Degrowth – characteristic elements and strategies, and two practical examples from Sweden

Definitions of degrowth:

- “…an equitable downsizing of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term” Schneider et al. (2010:511).

- “Sustainable degrowth can be defined from an ecological-economic perspective as a socially sustainable and equitable reduction (and eventually stabilisation) of society’s throughput” Kallis (2011:874).

- “…a collective and deliberative process aimed at the equitable downsizing of the overall capacity to produce and consume and of the role of markets and commercial exchanges as a central organising principle of human lives” Sekulova et al. (2012:1).

- “Degrowth challenges the hegemony of growth and calls for a democratically led redistributive downsizing of production and consumption in industrialised countries as a means to achieve environmental sustainability, social justice and well-being” Demaria et al. (2013:209).

- “…a project of radical socioecological transformation calling for decolonizing the social imaginary from capitalism’s pursuit of endless growth” (Kallis and March, 2015).

Jörgen Andersson, Fjällbete and Regenerative Agriculture

Andersson, partly in reaction to farming based on cheap fossil fuels, founded ‘Fjällbete’ with focus on the vitality of the ecosystems and of the surrounding local community. Though changing between organisation form – individual firm, economic association, today a stock company – the aim has been the same; to develop models for stronger local economies. One of these models are Regenerative agriculture, part of ‘Holistic management’, which can be described as a framework for decision making when it comes to complex systems such as nature or life.

Regenerative agriculture can be defined as a way of enabling the highest possible vitality in an ecosystem while simultaneously satisfying human needs, leading to a strong and healthy civilisation in a strong and healthy biosphere (J. Andersson, pers. comm. 11 May 2020). Andersson is convinced that a growing measure of interactivity between the ecosystems and the people supported by the land is the way forward. The more people know about what they need and what they could have, the more they can affect what should exist on the land and this will influence which bushes, animals and watersheds are there, adjusting it more and more to the people living in the area and vice versa. For him it is a farmer’s responsibility to make sure that people can connect to the land they are living from, to be the link between society and the ecosystems.

Local capital is another important part for Andersson. It is crucial that capital is made available for small, local companies so that they are not omitted to credits. A local venture capital market is needed in order to create self-reliant societies. An additional means to this end is to set up a local currency. This requires a new mindset which is guided by transparency.

Some of the difficulties or obstacles that Andersson sees is the alienation from nature that people are experiencing, enhanced further by the intermediaries in the food chain, for example the commericals from food companies.

Andersson talks a lot about the importance of grass-root movements and the possibilities of creating together. He emphasises that everything of importance happens around the kitchen table and in local contexts where people come together. The best protest is to find your people and to make sure that your life and your health are taken care of. This way there is no need to convince others, it speaks for itself. People and policymakers will come to you to see what you are doing. This attractiveness will be the driving force of the local movement that is global.

Conclusions

Degrowth can be described as a frame or an umbrella keyword that connects different types of actors, initiatives, goals, strategies, and policies. It derives from multiple academic fields stretching from bioeconomics to justice and its main goal is a future guided by ecological sustainability and well-being for all. It is defined by what it is against such as the capitalistic system, GDP and development, but also by what it advocates such as equality, democracy, localization, and sufficiency.

Strategies involve sharing in different forms, economic instruments such as taxation of harmful activities, restriction of advertisement and strengthening of the commons.

Degrowth envisions an altogether different society consistent of new institutions that is guided by alternative values such as altruism, respect, sufficiency, and solidarity.

Both of the organizations in the mid Sweden region, represented by the interviews, can be argued belong to the degrowth movement. Neither of the two interviewed persons identified themselves as ‘degrowthers’ as such but there are definitely some common reference points and strategies. The strong emphasis on the many values of localization is one. To establish there are some common strategies such as the promotion of local capital. Another common reference point is the emphasis on the individual and the power of grassroots-movements. There is a lot of power given to the individual but also a lot of responsibility.

Introduction

The academic field of degrowth is relatively young but is attracting more attention and has its own research network. With the aim of identifying characteristic elements and strategies, a small literature review were performed. Additionally, two interviews with actors in the mid Sweden region that operate within the frame of degrowth have been conducted for an insight in the practical reality.

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