will not save us, Wolfgang Sachs (1999) introduced the principle of 'sufficiency' into the debate. Along that line, the term 'sufficiency economy' is used today (Dietz and O'Neill, 2013), as is 'prosperity without growth' (Jackson, 2011). The bottom line in all such proposals is that there should be a shift of focus from GDP growth to achieving ecosocial goals (that is, meeting the needs of all within the planet's capacities). This is exactly what Kate Raworth (2012) envisages in her concept of 'a safe and just space for humanity': it is a space represented as a doughnut, delineated by two concentric circles respectively marking the planetary boundaries (Steffen et al, 2015) and a social minimum to be pursued. 'Doughnut economics' (Raworth, 2017), at any rate, implies a reduction in material resource consumption, but not necessarily in value creation – at least when conventional monetary terms are abandoned.

The growth debate actually leads us as a society to revise what we believe has value, which is a world view or paradigm shift rather than a mere economic task. Ivan Illich phrased the idea as 'breaking the addiction to growth' (cited in Azam, 2017). This is precisely what the term 'degrowth' covers: the development of a new ecosocial world view or lens (including cultural, political, social and economic) as opposed to the dominant ideology of growth and development situated in the anthropocentric world view. Although the term 'degrowth' originates from economics, it is not an economic concept for the opposite of growth, 'negative growth' or 'recession'. Since this association is readily made, the term is also being called into question by supporters of the degrowth movement since it is misleading. Besides, some believe that the negative wording does not sound very appealing for a positive agenda of change. Raworth (2015; 2017) prefers the name of the agenda to be representative of the social and ecological objectives pursued, for which she herself uses the image of a doughnut. In her opinion, it is better to be 'agnostic' about growth because even when GDP is no longer the criterion for success, some initiatives will still lead to GDP growth, while others will have an adverse effect on it.

Kallis (2015) rejects this criticism since 'degrowth' clearly reflects the need to reduce the global ecological footprint, starting with the ecological footprint of the wealthy. Moreover, the growth ideology seems stronger than ever before, so talking about degrowth is definitely subversive. Unlike positively phrased goals, the word cannot possibly be co-opted by capitalism: 'less' will not sell. Kallis also points to the fact that 'degrowth' brings people together in a movement, whatever their differences of opinion about the name. The name stands for 'a pluralistic and diverse social movement in which various currents of thought, experiences and strategies to build autonomous and frugal societies converge. Degrowth is not an alternative, but a matrix for alternatives' (Azam, 2017). This way, the movement joins the rich variety of social movements striving for a different economy, one that is socially and ecologically embedded. Given the complexity of the world and the necessary

transition, plurality is positive. After all, [Kallis \(2015\)](#) notes, not every approach and its related terminology will catch on equally well in every context.

Indeed, there is certainly a place for social work to join the movements for another economy and their critique on growth, without taking a position in the discussion on the name. More important for social work is the position of degrowth in the development issue and the search for alternative pathways.

Development through growth?

A major degrowth theme is the critique of development ([Escobar, 2015](#)), even when it is called 'sustainable'. The world community launched sustainable development, by the end of the last century, as a project to tackle poverty and environmental problems simultaneously ([WCED, 1987](#)). What it meant and how it should be done was, from the very start, the subject of ideological-political controversy and a wide range of different interpretations were circulating from the Left to the Right. We should bear in mind that the agenda of sustainable development was launched by the end of the 1980s when neoliberalism was already rising. Neoliberalism is characterised by a capitalist free market promoting individualisation, both in the goal to benefit from potential wealth and in its assumption of personal responsibility for economic downfalls, rather than collective welfare ([Sewpaul, 2015](#); [Jones et al, 2018](#)). Such neoliberal societies typically reduce government social protection programmes at the expense of their constituents, not to mention the lack of concern for the ecosystem ([Jones et al, 2018](#)). Therefore, it is not surprising that development, in the then dominant interpretation, was placed within a neoliberal, capitalist framework, where hope remains pinned on economic growth. This is reflected, among other things, in the so-called 'triple bottom line', which summarises the dimensions of sustainable development as '*people, planet, profit*'. The later attempt to rename the economic dimension as '*prosperity*' rather than '*profit*' never made it as the standard term ([Peeters, 2012](#)).

