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REIMAGINING COLLABORATION

Degrowth practitioners, scholars and activists

Orsolya Lazányi, Vincent Liegey, François Schneider and Logan Strenchock

Introduction

Degrowth, a movement formed around the provocative slogan *décroissance* and an articulated set of thoughts radically criticising the growth paradigm, was born in 2002 in France. '*Décroissance*' initially became visible through activism, media, books and practice. From the start there was a distinction, even lack of cooperation, between activists who first started to use the slogan, and many intellectuals who seemed mainly active in writing, seminar and conference discussions, and constructing theoretical pillars. Yet *décroissance* did not enter academia as such until a turning point in 2008 – with the organisation of the first international degrowth scientific conference in Paris. Through the 2010s degrowth was a very active and successful field of research. The rising interest in degrowth in the 2020s within diverse sectors, from civil society to academia, signals its growing popularity. However, some members of the movement are seriously concerned by the ways degrowth's practical, and activist or intellectual, dimensions seem to have faded into the background with the strong visibility of academic actors, who appear dominant (Bunea and Garnier 2024).

This chapter is co-authored by four observers, practitioners and activists in the degrowth movement – a couple amongst its initiators. We have had privileged and influential positions in shaping the trajectory of the movement as degrowth researchers, activists, practitioners and political campaigners. François Schneider and Vincent Liegey have been key figures, especially associated with the early degrowth activism in France and its internationalisation.

François participated in the earliest discussions on degrowth, published in the first degrowth special issue of the journal *S!lence* (in 2002) and toured France advocating for *décroissance* during 2004–2005. In 2006 he founded Research & Degrowth (R&D), and initiated and co-organised the first and second degrowth conferences. Since establishing Can Decreix (Cerbère, France) in 2011 he has maintained this 'house of degrowth' as a place for degrowth practice. He has worked intermittently as a researcher and teacher in France, Austria, Estonia, and Portugal, with the Institute of Environmental Science and Technology (ICTA) at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB) in Catalunya, and with R&D. He has been a member of the international conference support group and co-founded the International Degrowth Network (IDN) in 2023.

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Vincent Liegey, joined the French degrowth movement in 2006, becoming a spokesperson for the Parti Pour La Décroissance, participating in Parisian bike and squat movements, and several civil disobedience actions and political campaigns, including Europe Décroissance in 2009 and the birth of the ZAD (*zone à défendre* – militant occupation, deferred development zone) in Notre-Dame-Des-Landes (France). In 2015, he co-founded the degrowth cooperative Cargonomia (Budapest) and, in 2016, co-organised the 5th International Degrowth Conference (Budapest), and joined the ongoing international conference support group.

Orsolya Lazányi and Logan Strenchock also co-founded Cargonomia. Orsolya Lazányi is an ecological economist. Her doctoral thesis involved coordinating a participatory action research process within the Cargonomia collective. She also coordinated an urban permaculture garden in Budapest. As a member of the Environmental and Social Science Research Group, also based in Budapest, she researches sustainable food systems and human nature relations. Logan Strenchock is a researcher and teacher at Central European University (Budapest). Since 2012 he has been an organic farmer at Zsámboki Biokert, a 4 ha organic fruit and vegetable market garden about 50 km from Budapest, which has been in a partnership with Cargonomia since 2014. Logan is a member of the Hungarian Agroecology Network and coordinates educational outreach activities at the Zsámboki Biokert farm.

We write this chapter collectively drawing on autoethnography, praxis and critical inquiry. Our first aim is to reveal the historic tensions between degrowth as an intellectual, academic and anti-academic movement and its more practical and activist dimensions. We live with these tensions, especially in experiences in degrowth practice at Can Decreix, in the collective and cooperative activities of Cargonomia, and also among us as the co-authors of this chapter. We analyse and draw on these experiences to suggest constructive ways forward, in advancing the chapter's second aim – to launch a formal, respectful and significant dialogue between degrowth academics and practitioners within the civic degrowth movement.

First, we examine how the initial public and media perception of degrowth – as activists who experimented-by-doing based in a radical epistemological critique of traditional academia (detailed by Jarrige and Liegey, Chapter 6, this volume) – has faded in favour of a more academically oriented movement. Second, we reflect on the organisation of the degrowth movement, and suggest that deeper relationships and collaboration between research, activism and practice, could support ground-level movements and narratives by focusing on credible and robust assessments. Third, we make concrete proposals on how to reconnect academia, activism, and the politics of degrowth with practitioners in mutually beneficial, pluralistic and participatory ways, while re-embracing epistemological considerations in the formation of the original pillars of degrowth and associated challenges.

