

How degrowth can improve life quality: Using NonViolent Communication

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Special session: Degrowth & quality of life: needs and capabilities

Short Abstract

The spread of the degrowth movement is hampered by the widespread fear that degrowth severely impedes individual quality of life. This presentation explains the process of NonViolent Communication (NVC), as developed by Marshall Rosenberg, its premises, focus as well as limitations with regard to degrowth issues. NVC has been developed by Marshall Rosenberg as a tool that – through focalizing on connection to oneself and others – helps to achieve and maintain an attitude of Non-Violence (ahimsa). In our societies, people often are alienated of what really is important to them. The alienation is, e.g., furthered through the consumption of goods that meet our needs only for a short term or superficially. Here, NVC can, in a process of 4 steps (observation, emotion, needs, request) help recognize the needs behind the superficial consumption (e.g. of chocolate). NVC as an individual or dialogical process can be a useful tool for individual tensions related to degrowth – it cannot be used in public, unprotected spaces and its use in group processes is limited.

Long Abstract

When confronted with the new paradigm of degrowth, most people react with emotions of fear and uncertainty. The fear often is related to a decrease in individual and collective quality of life. People are uncertain whether an economic and societal organisation which is not based on economic growth is capable of yielding a high or even sufficient quality of life. A possible option to deal such a reaction is to show e.g. through modelling that degrowth (or post-growth) lifestyles are possible that enable high or sufficient life qualities or to show that degrowth societies are, in a middle or long term and due to resource constraints, environmental deterioration etc., a better way to safeguard high qualities of life than growth societies. Both and similar options deal with the fears on a rational way and with scientific arguments – this might not in all cases and for all people be the appropriate way to deal with emotional reactions.

A different way of dealing with the fears is the experimentation of degrowth lifestyles in mostly small scale communities. These experiments are more or less radical and contain elements such as complementary currencies ([Mock, Omann et al. 2013](#)), urban gardening or more comprehensive transitions to sustainability ([Wittmayer, Schöpke et al. 2013](#)) such as ecovillages. But becoming of part of these experiments, in particular of the more radical ones, requires overcoming one's fear of detrimental consequences on one's quality of life.

It is here that more individualistic methods with strong psychological backgrounds come into play that acknowledge the fear (or other emotional reactions) without judging them on their objective well-foundedness. Ideally, individuals experiencing such methods learn more about their individual reasons for these unpleasant emotions in order to gain the capability of dealing with the situation (“growth or degrowth?”) differently and in a more satisficing way. NonViolent Communication is such a method that is frequently practiced within transition town groups, ecovillages, etc. Non-Violent Communication (NVC) has been developed by Marshall Rosenberg in the tradition of humanistic psychology ([Rosenberg 2001](#)) as a tool that – through focalizing on connection to oneself and to others – helps to achieve and maintain an attitude of Non-Violence (ahimsa). The connection to oneself is facilitated first through the recognition of emotions that are triggered through a certain situation (e.g. “should I sign a degrowth petition?”) – these might be, as mentioned, fear, uncertainty, but also hope and urge. This connection is then deepened through considering which needs are at the basis of these emotions (e.g. I might be fearful because I need security that the degrowth paradigm really is a good way to orientate the society). Finally, the NVC method encourages me to take responsibility for my needs, e.g. through aiming for my security through a more profound study of literature on degrowth.

The understanding of needs in NVC is similar to that used in the Human scale development approach defined by Max-Neef ([Max-Neef 1991](#)) in the sense that needs are abstract and not related to specific situations or persons (I need security). It is also similar that the concretization of the needs happen at another level. While Max-Neef talks of *satisfiers*, Rosenberg rather call the links to the specific situation *requests* or *strategies*; those are influenced culturally, biographically, economically etc.

In this way, NVC can also be used to better understand one’s own adherence to those practices one wants to get rid of because of their, let’s say, unsustainability: flying to conferences might be such an example. Through experiencing the process of NVC, it is easier to understand which needs one nourishes when flying to the conference (e.g. comfort or acceptance through the adherences to this widely practised behaviour) and how to find different, more sustainable ways of nourishing this need.

As these examples show, NVC is an individual or dialogical process that can be a useful tool for individual tensions related to degrowth. When connecting to their emotions and needs, though, people become vulnerable and require safety. As the individual psychological stability might not be enough to nourish this need for safety, protected spaces usually are required to practise NVC. Here, safety is established through social norms of anonymity and non-judgmentality. These strategies are in opposition to a public use of the method and cause severe limitations to its use for group processes. Additionally, each individual process is different (my fears with regard to degrowth are not the same as yours; my reasons for flying are not the same as yours) and an extrapolation is not intended. Even though social processes

through practising NVC in groups may stimulate an increase in group trust and social learning, these processes cannot be guaranteed and are not the main aim of NVC.

Another argument used against a wide-spread use of NVC (or similar methods) is its focus on inner-individual processes in a time where outer and systemic changes might require more action and attention. At the same time, this argument is disputable: Change practitioners such as Otto Scharmer, Ken Wilber, or Richard Barrett ([Wilber 1995](#); [Barrett 1998](#); [Scharmer and Kaufer 2013](#)) argue for the need of incorporating individual inner change processes in any societal change process.

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