Even the UN's recent SDGs are still promoting 'sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth' as an objective.⁴ If the objective is to create prosperity in a sustainable way, this phrasing confuses the means with the aims, to say the least. Should growth still be necessary in some parts of the world for some length of time, to aim for it as a global objective is, as shown earlier, an undesirable and impossible route. Moreover, the Global Footprint Network has found out that the focus on development pays too little attention to ecological sustainability ([Wackernagel et al, 2017](#)). The major progress made, thanks to the agreement on the 17 SDGs, as well as the enthusiasm that goes with it, must not make us forget that this is a political compromise that, as yet, does not wish to erase 'sustained growth' from its vocabulary.

The focus on growth through profit often resembles a dance around a golden calf, with two camps opposing each other. In order to put the economy back on track, some people favour government investments, whereas others advocate public spending constraints to enhance private investment. This can be identified as the modern controversy about which party is best placed to create social value: the state or the market. Both positions hold each other hostage in a conflict with no way out. They represent two sides of the same coin since the substantial issue, namely, the need to achieve continued economic growth, is never questioned.

Conversely, the degrowth movement stresses that growth, even when meant to solve problems, is a paradox. Not only – despite investments in 'green technology' – does

the global ecological footprint increase without there being an absolute decoupling of economic growth from resource consumption, but growth is also achieved at the expense of equality – remember the studies by the French economist Thomas Piketty (2014) – through various means of unequal exchange. Moreover, growth is at the expense of anything related to care and community spirit. Indeed, these do not mesh with the logic of the pursuit of (private) profit. Furthermore, since growth should always be sustained, the market continues to take over more and more domains of human life, thereby creating an insatiable lifestyle. As a result, happiness remains an idle promise. In summary, achieving a better, more humane world through growth seems to be sheer torment.

Therefore, the argument that growth is indispensable for people who cannot meet their basic needs (for example, individuals and communities, such as so-called ‘developing world’ nations) is mainly a trap. The idea that growth should come first keeps putting satisfaction off to the future while new inequalities are being created and the ecosystem is being put under irreversible pressure: ‘Growth cannot reduce inequalities; it merely postpones confronting exploitation’ (Kallis, 2018: 2). A recent study calculated the overall needs satisfaction on the basis of the doughnut model and made a plea for a different approach to development:

Overall, our findings suggest that the pursuit of universal human development, which is the ambition of the SDGs, has the potential to undermine the Earth-system processes upon which development ultimately depends. But this does not need to be the case. A more hopeful scenario would see the SDGs shift the agenda away from growth towards an economic model where the goal is sustainable and equitable human well-being. (O’Neill et al, 2018: 93)

Such views are a lead for degrowth to reflect on a genuine alternative that is distributive by design while respecting the environment and leaving room for meaningful lives. Economically, ‘degrowth is when social and environmental conditions improve, and GDP inevitably declines as a result’ (Kallis, 2018: 9). This idea diverts from the conventional economic logic and corresponding austerity measures. Therefore, degrowth must go beyond economic discourse: it ‘signals a new “imaginary”: a different set of ideas about what society is and what it should pursue’ (Kallis, 2018: 10). This may mean different things in different places of the world:

Degrowth in the North will reduce the demand for, and prices of, natural resources and industrial goods, making them more accessible to the developing South. However, degrowth should be pursued in the North, not in order to allow the South to follow the same path, but first and foremost in order to liberate *conceptual* space for countries there to find their own trajectories to what they define as the good life. In the South there is a wealth of alternative cosmovisions and political projects such as Buen Vivir in Latin America; Ubuntu in South Africa; or the Gandhian Economy of Permanence in India. These visions express alternatives to development, alternative trajectories of socio-economic system. (D’Alisa et al, 2015: 5, emphasis in original)

Degrowth in order to flourish

Capitalism and its growth dynamics are not a law of nature, but a historical fact, a social construct developed in reaction to specific conditions. We cannot focus here on its historical origin, but will limit ourselves to the following consideration. Several analyses point to an existential need in European society during the transition from the late Middle Ages to modernity, among other things due to the Black Death epidemic followed by a population boom. Life was felt as threatened by permanent scarcity to which the economy of traditional communities did not provide a solution: 'In order to satisfy their unfulfilled needs, individuals tried to break bonds with their communities and to autonomously take up new and more effective, growth-oriented, courses of action' (Romano, 2015: 87). Fear of necessity and the motivation to overcome scarcity became a cultural leitmotif that legitimised the accumulation of capital and, in so doing, shaped a new economic order. This order wants us to be thrifty so as to be able to invest in the future, and always to be industrious, for instance, by retiring at a later age. On the other hand, it wants us to be consumers during our free time in order to spend so that the growth machine keeps turning. Is this what should give meaning to our lives? No wonder people grow ill from stress.

