DEGROWTH STRATEGY &

how to bring about social-ecological transformation

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Chapter 6:

Who shut shit down? What degrowth can learn from other social-ecological movements

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"Who shut shit down? We shut shit down!" This slogan has become a common cry amongst activists doing direct actions of civil disobedience, blocking fossil infrastructures such as lignite mines, gas terminals, or the construction of new highways. These actions, which Naomi Klein (2014) called "blockadia", are not only effective in raising awareness around issues of climate justice but have helped to actually shut down fossil infrastructure or effectively prevented the construction of new projects. In this chapter, we discuss what degrowth can learn from existing social-ecological movements – such as those who engage in direct actions around climate justice – and their strategies for systemic change. Similarly, we delve into how degrowth should orient strategically.

We understand degrowth as an emerging social movement that overlaps with proposals for systemic change such as alter-globalisation and climate justice, the commons and Transition Towns – a mosaic of initiatives for social-ecological transformation. Degrowth is one strategic vantage point for movements that explicitly aim at a society and economy beyond growth, industrialism and capitalism – not because it is or should be a key term for all movements in the mosaic, but because degrowth symbolises the most radical rejection of the eco-modernist mainstream of growth-centredness, extractivism, and industrialism. Similarly, degrowth has in recent years developed into a framework for many movements, initiatives, and projects that provides a set of theories, arguments, and visions that give meaning to prefigurative "nowtopias" (for more on this, c.f. Burkhart *et al.* 2020). In the following, we will discuss what the degrowth movement in the narrow sense – the community of activists, scholars, practitioners, and politicians involved in degrowth-related projects – can learn from other social-ecological movements that are part of the mosaic in terms of strategising. In focusing on those movements with already existing links to degrowth as explored in *Degrowth in Movement(s)* (Burkhart *et al.* 2020), we discuss the following questions: Which strategies do other movements employ to reach their goals and to expand their movements? To what degree should the degrowth movement consider these? (How) should the degrowth movement act strategically towards related social-ecological movements?

We argue that in thinking through strategies for the transformation of the current economic organisation to a degrowth society, there is much to learn from ongoing struggles and other social-ecological movements. We highlight four different strategies, which can be found within the larger spectrum of movements of this emerging mosaic of alternatives: Opposing, communicating, reforming, and practising. The degrowth community, we argue, should embrace, actively relate to, and support *all* these strategies and a diversity of strategic actions.

Strategies within the mosaic of alternatives

The question of whether degrowth is itself a social movement, an interpretative frame for movements, or whether it is more adequate to talk of the degrowth spectrum is much debated (Demaria *et al.* 2013; Eversberg and Schmelzer 2018). However, one thing is certain: the degrowth community, with its critiques, proposals, and practices, has diverse intellectual, social, and political links to many other social movements (Burkhart *et al.* 2020).

Degrowth can learn from the various strategies these socialecological movements employ. Building on the many examples discussed in *Degrowth in Movement(s)* (Burkhart *et al.* 2020), ranging from the alter-globalisation or climate justice movements to movements and alternatives such as the commons, Buen Vivir, food sovereignty, non-profit cooperatives, the care revolution, free software, basic income, or Transition Towns, four strategies emerge as particularly relevant. In discussing these, we provide examples of movements that are particularly strong with regard to specific strategies, while keeping in mind that this is an idealised systematisation and, in reality, strategies often overlap. Indeed, the fact that so many movements deploy a mix of strategies might already be an indication of the importance of combining different strategic approaches for a successful interaction with – or confrontation of – the status quo.

Our typology builds on the work of sociologist Erik Olin Wright, which we adapted and built on for this book chapter. We distinguish between four strategies: Opposing (in Wright's terms: ruptural strategies), reforming (symbiotic strategies), practising (interstitial strategies), and believe it is key to also discuss communicating as a fourth strategy (for more on this, see Wright 2010; Chapter 2, for an adaptation to degrowth strategies, see Schmelzer *et al.* 2022). The four categories identified can be further regarded as a development of three strategies that appear in earlier degrowth publications, namely: oppositional activism, the building of alternatives, and political proposals (see for example Demaria *et al.* 2013).