From radical critiques of academia to an 'academic movement'

Many of the ideas, imaginaries, practices and questions at the foundations of *décroissance* preceded it as a contemporary movement and a slogan. Basic principles of '*sobriété*' (moderation) and collective well-being guided cultures and traditions since homo-sapiens explored our planet. For thousands of years, human activity has depicted a capacity for thriving while consuming in balance with and embedded in nature, as a means of simplifying self-provisioning, and enabling more freedom and equality over territories of varying scales. Some archaeologists, anthropologists and ethnologists have shown how human communities dealt with scarcity through numerous creative and complex social organisation structures and imaginaries (Sahlins 1972; Graeber and Wengrow 2021). Central concepts such as temperance, self-implemented social and cultural limits, and voluntary simplicity or frugal abundance, are identifiable in most ancient and contemporary cultures,

traditions, spiritualities and religions. However, those vast periods of time during which complex civilisations developed and thrived without relying on competitive resource accumulation are marginalised in modern interpretations of history which, instead characterise non-capitalist societies as backward and wanting.

The intellectual origin story of *décroissance* is intrinsically linked to and inspired by historians whose work, again often ignored or marginalised, disproves the inevitability of self-centred human devolution into 'homo-economicus'. Even if *décroissance* compatible values were deeply embedded in humanity for thousands of years, it was only in the damaging overconsumption especially evident in the Global North that, in France in the early 2000s, '*décroissance*' as a political slogan and a concept was born. Later translated as 'degrowth' it quickly became a fitting slogan for a movement encouraging collective reflection on contemporary definitions of the meaning of life and, instead, promoted notions of well-being and fulfilling basic human needs within planetary boundaries.

For many years anti- or post-development ideas were discussed among a strong network of intellectuals, for instance in the group La Ligne d'Horizon, supporters of François Partant. They were influenced by a rich literature radically criticising the dominant and distorted narratives of homo-economicus as individualistic and competitive (Latouche 2016; Jarrige and Liegey, Chapter 5, this volume). A long tradition challenging capitalist economism includes critiques of the capitalist concept of development (Latouche 1986), the supremacy of technology (Ellul 1977) and the essentialism and centrality of markets (Polanyi 2001 [1944]), instead, rescuing the creative dimension of practice from the theoretical (Castoriadis 1975). The French anti-utilitarianism in social science movement (MAUSS) has offered radical critiques of mainstream social sciences, which are driven by positivism and quantitative beliefs and blind to a genuine qualitative and constructive understanding of human societies.

These dynamic and fruitful debates over 50 or more years have gained significance in *décroissance* activism dominated by doing and practice. Influenced by their readings of Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen – whose work was translated, compiled and published as *La décroissance* (Georgescu-Roegen 1979) – ad-buster anti-car activists in Lyon, Vincent Cheynet and Bruno Clémentin, decided to launch a campaign for *décroissance* in the French ad-buster magazine *Casseur de Pub*. They then met with academics and intellectuals from the Global South and North, who were linked by a radical critique of imperialist notions of development. In 2002, a collective effort resulted in an influential special edition of the monthly *S!lence* on sustainable and convivial *décroissance*. This was followed with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 'Défaire le développement, refaire le monde' gathering co-organised by La Ligne d'Horizon les amis de François Partant. From its inception highly dynamic and rooted in activism, politics and practice, the new movement emerged (Jarrige and Liegey, Chapter 5, this volume).

During the spring of 2002, Pierre Rabhi, a well-known proponent of agroecology supporting *décroissance*, attempted to become candidate in the French presidential election. Civil disobedience was organised against car races, advertisements, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs). The movement was framed by collective notions of targeted *décroissance*, free meals in the streets, bicycle-oriented car-free demonstrations. Such grassroots activity was guided by and linked to degrowth as a concept-cum-practice. *Décroissance* became the slogan for campaigns, articulating a desire to encourage a re-examination of our imaginaries, linked with ideas and cooperative models of numerous existing social movements such as alter-globalisation.

