

**How Degrowth Does Not Grow Equity:  
Normative Justifications for Redistribution Within Degrowth  
Literature**

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*Abstract*

Since the beginning of commercial society, overall economic growth has frequently been associated with improved wealth for all. In the “Fable of the Bees” Bernard Mandeville writes that the classical vices associated with money making, “Employ’d a Million of the Poor/and odious Pride a Million More.” Economist John Maynard Keynes also believed that with economic and technological growth, the standard of life across all progressive countries would be much higher. Degrowth literature similarly envisions greater equity: in the 2008 Declaration from the Paris Degrowth Conference, redistribution of income and wealth within and between countries is considered an essential part of “right-sizing” the economy, while 2010’s Barcelona Degrowth Conference Declaration assigns the “wealthy parts of the world,” “international elite,” “global middle class” with destroying the environment and perpetuating the unsustainable growth model.

This paper looks beyond empirical arguments of Degrowth and focuses instead upon its normative aspects. I link the movement’s discussion of redistribution with classic arguments for equality described within egalitarianism. I argue that if society’s primary moral obligation to degrowth is based on moral obligations to equality, it remains to be justified why redistribution within degrowth is uniquely necessary compared with redistribution policies within the current growth economy. Finally the paper proposes that the degrowth movement incorporate Harry Frankfurt’s ideal of sufficiency rather than an ideal of equality.

**Keywords:** Degrowth, Redistribution, Equity, Egalitarianism, Sufficiency, Frankfurt.

## ***Introduction***

Degrowth's introduction in the international academic community can be traced back to the Club of Rome's publication *Limits to Growth*. The report compared production and consumption models in population, industry, capital, food and agriculture, with Meadows et al. (1972) ultimately predicting that, "the limits to growth on this planet will be reached sometime within the next one hundred years," (p. 23). Primarily due to a fixed amount of earthly resources, the authors suggested placing global constraints on industrial output, global birth rate, material good consumption, and pollution to reach a global equilibrium for a sustainable society. The idea of a steady-state economy had already been raised by classical political economists including Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and J.S. Mill (the latter also directly quoted in *Limits to Growth*), but the suggestion that an equilibrium would best be reached via artificial methods to decrease rather than increase the economy was unique.

In more recent literature, Degrowth (*décroissance*), "is defined as an equitable downscaling 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, Kallis, Martinez-Alier 2010). What is notable about this definition is its specification for an *equitable* downscaling of the economy. Unlike most recommendations related to the economy, Degrowth's proponents prioritize equity over pure efficiency, and occasionally also make a case for how equality is an essential part to contracting the economy. Meadows et al. take the time in *Limits to Growth* to show a widening economic gap between rich and poor countries across the globe (1972: p. 44). In a later chapter on their vision for a global equilibrium, the researchers make their

intentions even clearer: their model world system is one that, in addition to being sustainable, is “capable of satisfying the basic material requirements of all of its people,” (p. 158). The authors specifically offer a policy where, “high value is placed on producing sufficient food for all people. Capital [will] therefore [be] diverted to food production even if such an investment would be considered ‘uneconomic’” (p. 164). Equality is placed over efficiency.

Much of the empirical evidence arguing in favor of Degrowth’s primary objective to contract the economy is familiar and also available in different forms throughout environmental science and climate change literature. Little has been done, however, in the way of analyzing the arguments for equality made by Degrowth proponents. In this paper I will first define and clarify the egalitarian framework I will be applying and referencing throughout the rest of the text. I will build on this by identifying instances of arguments made for equality in primary texts of the Degrowth movement, including the 2008 Declaration from the Paris Degrowth Conference and the 2010 Barcelona Degrowth Conference Declaration. I will then make my argument that policies aimed at improving equality put forward by Degrowth proponents remain to be adequately normatively justified. A parallel argument from the area of climate change justice by Eric Posner and David Weisbach will be introduced, further clarifying the issues with arguments for equality within the Degrowth movement. Finally, as a potential solution to the problems raised, I will walk through Harry Frankfurt’s ideal of sufficiency and explore its application to Degrowth. Ultimately I suggest that the Degrowth movement incorporate the ideal of sufficiency rather than an ideal of equality in the absence of sufficient normative justification for Degrowth policies aimed at equality.