Oppositional strategies create counter-hegemonic power through various forms of public mobilizations and actions. These include protests, demonstrations, strikes, direct action, civil disobedience, blockades, flash-mobs, occupations, or even insurrectionary tactics of riots and the demolition or sabotage of property. In recognising that not all of these actions are legal, it is key to understand that almost all the rights movements have struggled for throughout modern history, including the end of colonialism, women's and workers' rights were also achieved by acts of resistance and civil disobedience (Federici 2004; Harman 2008).

	Opposing	Communicating	Reforming	Practising
Key actors	Activists, citizens	Academics, NGOs, journalists, activists	Parties, NGOs, thinktanks	Practitioners, activists
What it is about	Opposing destruction, creating counter- hegemonic power	Changing paradigms, creating narratives of transformation, connecting topics and movements	Transforming institutions and changing rules	Building alternative structures, creating post-capitalist nowtopias
Activities	Demonstrations, strikes, direct action, civil disobedience, blockades, riots, sabotage	Research, media articles, conferences and public events, public statements	Developing and promoting (radical) reforms, lobbying	Creating spaces, alternative infrastructure, support networks
Typical movements	Climate justice, refugee movement, care revolution, People's Global Action, artivism	Commons, demonetise, the reception of Buen Vivir in Europe, decolonise the climate movement, decolonial degrowth, post- development	Basic income, environmental and global justice NGOs, trade unions	Solidarity economy, Transition Towns, urban gardening, free software movement, open workshops
Strengths	Creating strong symbols, building up power from below	Motivating people, building alliances, shaping narratives and changing cultures inside and outside of movement spaces	Incremental steps towards social-ecological transformation, broad alliances between state and civil society organisations, enshrining social- ecological thought in law	Open and welcoming, experimenting with alternatives, learning different imaginaries, independence
Limits	Difficulties of including visionary politics and alternatives, experiences of (state) repression	Mainly discursive, lack of actors to fight for and implement narratives	Danger of appellative politics to legitimise power, creation of false solutions, dependence on hegemonic power	Difficult to connect with wider struggles and movements

Table 6.1.: Four strategic approaches of social movements

The following three examples illustrate such oppositional strategies or "blockadia" actions where people use their bodies in acts of civil disobedience (Klein 2014). First, in Germany, the degrowth movement held several summer schools at climate camps, in which hundreds of participants discussed degrowth before joining an *Ende Gelände* action and, by entering a lignite coal mine, directly stopped the burning of coal at Europe's largest site of emissions. Second, the refugee movement has not only created a network of solidarity throughout European cities, but, in the year 2015 in particular, the thousands of people that collectively entered Europe through the Balkans have effectively disrupted the border regime of Fortress Europe. Third, the 15M movement in Spain set an example with massive occupations of public spaces as a reaction to the financial crisis from 2008 onward. It created autonomous structures that demonstrated what real democracy could look like and that life beyond competition and commodification was possible.

Oppositional strategies can be highly effective: a recent study has shown that Indigenous campaigns of resistance against fossil fuel expansion across what is currently called Canada and the United States of America, which included militant actions, civil disobedience, and sabotage, have effectively stopped or delayed greenhouse gas pollution equivalent to at least 25% of annual U.S. and Canadian emissions (Indigenous Environment Network and Oil Change International 2021). Often, oppositional strategies create powerful symbols that define entire eras, motivate and transform people, and shift existing power relations in society, thus making things possible that hitherto seemed unachievable. A key limit of oppositional strategies is the difficulty of including visionary politics and alternatives in the struggles, which often focus on opposing the destruction of something rather than imagining or creating something new, even as they do often contain a utopian element. Actions tend to take a lot of energy and time and are afterwards often confronted with state repression that targets systemically marginalised and racialised groups in particular. Thus, there are barriers to entry for these actions, which renders the creation of long-term structures difficult.