In 2004–2005 François Schneider, a researcher questioning the orientation of institutional academia, a self-described '*objecteur de croissance*' (an objector to growth), led a march ultimately

joined by hundreds of participants, mostly practitioners, engaging with citizens from village to village, encouraging open dialogues on degrowth. This march was exemplary of academic intellectuals practising degrowth, beyond intellectualising and giving speeches – walking in the mud with donkeys, meeting people – showing incredible strength of purpose. Organisers of degrowth seminars in Thiviers in 2004 were blindsided by the journalist's and public's interest in the grounded activism of the 'barefoot' researcher–practitioner. Even the French secret intelligence was concerned by such interventions promoting degrowth within the general public whereas degrowth seminars seemed completely harmless.

In 2006, le Parti pour la Décroissance (Degrowth Party) was founded. In 2009, degrowth networks participated in the European elections and played a central role in the birth of the Notre-Dame-Des-Landes ZAD. Ideas of 'open relocalisation' developed along with solidarity actions with other like-movements, such as local (alternative) currency networks, transition towns, ecovillages, community gardens, incredible edible, AMAPs (Community Supported Agriculture Programmes), repair cafés and do-it-yourself (DIY) bike shops. Actions were associated with civil disobedience, flashmobs, and demonstrations, and dialogues with left, green parties and associations.

In short, the early years of *décroissance* were dominated by activism and practice even if intellectual figures, such as Paul Ariès and Serge Latouche, were prominent in public and media spheres. Like Gilbert Rist, among others, they had advocated for using other descriptors and concepts such as post-development but became convinced to adopt *décroissance*. They became significant theoretical supporters, bringing on board a rich academic epistemological critique of the rising dominance of positivism and economicism. The association Sciences Citoyennes questioned the limits of research and innovation in the context of anti-GMO, anti-nano-technologies and anti-nuclear movements. They advocated for citizens to reappropriate science and choices of technology through expert-informed deliberation that was transparent, inclusive and democratic. This pointed towards a construction of knowledge, involving research, which should be democratic, inclusive, participatory and transdisciplinary.

While cooperation over thinking and doing within the movement has always been necessary, it has never been easy. The first emerging public figures speaking about *décroissance* theorised while the lesser known or forgotten majority were active as philosopher-artisans and philosopher-practitioners. The first spoke and wrote in the name of the movement, while others experimented daily, sometimes irreverently with respect to their self-designing theoretical masters. The main challenge here has been that *people engaging in practice usually do not have either the time or the motivation to write*, and in general do not have the skills developed by someone whose profession involves writing. To publish academic work is highly demanding in terms of time, effort and energy and is often incompatible with the daily struggles of experimentation, activism and resistance. But, *intellectuals often lack the skills and know-how of basic practices*. More significantly, they can appear reluctant to be practical and resistant to grassroots feedback. Consequently, intellectual separation from experimentation can be seen to reduce the quality and relevance of intellectual ideas.

Some in academia refer to themselves as 'activist scholars' because they approach their research more as a service to the movement, adopting complementary research methods (as in Nelson and Liegey, Chapter 35, this volume). Many are critical of mainstream academic frameworks but still consider themselves serious scholars. Indeed, all the co-authors in this chapter have engaged in independent intellectual and scholarly activities, including research. So the tensions here have been experienced personally as well as observed.

From *décroissance* to degrowth

In this early history of *décroissance* tensions between more practical activists and degrowth academics and independent intellectuals revealed gaps that could be observed even as dialogue and cooperation ensued. A lot of discussion and experimentation took place with respect to how to fulfil basic needs in sustainable and convivial ways, including changes in political relations and practices of power, self-organisation, horizontal governance, gender balance, decolonialism, direct democracy, reciprocity, the gift economy, and the practical know-how of low-tech, permaculture and agroecology. Unfortunately, most of this experimentation, whether successful or not, went undocumented and was not integrated into analysis. Theory was generic and inspired practice but not much *reflexive praxis* by activists and scholars took place.

In 2006, after a series of interventions in scientific seminars, R&D was founded in order to explore, analyse and document these fruitful experiences. *Décroissance* was translated into English and entered as such in the academic literature. The first peer-reviewed academic articles were published in well-established scientific journals, formalising 'degrowth' in English. In 2008 R&D France – represented by Francois Schneider, Denis Bayon and Fabrice Flipo – organised the first international degrowth academic conference in Paris. It was highly successful and followed by others to become an institution.