### ***What is Equality?***

To identify arguments for equality, it is first necessary to define the term. Most generally, equality signifies a relationship between sets of objects, people, circumstances, or processes that share the same qualities in at least one respect (“Equality,” 2007). Gerald Gaus notes, however, the term has various meanings and applications in different contexts and for different sets of agents. Within the political and economic spheres, he suggests that a nonpreferential conception of equality is typically understood, where a political or economic system is understood as equal if it treats neither group/individual A or B differently (Gaus 2000). Daniel Hausman and Michael McPherson say that this leaves some amount of ambiguity on what and who theories equalize, an amount of variance that becomes significant when equality is held as an ideal in moral theorizing. Some inequalities in ownership of particular goods like health, income, wealth or social status seem to be of greater moral concern than inequalities for goods like boats (Hausman & McPherson 2006). The variety of objects that different moral theories would equalize, Hausman and McPherson argue, makes it difficult to pinpoint what exactly is morally wrong with inequality itself, or why equality is of moral importance.

### ***Equality as a Normative Ideal: Egalitarianism in Discussion***

The two authors primarily argue against egalitarianism, a strand of normative theory that aims towards equality for all – whether in being treated to the same, being treated the same, or being treated as equals (“Egalitarianism,” 2013). It recognizes some inequalities are morally disturbing – huge discrepancies in life expectancy across different countries, or income inequality within a nation. Egalitarians want to resolve

these inequalities, but vary widely in their valuations of which inequalities are morally obligatory to change and why. Some perceive equality to be of instrumental or inherent value for some other values, a tool to obtaining separate, good states of affairs. Others are committed to equality as an intrinsic good. One form of egalitarianism is resource equity, pushed forward by philosophers like John Rawls who are interested in securing equal amounts of primary goods for every individual. The idea is that so long as people are furnished with equal amounts of some crucial goods, people's welfare can at least be accounted for. Amartya Sen, however, criticizes this perspective as leading to "resource fetishism," where there is a greater focus on providing primary goods than on ensuring that people can enjoy or capitalize on those resources. Sen counters instead with equality of basic capability, where everyone is ensured the same bundle of abilities to do what they wish with the resources they receive (Sen 1979). Regardless of the type of equality, few egalitarians are in favor of simple or literal equality in all aspects, while most agree on ensuring some amount of equality of basic welfare. But philosophers remain divided on what degree it is morally obligatory that everyone is equal for the sake of being equal, especially if the demands of equality are so firmly tied to what and who is being equalized. One alternative to equality, as will be discussed later in this text, is the principle of sufficiency.

### ***Discussion of Equality in Degrowth Literature: the 2008 Paris Conference Declaration***

Several other publications and literature on Degrowth followed from the Club of Rome's report, and in 2008, an international group of researchers from various disciplines held the first Economic De-Growth For Ecological Sustainability And Social Equity Conference in Paris. The participants published a declaration establishing their

foundational framework and primary policy recommendations. Not far into the declaration (2008) does it directly address equality:

“Global economic growth has not succeeded in reducing poverty substantially, due to unequal exchange in trade and financial markets, which has increased inequality between countries.”

The first part of this statement connects the Degrowth movement’s primary missive against a global growth economy to the idea of *poverty*, not equality. It counters arguments from economists like Adam Smith in *Wealth of Nations* (1976) who envisioned that, “when society is advancing to the further acquisition... the condition of the labouring poor... seems to be the happiest and most comfortable,” (p. 99). Benefits of accumulating capital and profits were assumed to trickle down even to the lowest classes, and Mill even believed that poverty would not be an issue once an economy had reached a stationary state.

The declaration directly refutes this claim, furthermore arguing that inequality in financial exchange is the reason for the lack of poverty reduction worldwide. The declaration, however, does not make any clear normative argument for why the issue is with inequality. Poverty is certainly an issue people typically care about resolving, but the claim that economic inequality between nations and not poverty is problematic remains to be justified. It is possible, for instance, to have a world where each country is privy to a different amount of capital but no one is impoverished. It is also possible that there is a world where every country has an equal amount of money and is equivalently impoverished.