In contrast, degrowth falls within a radical, ecosocial paradigm shift, with abundance rather than scarcity as its principle. In the traditional environmental activist's ears, this may sound like heresy since thinking in terms of a possible ecological collapse as long as the ecological footprint does not decrease would require mitigation instead. However, this line of thought sticks with the scarcity scope because abundance is interpreted as the consumption of commodities. The key to solving this confusing interpretation is to realise that modernity tried to find an answer to scarcity through a process of individualisation. Meaning, it is every individual's duty to try and meet their own needs. With scarcity as a preconception, this involves competition, which produces winners and losers. Yet, in that competition, scarcity shows itself as a socially constructed phenomenon. Economic growth, then, would be a remedy to prevent real scarcity, and thus escalating social conflicts. However, as already said, the paradoxical effect is producing problems that we can understand as real scarcity.

Degrowth is to embark on a totally different approach. 'The realm of meaning starts where the realm of necessity ends', is what the editors of *Degrowth* (D'Alisa et al, 2015: 220) stated. What matters is to set limits to the realm of scarcity devouring ever more areas of life and to free the search for meaning from the paradox of growth: 'Finding meaning alone is an illusion that leads to ecologically harmful and socially unjust outcomes since it cannot be sustained for everyone' (D'Alisa et al, 2015: 220). As an answer, degrowth proposes a double shift of perspective: frugality in the private domain and meaningful expenditures in the public sphere (for example, culture, art and celebrations). Basically, it is a world view or paradigm shift that lays the foundation for a different, non-capitalist economic orientation.

Perilous consumerism, which is tantamount to the generalisation and privatisation of luxury, will be superseded by the acknowledgement that the individual's life will necessarily be characterised by frugality. When people share and cooperate rather than compete with each other, everybody's needs can be met. In addition, society's collective energy will not be exhausted. Therefore, every society should decide how to use its surplus. In this way, medieval communities managed to build their cathedrals and several cultures made large expenditures on grand celebrations. These are instances

of the creation of collective meaning within the public sphere (Romano, 2015). Today, however, the social surplus is spent in privatised squandering as a function of the accumulation of capital. In contrast, meaningful public spending of the social surplus must be understood as deliberately holding back the ongoing investments with regard to the ever-increasing accumulation of capital. What is thus gained is a public space that enables individuals and their communities to lead flourishing lives. This ultimately also opens a space for ecological justice. The recognition of (intrinsic) limits implies the recognition of the unavoidable relatedness of humans with other beings and the earth, as well as a possible source of meaning (Peeters, 2012), with degrowth expressed as a relationship of care.

Commons to cooperate and share

Degrowth's proposal may seem abstract but a number of civil initiatives are beginning to embody this alternative, for example, giveaway shops, repair cafes, community gardens, community supported agriculture (CSA) farms, cooperatives, community land trusts and so on. Also, many indigenous cultures have long-established systems of reciprocity for common ecological well-being, such as communal property for agriculture (Martin and Quiroga-Menéndez, 2018; Scott, 2018). Indeed, the commons is a worldwide phenomenon. Such initiatives in Western, industrialised societies constitute a transformation of social relations and are therefore often called 'social innovations' (Peeters, 2017b). These are localised actions and initiatives enabling people to meet their social and ecological needs and challenges for which no adequate answer could be found on the private market, or in government policy. It is essential that citizens operate from the perspective of civil society and open up a source that diverts from the hopeless opposition of market and state. From an economic point of view, a whole domain of value creation is re-explored and developed.

It is no coincidence that civil economic initiatives emerge in times of economic crisis. Yet, this explanation does not suffice as they were already developing before the present crisis. It appears as a recurrent phenomenon in European history whenever private market forces begin to dominate: the late Middle Ages saw the emergence of guilds and commons; and in the 19th century, cooperatives came into being (De Moor, 2013). Each time, the objective is for people to find alternative economic institutions that are less dominant and so allow for people's say and involvement. Moreover, a crisis of the old institutions offers opportunities to spread innovative social-economic forms. Ultimately, this boils down to structural social change.

Today, plenty of movements worldwide are aiming for a different economy than neoliberal capitalism, each with their specific emphases, history and embeddedness. In addition to the degrowth movement, for instance, there are the cooperative movement, the commons movement, the social and solidarity economy and the movement for a care-centred economy, in addition to specific movements focusing on sharing cities, the open exchange of seeds, local food and so on. Usually, the core of the desired transition reveals the motivation for their economic activity, namely, the shift from profit for its own sake towards a contribution to the common good (Peeters, 2017a). As an alternative to the scarcity economy, the practices of the commons probably represent the desired paradigm shift the most clearly. The 'commons' must be understood not merely as collective resources (whether material or not), as is often assumed, but also as practices of common governance and use by

communities that decide on the rules themselves: 'A resource becomes a common when it is taken care of by a community or network. The community, resource, and rules are all an integrated whole' (Helfrich and Bollier, 2015: 75).