If people are better connected and influential, how they use their privileged positions is a key question. They can act in self-interested ways to enhance their position, power and prestige. Or, they can give voice to others and support otherwise invisible or easily dismissed ideas. In promoting degrowth academic conferences, François Schneider took a bet – using his networks within academic fields such as ecological economics, substance flow analysis and life cycle assessments – to give visibility and credibility to degrowth, and give it scientific recognition. The strategy was to attract lots of experience and knowledge into this area while offering the rich epistemological thoughts already discussed within intellectual degrowth circles. The challenge, of course, was to do so in ways that highlighted and reinforced activism and practice that could be enriched by different analytical perspectives through academic research. The hope was that others would use their networks to promote degrowth into many areas, including agriculture, general education, health and so on.

For two main reasons, this strategy was strongly criticised by some French academic and non-academic degrowth intellectuals, especially Serge Latouche, and poet Jean-Claude Besson-Girard (director of Paragon publishing house, printing many books on degrowth and the international and interdisciplinary peer-reviewed open access journal *Entropia*, which presented theoretical and political reviews on degrowth). Their first objection suggested that the translation of *décroissance* into English carried the risk of losing some of its original radical and anthropological substance, often referred to as a 'cultural' approach (Schneider et al. 2010, pp. 511–3). Their fear – which could be challenged as illegitimate from the point of view of upholding diversity – was realised, as outlined by Jarrige and Liegey (Chapter 5, this volume) and Fitzpatrick (Chapter 11, this volume). *Décroissance* was translated relatively easily into other Latin languages – Spanish (*decrecimiento),* Catalan (*decreixment*) and Italian (*decrescita*). However, as outlined with respect to Italy in Karl Krähmer et al. (Chapter 6, this volume) and by Nogué Algueró and D'Alisa regarding Catalunya (Chapter 8, this volume) the interpretive results were mixed as the movement spread in new cultures.

The second objection of Latouche, Besson-Girard and others was associated with an aligned epistemological risk – of creating an *economistic academic* degrowth field which might kill its

'creative and radical origins' tied to emancipating itself from utilitarianism. While they seemed to ignore the more diverse sources of degrowth, their concerns were perceptive. Academia can be highly normative in imposing mainstream research frames and demanding constraints; journals and publishers require manuscripts by degrowth tendencies to conform by responding to mainstream review. Still there had been few academic articles published even in French on degrowth, so the promotional strategy ended up being implemented through a series of academic conferences.

The 2nd International Degrowth Conference was organised in Barcelona in 2010 and was even more of a success (Nogué Algueró and D'Alisa, Chapter 8, this volume). The aim was to bring together a large diversity of actors, ultimately fulfilled by numerous and various activists, scientists, artists, practitioners, journalists, politicians and citizens. There was an amazing collective process of designing degrowth policy proposals and research areas of degrowth. After this conference, a support group was set up to follow up with more degrowth conferences, to share their formative experience and networks, and to maintain as much as possible a balance between academic and other dimensions of degrowth.

This involvement of different actors was achieved by successive degrowth conferences – in 2012, one in Venice (Italy), and another in Montreal (Canada) – the 1st degrowth conference in the Americas; in Leipzig (Germany) in 2014; and Budapest in 2016 – all-embracing activists, artists and practitioners. But the latter actors became marginalised with the increasingly academic leadership and format. Moreover, the initial impetus to have academics document and reflect on degrowth did not happen much in practice. Yet, the strategy to attract academic recognition to give degrowth visibility and legitimacy did pay off. The credibility degrowth gained was significant.

In 2018, to offer more balance, it was decided to host three complementary events. The 6th International Degrowth Conference in Malmö (Sweden) highlighted the tradition of encouraging as great a diversity of actors as possible. There was a much more political forum at the European Parliament (Nelson and Liegey, Chapter 1, this volume), and a significant First North-South Conference on Degrowth: Decolonizing the Social Imaginary conference in Mexico City focusing on North–South dialogues. Efforts were made to maintain strong connections and dialogue with political, activist and institutional organisations where degrowth values, principles and visions were influential.

But the degrowth movement was restrained by economic realities, pragmatically appropriating an academic conference framework as a window of opportunity to fund and organise large inclusive degrowth gatherings through registration fees and access to university facilities. It is a Robin Hood model, consistently financing less-resourced non-academic members of the movement, redistributing the surplus for greater inclusivity but at the cost of academic expectations. Moreover, even as more academics face precarious work terms and conditions, their situation is perceived as more comfortable than those of activists and practitioners. While academia has its codes and constraints, the movement risks normative steps by stealth that threaten to enclose, reduce or contort the messages and directions of degrowth and divorce it from 'reality'. While many young degrowth activists find opportunities to avoid a 'bullshit' job and time to devote to degrowth, say through a subsidised PhD thesis or research grant or position, others do not.