Communication strategies are central to many academics, professionals in non-governmental organisations (NGOs), journalists, and activists that engage with and in social movements. Their aim is to change paradigms and to create narratives of transformation. This includes, among many others, activities such as research that explains, politicises, and frames key issues, and the writing of media articles or public statements to create publicity and outreach. It further entails the organisation of workshops, conferences, and public events to engage with the public, to strategise within the movement, or to involve politicians. The degrowth community has – up until now – centred its strategic energy around communication. It has pursued basically all of the actions that fall into the category of communication: an immense output in terms of research and academic teaching; growing visibility in the public discourse through statements such as the "Open Letter: Re-imagining the Future After The Corona Crisis"; (popular) scientific books and media articles; a considerable number of workshops and lectures; dozens of summer schools and large international conferences that often sparked new networks among social-ecological initiatives and some mobilisations (Kallis *et al.* 2018; Eversberg and Schmelzer 2018; *degrowth.info* 2020).

Degrowth has also contributed to an ongoing process of undermining the hegemony of growth in growing segments of related social movements, academic debates, and new fragments of society, by framing green growth as an oxymoron and presenting degrowth as a viable alternative (Hickel 2020). In recent years, activists have also included decolonial narratives in the degrowth framework and have grown awareness related to the importance of intersectional justice in degrowth visions (Tyberg 2020). However, this has only just begun and much still needs to be done. Many other movements have demonstrated the power of communicative strategies: the global commons movement, for example, has created a collective narrative and framing for the thousands of historical and currently ongoing institutions and communities that organise economies based on bottom-up non-market relationships, linking local practices with academic research and political demands (Bollier and Helfrich 2015). Further, the post-development movement has contributed to the critique of the notion of "development." Through on-the-ground knowledge generation, publications, communication strategies, and international networking, it laid the ground for and inspired many other social movements (Burkhart et al. 2020; Escobar 2018, Hickel 2020; Kothari et al. 2019).

Communicative strategies can be very powerful in motivating people by creating a narrative that clearly articulates the problems, provides solutions, and shows pathways for transforming society. A good speech, a well-articulated demand, a powerful political slogan – all of these can make a significant difference, in particular, if they are framed in a way that people perceive them as a new common sense, as can be seen throughout the history of social movements. Recent examples for this are the actions and words of youth climate activist Greta Thunberg and the Fridays for Future movements, which helped put the climate crisis on the political agenda (Fopp *et al.* 2021). However, standing on their own, communication strategies lack the actors and the power to fight for and implement change. They are, so to speak, the underlying work of ploughing and fertilising the soil, on which social movements grow, and with the help of which alliances and counter-hegemonic power can emerge.

Reforming politics and institutions is the key strategic terrain of politicians and professionals in NGOs that work to change the rules of societies and their systems. Strategic actions to achieve reforms could include developing and promoting laws and legal reforms, lobbying politicians and bureaucrats to adopt these laws, informing the public about reform initiatives to create a constituency, starting petitions to raise awareness, or even joining or creating parties. It is important to highlight that degrowth actors do not aim at reforming society, but at a structural and systemic change. That is why degrowth proposals are often interpreted as "non-reformist reforms" (André Gorz) or "revolutionary realpolitik" (Rosa Luxemburg) commonsensical demands that would transform the growth-based capitalist system (for more on this, see Schmelzer et al. 2022). Still, promoting key degrowth political demands such as basic and maximum income, a cap on resource use, or radical working time reductions constitute central steps on the path towards a degrowth society.

Examples of movements that focus on such reforms are the global basic income movement, which uses a diversity of strategic actions,

ranging from petitions to local experiments and demonstrations. A different example would be environmental and global justice NGOs that lobby around local, national, and international political institutions. An interesting case is trade unions, which historically have started mainly through oppositional strategies, but now - as discussed in one contribution in *Degrowth in Movement(s)* – largely focus on the reform strategy of changing laws. As a social movement strategy, reforms are important insofar as they can improve concrete situations and lives through incremental but legally secured change that cements what movements have been fighting for, and because reforms can generalise certain rights and practices that had hitherto only existed in alternative niches (or what Erik Olin Wright referred to as interstitial modes of transformation, see Chapter 2) to the entire society. A danger and limit of this strategy is that political action that strongly appeals to governments tends to legitimise power. This comes often with the problematic understanding that "demanding" solutions from politicians is in itself enough to achieve them (which in the case of degrowth demands is clearly illusionary) and tends to lead to superficial reforms that function only as symptomatic treatment and maintain the status quo.

