

# Degrowth Europe in a Convergent World: Differential Degrowth towards Equity within Planetary Boundaries

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**Submission for the session ‘Respecting planetary boundaries while enhancing the well-being of all’.**

*The CONVERGE project has developed a philosophy, a vision, recommendations and guidelines, tools, and a research agenda in support of Convergent Globalisation. The human population is now in the Anthropocene era of the Earth where human impacts are the biggest cause of global change – we are now ‘in charge’ of the planet and its future. Convergence is a process whereby human well-being across different groups merges to equitable levels – within planetary limits. Convergent Globalisation is the result of Convergence happening at all levels. (Parker et al, 2013)*

*‘The old economic paradigm, which is based on a fixation of GDP growth, is leading us to disaster... we need to find a completely new way of measuring the success of society. (Jeffrey Sachs, Special Advisor to Ban Ki Moon on the proposed Sustainable Development Goals, 2012)*

This paper will draw on the findings of the EU P7 CONVERGE project in ‘Re-thinking Globalisation’ in the light of Contraction and Convergence TM. In particular it will build upon ideas proposals developed at an international conference on a ‘New Social Contract for Sustainability’ which focussed on a new sustainability vision for Europe. The paper thus proposes to add a contemporary political context to the discussions, including the continuing fall-out from the financial crisis and the consequent slow-burn crisis in mainstream economics as a discipline and as an effective guide for policy. The paper will propose that taking a systems approach to planning a degrowth Europe in a Convergent world will be essential especially focussing on the concepts of feedbacks and emergence.

Feedbacks are crucially important in the area of economic governance. The Anthropocene era of the Earth signals the necessity for forms of global to local governance (CCG, 1995; Held, 1995; Pontin & Roderick, 2007) – and local to global governance of economy not just for reasons of preservation of life support systems but for equity reasons (Barry, 2012). Lack of this governance is currently contributing greatly to the inequality crisis worldwide as global elite players exploit the governance deficit in order to avoid social stabilising and redistributive systems such as taxation and environmental regulation. These stabilising systems have been established largely through democratic means to mitigate some of the emergent negative side-effects of our current economic system. The domination of global economy by finance means that the more localised feedback

systems put in place for regulation of finance have either been removed – or are increasingly under pressure. More equitable and sustainable societies cannot emerge under these structural conditions.

The paper will argue for the value of the European project as a peace and human development project and look to ways to transform and build on existing structures. It will be argued that the global-regional level is an important level of agency, identity and practice in any developing polity for Earth system governance and human development project. This paper will also address some issues of identity and solidarity in any degrowth project, proposing an approach of nested identities and agency from local to global to re-think agency for sustainability. This will challenge the often assumed association of degrowth with an exclusively localist perspective. The concept of ‘differential degrowth’ will involve the recognition of the right to develop of the poorest on our shared planet, providing an even stronger imperative for ending destructive forms of growth that can actually undermine human well-being.

It will be argued that an exclusive focus on localism can sometimes seem to threaten concepts of cosmopolitan solidarity in the light of the Earth system crisis and the need for forms of Earth system governance at different levels. In this respect the discussion will be placed in the development of the new Sustainable Development Goals and the potential outward-facing role of a new Europe committed to a more equal and environmentally sustainable model of consumption and production. For all its faults, Europe has acted as a world leader in environmental policy – how might that segue into support for a new and more equitable global order respecting planetary limits? What kinds of changes in policy and practice would this involve? Some of the results from the CONVERGE project will be presented as a basis for discussion and development.

This paper will discuss the approach taken to the ‘New Social Contract for Sustainability’ by the German Advisory Council on Social Change which deals persuasively with the need for a new social contract between scientists and civil society for sustainability. It will be argued that this initiative needs to be complemented by a more holistic discussion of the nature of the social contract in Europe today and the sense that this is in crisis owing to austerity measures and lack of a vision beyond growth. This is necessary in order to engage with the opportunities presented in Europe at the present time to change the discourses of prosperity and to begin to embed new concepts consistent with equity and respect for planetary limits. The paper will argue that a persuasive vision for degrowth can only be presented successfully with full acknowledgement of many of the achievements of modernity – including aspects of the welfare state and social care. The gender and inclusion aspects of this will be clearly identified.

The necessary roles of sustainability science in guiding future differential degrowth strategies will be discussed including the roles of social science in this regard. More attention must be paid to the work of social scientists in Europe in the fields of inequality, inclusion and the kinds of strategies and support that support positive change. There is no reason in

principle why pro-poor policies cannot be combined with degrowth strategies that support employment and human rights. The legacy of Fritz Schumacher in outlining the basics for appropriate forms of technology and development will be discussed in this context and key principles proposed. The necessity for a wider discussion of what constitutes responsible innovation has already been recognised in the EU's Science and Society research programme. It is time to bring the knowledge and practice of appropriate technology movements worldwide to bear on what can be an alienating and overly-technical discussion.

The paper will argue that in order to pay due attention to issues of equity, inclusion and social justice it will be necessary to develop a differential approach to degrowth. This should target conspicuous and unnecessary forms of consumption and particularly harmful kinds of production whilst encouraging the growth of transforming modes of meeting the needs of Europe's citizens. It will be argued that this will involve actions across the transdisciplinary range – including forms of cultural action. This will also involve greater articulation of a vision for new and transformed kinds of support for citizens in the vital fields of health and social welfare. Some new and developing initiatives and discussions will be flagged up here.

Strategic and political implications for different kinds of stakeholders and for ongoing EU sustainability debates will be outlined for further discussion.