What seems to be the highest moral imperative, then, is eliminating poverty, not

addressing inequality. But the declaration's proceeding discussion on "right-sizing", or reducing the global ecological footprint, mixes the two concepts again. In countries where there is severe poverty, the declaration (2008) states, "right-sizing implies increasing consumption by those in poverty as quickly as possible," and that this will require, "redistribution of income and wealth both within and between countries."

Redistribution is a familiar scheme for egalitarian justice. The argument follows that inequalities between people are a result of factors beyond human control, and therefore each person should enjoy the same amount of goods regardless of where they were born, what capabilities they were born with, etc. Redistributing resources is therefore justified because any differences between people are undeserved and unfair, even if this means coercing people into redistributing their goods.

On what basis, however, is redistribution critical to either contracting the economy or addressing poverty? It could be that redistribution is necessary if, in the process of degrowth, the production of essential basic goods like food will be reduced. This would be consistent with the point raised by the Club of Rome that general policies to reduce consumption of environmental resources and industrial goods, as well as pollution, may result in a low value of food per capita that would affect people who are already malnourished (Meadows et. al p. 164). But if abject poverty is the issue, redistribution is not necessarily the best solution to satisfying basic needs. There seems to be no intrinsic value in forcing an exchange of resources from rich nation A to poorer nation B, rather than simply producing enough food and making sure enough goes to nation B. People in nation A could even choose to donate food to nation B, as many already do, and ensure that everyone living in nation B has enough to eat without

embarking on a global policy of redistribution. Degrowth does not clarify why taking resources from nation A to nation B would be morally obligatory for addressing poverty.

The declaration's final point summarizes the elements considered to be essential to the Degrowth paradigm. It reads that the process of Degrowth is characterized by the fulfillment of basic human needs for all and, in a separate point, that the principle of equity is observed ("Economic De-Growth For Ecological Sustainability And Social Equity Conference" 2008). Here the two ideals – guaranteed basic sufficiency and equality – are listed individually. It is possible that the policies of Degrowth maintain as much equality in resource distribution as much as possible, that the movement's recommendations for contracting the economy are upheld by every country in the world, thereby achieving some amount of equality. It is also possible that these policies are such that no country and no individual is left destitute. But as I have pointed out, ensuring equality and providing for those in need are two separate goals, and the former is not a necessary condition for the latter.

### ***The 2010 Barcelona Conference Declaration***

The lines between an empirical objective against an eminent collapse of the global economy and natural world, a concern with global poverty, and a pursuit of equality are further blurred in the declaration from the Degrowth conference in Barcelona held just two years following the Paris gathering. The group in Barcelona (2010) blamed, "an international elite and a 'global middle class'," for excessive consumption and utilization of world resources, explicitly setting a socioeconomic inequality between individuals across the globe that places, as well as placing responsibility for the state of the economy

upon the richer and more affluent. Along the line of previous Degrowth literature, the declaration (2010) states that environmental degradation has made degrowing the economy inevitable. Differently, however, it also emphasizes that, “the challenge is how to manage the process so that it is socially equitable at national and global scales.” Not only is the movement motivated to shrink the economy for empirical reasons, but proponents also see improving global social equity as an essential part of degrowth.

This argument for equality differs from the position of equality in the Paris declaration in that it identifies equality as a separate ideal of value, unrelated to another normative goal like alleviating poverty. Once again, however, the declaration is unable to provide a separate argument for why pursuing equality should matter. Direct policy recommendations from the statement include using redistributive taxes to address income inequality, fund social projects, discourage consumption, and decrease damage to the environment. Redistributive taxes could of course lead to more equal incomes, but again the declaration does not clarify what the value of such income equality would be. Why is everyone enjoying the same amount of income essential to contracting the economy? What is the function of the equality itself? There is also the question of how to validate the coercion necessary in implementing redistributive taxes. On what basis are redistributive taxes uniquely essential to funding social projects or discouraging people from spending money compared to other kinds of taxes like a carbon emissions tax, which would tax people directly for the pollution that they are responsible for?