The commons contrasts with the commodities of the market economy and applies a logic of abundance: 'the proposition that there will be enough produced for all if we can develop an abundance of relationships, networks, and forms of co-operative governance. This kind of abundance can help us develop practices that respect the limits of growth *and* enlarge everybody's freedom to act in a self-determined way' (Helfrich and Bollier, 2015: 77). Here, a sufficiency economy is connected with an abundance of relationships opening up prospects of meaningful existence. In contrast with market competition, practices of *cooperation* and *sharing* are central issues.

We can see this happening at the local level in initiatives such as repair cafes and community gardens, as well as in global networks on the Internet such as Wikipedia and free software (Kostakis and Bauwens, 2014). Experiences of the intrinsic quality of a type of economic relationships different from customary market practices are, indeed, playing a major role. The central and meaningful driving force is not individual profit, but care for what we are sharing. This perspective enables us to recognise a wide range of new types of entrepreneurship, which take a totally different direction from those that we are familiar with and that we have been talked into for so long. Equally, we should question numerous forms of so-called 'sharing economy'. Are they new business models within a capitalist market economy (for example, Uber or AirBnB), or are they commons-oriented initiatives genuinely aimed at sharing (Peeters, 2017a)?

Economic initiatives arising from civil society – the commons in particular – are often interpreted as a domain of value creation beyond market and state. Even when these three domains are recognised, a fourth crucial domain is usually forgotten, namely, the household economy (Raworth, 2017). For this type of work, there is no monetary reward and so it is economically invisible, and often fulfilled by women, which further subjects them to inequality and oppression (Raworth, 2017). The value that it creates is not included in GDP, even though it is of vital importance. Ivan Illich called it 'shadow work'. Therefore, novel thinking about the economy should remove this work from the shadows. In this respect, it is relevant to recognise care as a core economic task (Peeters, 2017a). Raworth (2017), among others, points to the household as a domain of socially embedded economy. As such, forms of nearby community economy, including commons initiatives, have a potential to co-support households and thus alleviate their burden (Peeters, 2017a), which is a critical issue for promoting ecological justice within social work. Apart from the classical demand to redistribute, it seems essential that everybody should share the new way of flourishing for which the degrowth movement is aiming. In this way, degrowth is a form of radical social work as it seeks to implement an array of transformational alternatives within society at large in order to promote positive ecosocial change.

Possibility: social work's role in promoting ecological justice

Social work is perfectly positioned as a profession to look at multiple levels to implement radical change through degrowth, including alternative ways to look at the labour market and systemic change, possibilities for decolonisation, and intentional partnerships with service users and communities. In addition to the examples listed earlier, radical social workers are also using degrowth approaches to create

ecological justice by creating policy change through divestment campaigns, organising communities for climate change marches and creating alternative employment opportunities, decoupled from the growth ideology of ‘sustainable development’.

One of the authors of this article (Powers) has joined the degrowth movement and began hosting annual community picnics for neighbours to get to know each other, create social capital and establish sharing libraries of tools, skill sets and resources. Moreover, another author (Peeters) is engaged in his city with initiatives to develop a ‘repair and share economy’, which makes links with community work opportunities and organisations of low-income individuals. The final author (Rambaree) has been addressing injustices within the tourism sector in Mauritius, his nation of origin. In the following, we will further elaborate on this example from Mauritius in order to demonstrate the possibility of using a degrowth approach as a transformational alternative and to discuss social work roles for promoting ecological justice.

Degrowth as transformational alternative in Mauritius

Mauritius, which is located in the Indian Ocean, is a small island developing state (SIDS), with about 1.2 million inhabitants. Over the last few decades, the average GDP annual growth rate of Mauritius has been about 4 per cent. The tourism sector plays a key role in the economic growth of Mauritius. Currently, the country receives about 1.2 million international tourists per year. Over the last few years, successive governments in Mauritius have been promoting the expansion of new hotels/resorts, as well as property development schemes to be sold to foreigners, as a strategy to further boost economic growth and employment.