Practice or *prefigurative strategies* through which practitioners and activists create post-capitalist nowtopias in the here and now seek to experiment with new institutions, infrastructures, or forms of organisation. They are laboratories in which new social practices are intentionally developed, tried out, and practised. They emerge within and despite the old system and prefigure post-capitalist relations on a small scale (for more, see Wright 2010; Schmelzer *et al.* 2022; Carlsson 2014; and also see Part II in this volume). Temporary interstitial practices such as the degrowth summer schools or other political camps around the world offer people an experience of a communal, self-determined and sufficient lifestyle through collective self-organisation, shared care work, and the use of, for example, exclusively renewable energies and compost toilets. More important, still, are the more permanent movements that employ prefigurative strategies: solidarity economy, Transition Towns, urban gardening, the free software movement, open workshops and repair cafes, community-supported agriculture, alternative media, collective kitchens and food recuperation, community housing projects and squats, occupations, municipal energy projects, time banks or regional currencies. Such practices that engage in bottom-up social change are particularly present in the discussion on degrowth. Reference is often made to them to show that the principles of a degrowth society are already being implemented on a small scale today. In providing an interpretative frame, degrowth has, one could argue, contributed in recent years to advancing the visibility and politicisation of these practices.

One strength of many of these initiatives is a relatively low threshold for participation. Gardening with others in the neighbourhood attracts many and does not necessarily require substantial political knowledge. Citizens with various backgrounds, who might otherwise not meet, get together, strengthen the local community, and practice alternatives to a market economy. Community organising and small-scale agriculture are practised and normalised. However, some of these have comparatively high thresholds for participation, as projects can be time-intensive and difficult to make compatible with, for example, care responsibilities. Since these projects often do not involve any political engagement or commitment, they risk remaining focused on their local situation and do not connect to wider struggles, nor do participants necessarily politicise their practices.

What should the degrowth movement do?

After presenting these four groups of strategies, we will discuss how the degrowth movement in the narrow sense should consider these. As stated above, we would like to stress again that we see a combination of strategies as the best way forward. The question is, then, how the degrowth community can widen their repertoire and combine different strategic approaches. The degrowth community is experienced in communication, but less involved in opposing, reforming, and practising. We suggest that the degrowth movement build on its strengths and collaborate with other social-ecological movements and initiatives that have different foci and areas of expertise. To be more concrete, we make the case for three tasks for the degrowth movement: firstly, to intervene in ongoing debates, struggles, and conflicts; secondly, to provide visions and narratives that are concrete; and thirdly, to actively reflect, change attitudes, and act towards intersectional justice.

Intervene into ongoing debates, struggles, and conflicts

The idea of intervening in ongoing debates, struggles, and conflicts serves the aim of bringing degrowth perspectives into new arenas and learning from the ideas and strategies of existing struggles. One example mentioned earlier is the integration of degrowth summer schools into climate camps. Here we have a concrete struggle (climate justice), a local conflict (displacement of citizens or the loss of a forest), direct action (Ende Gelände), and a camp where all is linked to degrowth ideas that are discussed, developed, and practised. Communicating, opposing, and practising come together and create various outcomes, which generate an opportunity for communication to the wider public, politicisation, and networking.

Another example for connecting different strategies and a concrete struggle to degrowth were the 15M protests in Spain mentioned earlier. Here, citizens occupied squares, organised protests and direct action, while trying out direct democracy. The protests were further joined and supported by small local projects that were promoting alternatives to capitalism and could gain momentum from the protests. Others active in the protests followed a reform strategy by joining established political institutions and later entering parliament. Throughout the protests, degrowth ideas informed political action and organisation – and the 15M protest in turn inspired the further development of degrowth ideas and practice (see the chapter by Eduard Nus in Burkhart *et al.* 2020). What do we suggest for the near future? In a post-lockdown world, we hope to see the degrowth community continue to intervene in climate justice struggles, in particular in the Fridays for Futures movement, to connect with the refugee movement and social justice struggles – of which there will be plenty as a result of the pandemic. As the two examples above show, intervention in those and other ongoing debates, struggles, and conflicts provides a moment to make degrowth ideas concrete and to develop them further in dialogue with other experiences and realities.