One of the concluding remarks from the Barcelona declaration (2010) is that when the economy of *wealthy* parts of the world quietly contracts and other environmental damages are constrained, the general well-being (of all individuals, it is

assumed) will increase. Once again the onus for unsustainable growth is placed on wealthier countries, with the implication that poor countries are not as responsible for either the damages that have merited Degrowth, or for implementing Degrowth policies. But if the global economy will collapse, is it not necessary for all economies to participate in Degrowth? Even if the rich were the ones primarily responsible for exponential industrial growth and resource depletion, would it not be most effective for every nation to participate equally in Degrowth given that the global economy impacts everyone?

### ***Egalitarianism in Climate Change Justice: A Parallel***

The Barcelona declaration (2010) argues that the wealthy and “international elite” should pay and participate in efforts for degrowth because they are primarily responsible for unsustainable consumption and appropriation of worldwide resources. Given the connection between the environmental interests of the Degrowth movement and climate change justice, I would now like to discuss a topic of distributive justice within the climate change policy debate called the, “polluter pays” principle that runs parallel to Degrowth’s redistributive policies.

“Polluter pays” is the notion that those responsible for polluting should pay for the harm they have caused. Based on this principle, it is often argued that presently rich countries should primarily pay for climate change policies because they polluted the most and became rich by extensively polluting the earth. Therefore the wealthy should limit their emissions the most, pay more for carbon emissions than poorer countries, or even pay poorer countries directly in order to pollute. There are also arguments using this

principle that wealthy nations should additionally compensate developing nations because wealthy nations capitalized on resources presumably available to everyone and left developing countries to suffer with the effects of climate change without equivalent economic means.

Akin to the points I have raised against the redistributive measures posed by Degrowth supporters, Posner and Weisbach in their publication *Climate Change Justice* (2010) argue that the basic principles of corrective justice are inappropriate for the problem of climate change. The authors believe that the polluter pays principle and arguments for corrective justice seem attractive partly due to, “suppressed redistributive and welfarist assumptions,” (Posner & Weisbach p. 116). Degrowth is transparent about its interest in redistribution. Serge LaTouche in his book *Farewell to Growth* (2009) wrote that redistributive policies will be able to reduce consumption by reducing the wealthy’s ability to consume, as well as remove incentives for all people to consume by example/following the rich consumptive class (LaTouche 2009). This is similar to an argument made by environmentalists that developed countries like the U.S. contribute more to abating pollution than developing countries like India and China. But as Posner & Weisbach point out, this assumes that all wealthy people live in the U.S. and all poor people live in developing nations, when there are wealthy people living in developing nations and poor people living in the U.S. who would now have to contribute more to this climate change fund. Likewise, a redistributive Degrowth policy separated by nation would not stop rich individuals living in poor countries from consuming less than before. It is also likely that poor people are more consumptive than wealthy people in environmentally costly ways relevant to Degrowth’s models, which would further make

any redistributive policy irrelevant. If money was taken from the wealthy and given to the poor, there is also a possibility that the poor will actually increase their consumption given the increase in their resources.

On the other hand, redistribution could be considered crucial within the Degrowth movement as a means of ensuring that every individual's basic needs are met, as the Club of Rome's Degrowth publication and the Paris Declaration of 2008 suggested. If this is the argument, there is the question of whether redistributive Degrowth policies are the best way to ensure welfare. Degrowth is concerned with the collapse of the global economy in the face of global degradation of resources both human and natural – if exponential growth is at the root of this problem, only limiting the economies of wealthy nations seems to be an inefficient way of both addressing the problem of Degrowth and of providing means of welfare to poorer countries. If poor countries continue to grow their economies, industries from wealthy countries could simply move their business to poorer countries to continue production. This is equivalent to allowing pollution heavy industries and activities to continue in poorer countries, thereby incentivizing companies from wealthy nations to move their business to poorer nations so that they can get away with more emissions.

Posner and Weisbach ultimately point out that because abating climate change is a problem of international collective action, the most optimal climate change solution may not be one that is redistributive. The authors state that the problem of poverty or providing welfare, meanwhile, *is* one of distributive justice, so the rich should contribute to providing for the poor (Posner & Weisbach p. 96-97). But the most optimal solution for distributive justice is likely not to be a redistributive climate change policy. Similarly,

the main issue with the growth economy raised by Degrowth researchers is one of collective action that affects everyone, while the Degrowth movement's concern with poverty is one of distributive justice. Conflating policies for equality with those of welfare *and* economic contraction may not provide the best solution for any of those problems. If Degrowth proponents are interested in addressing poverty, policies related to Degrowth may not be the best way of providing basic welfare for all.