Degrowth activists entering academia take other rarely discussed risks. Academia and research undoubtedly offer wider understandings of the world, including social, political and ecological processes, dynamics and interactions. Research has a role in developing theories which help us to look at problems through different lenses. Indeed, certain early academic articles published about degrowth (such as Demaria et al. 2013) laid out some of its premises and fundamental concepts such as post-development, conviviality, autonomy, open relocalisation and commons, which have been essential to establishing the degrowth movement.

However, degrowth research in the 2020s tends to focus on applying conventional academic approaches and methods, such as disciplinary analyses eschewing broader interdisciplinary or novel paradigms. This is due to the prevailing research paradigms and practices (dominated by positivist and colonial approaches), and academic emphases on outputs by way of journal articles. The number of degrowth reviews and analyses of the results of peer-reviewed scientific publications is increasing. Academic publishers focus on their prestige within the university sector, competing for narrow audiences, with high subscriptions and open access publication fees often resulting in a limited focus on, for instance, 'scientifically valid' results irrespective of, say, the practical necessity for diverse real-life degrowth prefigurative experimentation. From the point of view of the movement, some of this work can be considered as constructive self-analysis but other work is of dubious merit for practitioners, campaigners and activists. Moreover, it is frustrating for them to take part in conferences – that offer rare opportunities for large gatherings of movement members to interact – if most sessions seem to be too abstract compared to their lived experience and daily struggles.

Still, degrowth and other like, and aligned, movements envisage a just society based on democratic processes and institutions with much more justice and participation – all of which ought to be reflected within knowledge production processes. While current mainstream research prioritises researchers as if objective observers, seen to be separate from their life worlds and practices, more researchers are applying appropriate methods, such as action research and other participatory processes, sensitive to ethical issues and seeking to serve stakeholders' interests. Yet large research institutions attract the most funding, and most researchers are still under pressure to research in certain ways and to publish only in certain outlets. In this paradigm trained researchers create approaches to knowledge and associated skills. Like all workers they have masters and however much researchers are personally concerned about their subjects or and about ethical questions, knowledge production and prioritised skills are formed in competition in a sector that remains monopolised (Nelson and Leahy 2024). Certain intellectuals and institutions form an elite, dismissing, even silencing and making certain parts of society invisible. This might not be conscious, but knowledge serves those in power.

Mobilising academics and practitioners

Clearly, the time is ripe to explore how to reconnect academic skills and knowledge with real-life practice and to engage with practitioners experimenting with degrowth. The co-authors of this chapter set aside time to discuss proposals in this direction by reflecting on their own experience, work, observation and learning. We aim to illustrate through the trajectory of Can Decreix and Cargonomia, how practice and theory can be connected in meaningful ways. Based on the co-authors' extensive experiences – participation in practical collectives, organising degrowth conferences, political activism, engagement with other degrowth movement participants, research, teaching and academic writing – a short list of recommendations for working to bring degrowth theory and practise closer together has evolved. This list, further below, relies on our experiences as advocate-researcher-organisers, acknowledging a self-responsibility in relation to our work, research, volunteering and related projects.

Reimagining the practice of degrowth research

We urge a reimagining of degrowth research as a genuine collaboration between researchers and practitioners, in the vein of participatory action research, militant research, professional research,

communities of practice and much more, still to be explored. We need to identify ways to increase intimate and grounded practice-based interaction between researchers and practitioners. In particular, we need to address the current imbalance within most research projects where academics involved receive an income for such time and effort, while practitioners regularly volunteer their time and effort (for instance, as interviewees, case study 'subjects', workshop participants). Often practitioners feel exploited in such research or, perversely, only superficially referred to sometimes out of 'respect' for their volunteer status. Research goals can be seen as irrelevant or too abstract compared to their everyday life and struggles. Such relations have been addressed by certain researchers, especially in social science fields, by integrating those with life experience into paid research teams as co-designers, co-organisers and co-workers in ways that influence the intentions, collaborative relationships and related goals of projects or, alternatively, by remunerating interaction on an hourly basis. Research articles can also be co-written. This allows practitioners to have equal status, negotiate their research/non-research schedules more rationally, and fully offer their knowledge while encouraging working relationships that result in mutual benefits.

