

## **No good life in a bad life? – Experiences of degrowth-orientated actors in a growth economy**

### *Summary*

In *Minima Moralia*, Theodor Adorno formulated his famous dictum “Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen”. Adorno highlighted the difficulty of finding a way to pursue a good life for oneself, in a world that is characterised by inequality, exploitation and domination. So far, this question has been predominantly dealt with theoretically. By applying it to the current degrowth movement, we seek to deal with this question empirically. In recent years, a growing number of initiatives have developed patterns of production beyond the growth paradigm. However these actors remain in a broader economic context, which is characterised by competitive markets. In our paper, we identify some of the obstacles that such degrowth-oriented actors encounter as well as their attempts to deal with them. Our empirical basis are 13 semi-structured interviews with actors that try to emancipate with their business activities from the growth principle as well as case stories of the database of the foundation *FUTURZWEI*, which publishes stories of initiatives that are experimenting with more sustainable modes of production.

*Key words:* Bottom-up initiatives, Organization of businesses, Conditions for degrowth, Productivity beyond growth

In *Minima Moralia*, Theodor W. Adorno formulated his famous dictum “Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen” (“Wrong life cannot be lived rightly”, in translation by E.F.N. Jephcott; Adorno 1974: 39). Adorno highlighted the difficulty of finding a way to pursue a good life for oneself, in a world that is characterised by inequality, exploitation and various forms of domination. So far, this question has been predominantly dealt with theoretically, respectively as an ethical issue (recently see Butler 2012). In our paper, we chose a different approach: By applying it to the representatives of the current degrowth movement, we deal with this question empirically. More precisely, we seek to identify on an empirical basis the possibilities of and barriers to degrowth-oriented actors in a growth-dominated economy. In recent years, a growing number of initiatives and enterprises have developed patterns of production and consumption beyond the growth paradigm. According to Liesen et al. (2013, with reference to Bakker et al. 1999) “growth-neutral” companies’ foremost corporate goals are not the maximization of sales and profits. Instead of that they pursue goals like fair payment, high quality of work and a production process of high-quality products that minimizes negative influences on people and the environment. Nonetheless, a growth of sales and profits is possible as long as it serves the corporate goals. However, these actors remain in a broader economic context, which is characterised by competitive markets and enterprises that need to achieve revenues from the sale of goods and services. In short, actors that are trying to emancipate from the growth principle and try to act more sustainable find themselves in conflict with the social world around them (Jackson 2009: 151f.). On the basis of semi-structured interviews with 13 actors from 11 German and Austrian enterprises we specify some of the most pressing obstacles such degrowth-oriented actors encounter as well as their attempts to deal with them. In order to examine the question we additionally included case stories from the database of the foundation *FUTURZWEI Stiftung Zukunftsfähigkeit* in our analysis. *FUTURZWEI* publishes stories of projects in Germany, Switzerland and Austria, which are experimenting with more sustainable lifestyles and modes of production and consumption, many of them in a growth critical manner. Our analysis

shows that the main obstacles these actors face can be categorized into three subjects, namely framework conditions, personal hitches and financial concerns.

Regarding the framework conditions bureaucracy seems to be a big issue. The entrepreneurs encounter a high administrative and regulatory burden in their work in terms of organizing financial accounting, coping with the tax system, meeting building regulations, etc. Beside these issues that more or less affect every entrepreneur, the alternative practitioners have to handle problems due to the unconventional organization and/or goals of their enterprises. For instance, financial law allows business owners only to borrow money from banks but not from personal friends. Disputes with the authorities concerning issue like that are very time-consuming and legal advice is expensive. Another powerful framework condition is the economic context in which the actors manage their enterprises. It is not easy for the business owners to establish themselves in a competitive market. As they seek to avoid to externalise costs at the expense of people and the environment, the prices for their products are usually higher than those of conventional competitors. Consequently, they rely on a (in most cases relatively small) customer base that remains loyal to the company. In general, the actors experience the consumerist cultural framework as challenging.

Interviewees mentioned that the majority of people is sceptical towards their goals and actions. They just get very limited support from policy decision makers and society.

Therefore, for them to it is exhausting to “swim against the current” permanently.

Regarding the personal hitches, the protagonists claim to be overwhelmed by e.g. a lack of personal knowledge and experience. Quite often the entrepreneurs act in a field that is absolutely new to them. The reasons for this are quite diverse: Some enterprises are the result of a civil initiative that did not start with the aim of setting up a business. However, the activists realized that to achieve their goals it was ultimately necessary. One example is a cooperatively organised shop for local support of goods for daily life. Other protagonists claim that they saw it to be their mission to start the business either to prove that an ethical production is possible or just because no one else would do what needed to be done. Actors repeatedly have to go through a learning process that includes wrong investment decisions and relying on time-consuming capital raising processes. The protagonists of the initiatives often end up working unpaid overtime due to problems like insufficient financial resources. In some cases, this even leads to physical fatigue.

Even for starting a degrowth-oriented business there is often the need of financial resources, which many of the interviewed entrepreneurs lacked. Most banks are sceptical about investing in such unusual businesses. So the alternative practitioners have to either rely on their private savings or to find individuals that are willing to invest money because of idealistic reasons. In addition, the costs for licenses and patents are a major hurdle the actors have to deal with. Quite often it takes a lot of time until they are able to cover living costs by the work in their company.

However, in our explorative study we could also identify a number of resources the protagonists can rely on. The protagonists revealed profound analytical skills in order to assess the economic and broader societal context of their activities. They are aware of options at their hand and have a clear view of their goals and how to achieve them. This helps to set up a business plan. Additionally, most actors can build on a vital social network consisting of family members, friends and like-minded people. A considerable persistence and passion is also an important success factor. Making use of the right window of opportunity can also considerably ease the early development of the enterprises.

## *Literature*

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