Provide visions and narratives that are concrete

Degrowth has its strength in discussing and arguing for alternative economies in an academic context and increasingly in public debates around the future of economics and climate justice. Beyond that, it is, however often a struggle to explain what degrowth really is about. To make degrowth common sense, we need a language, narratives, and visions that are concrete and easy to communicate. This requires the pursuit of a well-thought-through communication strategy. Engaging communication should be targeted at various groups, including politicians who are potentially already close to some degrowth ideas but still holding on to growth politics. One example are the ten degrowth policy proposals published by Research & Degrowth in 2015 (Research & Degrowth 2015), which were directed to political left parties and concretely outline reforms that would foster a degrowth economy, including a citizen debt audit, a minimum and maximum income, and a green tax reform.

Aimed at a much wider audience is the project "Future for All", by Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie (Laboratory for a New Economy, based in Leipzig, Germany) and many partners, in which some of the authors of this chapter were involved. Through workshops with visionary thinkers from academia, civil society, and social movements, we developed and published ideas for a utopian society in 2048 and ways to get there. "Future for All" includes degrowth ideas but does not use the word and has a much brighter and more inviting framing (Kuhnhenn *et al.* 2020). In contrast to the many text-heavy and often abstract degrowth publications, this project has made very concrete what everyday life could look like in 2048 if degrowth proposals would be put to practice. The publication aims at communicating in an accessible language with illustrations and concrete scenarios, while also highlighting controversies and struggles within diverse fields of action such as global justice, inclusion, mobility, food, housing, and finances. These visons and narratives can serve as starting points for discussions led by the degrowth movement in circles beyond academia.

If degrowth is to reach more people, it needs to use accessible language and relatable visions. The communication of such concrete visions and narratives needs to go beyond text and purely informing formats such as documentaries, magazines, or popular science publications. This could be art, fiction, or theatre as well as hands-on actions that are engaging, enabling, and inviting.

Develop an attitude and pursue actions towards intersectional justice

As the core of degrowth is built around criticising and reversing oversized economies based on accumulation, oversized economies sustained by a complex web of (neo)colonial and intersectionally exploitative business, trade, and cultural dominance, it is fundamental for the degrowth movement to actively include intersectional justice in its agenda. The moral and ideological power of the movement is weakened unless conscious commitments to antiracism, anti-patriarchy, and anti-classism become an inherent part of its strategy, vision, and actions. Degrowth is about global justice, and one of the main ways to ingrain this vision in the movement's thinking and narratives is to also take practical actions towards working on internalised structural biases and building up political power on intersectional issues. We see changes in recent years by more and more scholars, activists, and organisers from the Global South taking a degrowth position from a decolonial perspective, and thus shaping the predominantly Northern degrowth discourse towards a more inclusive vision (Tyberg 2019; Ituen 2021; Nowshin 2019). For the movement to reach the next level of its potential and unfold more holistically, intersectional justice needs to become a priority.

Conclusion

Degrowth – a movement in the making that is mainly academic and has so far mostly focused on creating knowledge, shifting discourses, and changing mind-sets – should learn from, embrace, and actively relate to ongoing struggles of existing social-ecological movements. As we have argued in this chapter, in doing so, the degrowth community should use and support a diversity of strategies. We have identified four core categories: opposing, communicating, reforming, and practising.

While engaging with a sorting and labelling exercise, it becomes obvious that in practice strategies are interconnected – often employed simultaneously and deeply depending on one another. It is often difficult to pinpoint where, for example, communicating ends and reforming starts or when an action becomes a practice. Thus, while categorising, it is important to remember that strategies are contingent on one another.

The notion of a "mosaic" highlights the vision of building a plural world, rooted in multiple struggles and with many different strategies – composed of different forms of economies, living worlds, and cultures, pollinating, interacting, and collaborating with each other. To differentiate it from the one-way future of capitalism and economic growth, the various alternatives to economic growth have recently been termed the "pluriverse" by a group of scholar-activists from various continents (Kothari *et al.* 2019). We should combine different strategies to build this pluriverse!

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