During the last few years, Mauritius has been experiencing a sharp rise in community movements against new hotels/resorts and property developers as they are being accused of beach grabbing for the appropriation, exploitation and destruction of the ecosystem’s resources and services. In some cases, multinational companies are involved in appropriating state land, that used to be public beaches, for developing privately owned villas/apartments to be sold on the international market to foreigners. Consequently, public access to beaches in Mauritius, which used to be a commons, is now being restricted. Foreigners buying such villas/apartments for a minimum of approximately US\$500,000 per unit are also entitled to have a residence permit and, in some cases, Mauritian citizenship (BBC, 2018; Economic Development Board Mauritius, 2019).

Today, the average occupancy of hotels in Mauritius is about 70 per cent and several hotels are running millions of dollars in deficit (Vilbrin, 2017). Still, the government of Mauritius is continuing to approve the expansion of hotels, with some of them to be constructed on sand dunes, wetlands and cultural landscapes that are listed as United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) world heritage sites. As of 2007, the negative sociocultural impacts of tourism had already started to emerge among Mauritians (Nunkoo and Ramkissoon, 2007).

Several Mauritian social workers (including Rambaree) are intervening against such ‘development’ through an organisation called Aret Kokin Nou Laplage (AKNL).⁵ Social workers within AKNL are involved in radical movements through critical, social and environmental impact assessments, community mobilisation, pressure groups, lobbying, advocating and so on. The organisation’s website highlights that a growth-focused approach is detrimental to society. A key representative from the

organisation refers to the *Vision 2020* report published in 1997 (Government of Mauritius, 1997), where it was already stated that the country would destroy its appeal as an exotic destination for tourism, threaten the ecology of its lagoons and deprive Mauritians of a proper share of their own beaches through the further construction of hotels/resorts on the beaches.

Some radical social workers are also seeking to address not only governmental and corporate responsibility, but also the degrowth possibilities of *responsible tourism* (Duff, 2019). For example, social workers in Mauritius, and other places, can mobilise and empower local communities towards the creation of a 'Community-based Commons for Sustainable Ecotourism' (CoCoSE). Through CoCoSE, local inhabitants/households can set up 'Guests' Rooms' (that is, like AirBnB) and 'Guests' Tables' (for example, lunchtime food in local households), and promote environmental sustainability. Community-based social workers can work with local inhabitants and households in communities in establishing and running CoCoSE, which are based on cooperation and the sharing of knowledge, resources and benefits. Social workers can intervene to mobilise community capital (that is, the natural, social, financial, cultural and built capital that exists within a community) to promote ecological justice. Instead of constructing new hotels, which is based on the high accumulation of profits for multinational companies and the destruction of the ecosystem's resources, governments can support initiatives like CoCoSE.

Discussion and conclusion

In addition to the examples provided in this article, all three authors, in collaboration with other radical social workers, have been instrumental in developing and launching the Climate Justice Program of the International Federation of Social Workers. This programme is a degrowth approach that helps social workers (and their service users/communities) to consider ways to shrink their ecological footprint, to advocate for policy changes and to contribute to climate justice programmes as a way to redress their ecological footprints when travelling (for example, professional conference travel or as tourists).

Even though social work has historically been and continues to be part of the problem that creates injustices, we can also be leaders in utilising radical social work solutions that reject growth and embrace a degrowth approach for radical and sustainable transformation. At first glance, such degrowth practices may appear odd as they are perceived as radical and countercultural to the typically accepted growth ideology in which social work is situated. However, since the dawn of the profession, social work's mission has always been to seek justice in a world of greed and selfishness (for example, creating practices and policies such as universal health care and food security, creating networks of social solidarity, and establishing sharing programmes such as taking turns with childcare duties). Thus, we are not suggesting that degrowth creates any new obstacle to this challenge; rather, we assert that degrowth is an alternative possibility for transformation towards ecological justice that radical social workers can employ, without the unintended consequences of perpetuating the injustices through the growth ideology. Despite challenges in shifting to an ecosocial lens and embracing degrowth, we do believe that it is possible in radical social work practice. The examples presented in this article are just a glimpse of the possibilities through which social workers are already engaging with degrowth approaches to

promote ecological justice. Not only are such degrowth approaches possible, they are critical for the successful well-being of our planet and for us, humans, as a species.

Notes

¹ See: www.wichitasi.org

² See: www.ifsw.org/social-work-action/climate-justice-program/projects/cjp-project-latin-america-the-caribbean-region/

³ There are several approaches to express the transgression of ecological limits, such as the ‘ecological footprint’ (see: www.footprintnetwork.org/our-work/ecological-footprint/). Further, the recent scientific determination of ‘planetary boundaries’ provides crucial insights (see: www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries.html).

⁴ Goal 8 (see: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>).

⁵ See: www.aknl.net

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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