### ***Harry Frankfurt's "Doctrine of Sufficiency"***

In a response to egalitarianism, Harry Frankfurt in his 1987 article "Equality as Moral Ideal" noted that people bothered by economic inequality are not morally offended by inequality, but rather by situations in which some individuals have too little to provide for themselves. Frankfurt (1987) identifies that what disturbs people about economic inequality is not that the economic resources of the poor are smaller in magnitude, but rather that people are poor (p. 32). What is morally reprehensible is not if some individuals have more than others, but if some people have less than enough and others have more than enough. Therefore, Frankfurt offers, people should uphold a doctrine of sufficiency – given the reality of limited resources, it would be more morally reprehensible to distribute those resources equally and risk people not having enough, than to distribute resources so that as many people as possible have enough. In other words, it is not inequality that requires action, but conditions of insufficiency, like poverty.

### ***Incorporating the Doctrine of Sufficiency Within Degrowth***

Schneider, Kallis and Martinez-Alier in their 2010 article on economic degrowth state that, “what happens to GDP is of secondary importance; the goal [of sustainable degrowth] is the pursuit of well-being, ecological sustainability and social equity,” (p. 512). Once again Degrowth is framed as a movement for providing welfare and ensuring equity. As Frankfurt pointed out, however, satisfaction of basic needs and equality are distinct goals, and that providing for enough is the most important, morally relevant aim. His doctrine can be represented in the climate change debate – given the universal nature of the problem, ensuring that every country has enough to survive as the environment changes should be the priority, rather than focusing solely on redistributive carbon emissions taxing or other policies for equality. Degrowth proponents do believe that welfare is most important, noting that, “GDP per capita does not correlate with happiness above certain levels of satisfaction of basic needs,” (Schneider, Kallis & Martinez-Alier p. 512). If the movement wants to provide for basic welfare, then policies ensuring that these fundamental requirements are being met for everyone should not be conflated with redistributive measures that are motivated by an unjustified desire for equality. Without any clear arguments for why equity is morally obligatory, and an observed prioritization of poverty elimination from the literature, Degrowth proponents should support ideas that uphold the doctrine of sufficiency because it *is* problematic if some people have too much and others not enough to survive, regardless of economic policy.

### ***One Final Argument for Equality Within Degrowth***

Unlike previous international Degrowth conferences, the most recent 2016 Degrowth conference held in Budapest explicitly refrained from publishing a unified

declaration summarizing conclusions from the gathering. This particular group argued that given the variety of research and development that had been done in the field, “forcing a solidified universal declaration statement might have been hierarchically constraining, or what is worse, practically irrelevant,” (“Degrowth Conference Budapest 2016” p. 14). It is possible that not everyone involved in the Degrowth movement shares the same vision of Degrowth’s simultaneous involvement in contracting the economy, reducing poverty and pursuing equality. It could be that the movement is characterized by a multipronged approach to several different ideals, and that equality can be pursued independently of other desired components. According to Schneider et. al, “degrowth is not meant to be a complete theory or a new type of ‘religion’” and that it is in fact a, “a diversity of interpretations and proposals for practical implementation open for public debate,” (Schneider, Kallis & Martinez-Alier p. 513).

Though the literature I have examined in this paper have clearly combined multiple ideals within the same policies, there could be unexamined Degrowth literature available that only focuses on Degrowth’s involvement in reaching equity. I am not trying to decry equality as a legitimate goal, but I do believe that there is a need for Degrowth proponents to clarify why pursuing equality is important, what purpose it would serve in their picture of Degrowth, what specific policies they would implement to serve the specific ideal of equality, and finally, why adhering to these policies and achieving equality is morally obligatory. If it is the case that it is not so much equality as it is poverty that Degrowth wishes to resolve, then the movement’s followers should make an argument for providing for basic welfare along the same lines as Frankfurt, and not risk losing this goal of making sure everyone has enough by conflating poverty

reduction with equality achievement. If the Degrowth movement wishes to continue to aim towards a more equal society and economic system, proponents must be able to justify this purpose and its following policies.

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