Although it is an achievement for degrowth researchers to receive more public and private funding, that has often been seen as contorting the power relationship between researchers and practitioners. Practitioners are used as *subjects/objects* – rather than being integrated respectfully as intelligent *agents*. The participation of practitioners at the onset of the brainstorming stages of research projects is essential to ensure that the goals have tangible impacts for empowering degrowth in practice and, conversely, achieve high-quality research. Research funds should incorporate a component for greatly needed financial support to fledgling alternative initiatives with meagre tangible financial resources. In short, academic and industry pilot projects provide a model which could be easily adopted and adapted.

A fulsome inclusion of practitioners compensated as team members in research projects would have the additional benefit of formal collaborations, enriching and even entwining academic and practitioners' perspectives. The time researchers might spend physically interacting with practitioner networks in the field, even experiencing practical fieldwork, could provide unique emancipatory insights to researchers, positively influencing the trajectory of projects and enabling more accurate depictions of real challenges to transitionary pathways. Academics can deepen their learning by experiencing, doing, as they contribute to practical tasks. (Strenchock 2021; Pixová et al. 2024). Various research approaches, from ethnographic to participatory ones, allow researchers to engage with practical work.

As practitioners we contest much of the elite disciplinary language used in research applications and findings, as well as many methods of academic research driven by positivist approaches. A holistic degrowth transformative approach demands, on the one hand, that academics challenge their workplaces and enlighten researchers with emancipatory practices. Such approaches are increasingly succeeding in being funded, but many models, such as 'living labs' are still struggling with inherited patronising and economistic roles. Such models often involve commercial industry and have a template wherein researchers have 'objective' power and roles (Bulkeley et al. 2019; Saad and Agogué 2024). Meanwhile practitioner-participants are frequently frustrated in finding, understanding and applying theories and analytical frameworks in their everyday life, ultimately feeling that research as such seems useless.

Therefore, while funding is an important ingredient to provide equal opportunities for everybody in research, the inclusivity of knowledge production should be addressed at a much deeper level. Radical participatory approaches address power relations within the knowledge production process (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991). Questioning the mainstream hegemony and privileged position of scientists in knowledge creation, all participants become co-researchers in democratic

knowledge creation processes. Furthermore, their real-world research calls for action. Participatory action research moves away from the idea that research is limited to observing reality and that the researcher is an objective outsider (Heron 1996; Heron and Reason 1997). Participatory action research aims to change social practices and habits, and to support communities advocate for change, and even to transform systems. This approach allows researchers to take responsibility for current social, political or ecological issues (Reason and Bradbury 2001).

At the same time, the process of participatory action research ensures that theory is grounded in experience. By definition, it aims to solve problems sourced within practice (Heron and Reason 1997). Furthermore, a participatory and action-oriented paradigm seeks to empower problem holders by giving them the tools normally reserved for trained researchers, and to re-define what useful knowledge is – from peer-reviewed journal articles with limited access and complex language to knowledge embedded in practice and shared by co-researcher practitioners – and for whom it exists (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991). Nevertheless, this approach requires practitioners to be engaged, to be prepared to self-analyse, reflect on their goals and achievements, and even theorise over the challenges and conflicts within their operational activities. To illustrate these points we discuss how participatory action research was implemented cooperatively within the Cargonomia collective.

Researching Cargonomia

Cargonomia (Budapest, Hungary) is a self-organised, open collective focusing on activities associated with urban sustainability, organic farming, organic gardening education, bicycle mobility, degrowth in practice, community activism for more liveable cities, and self-sufficient living (Figure 23.1). The self-organised collective's trajectory has been greatly influenced by its urban context, local opportunities and its co-founders' personal interests and involvement in degrowth. Three co-authors have been very active founding members of Cargonomia.

Figure 23.1 Logan and Cargonomia trainees Perrine and Enora remove weeds in a vegetable plot with oscillating hoes at Zsámboki Biokert. Photograph by Noemi Bulecza.

The cooperative's various activities are accompanied by continuous discussions, shared readings, and reflections among members, and practice is constantly assessed by reference to degrowth principles and values. Practice is embedded in a number of Cargonomia's core internal and public activities, which include direct collaboration with an active organic farm, experiments with their own ecological building project, implementing various forms of bicycle mobility pedagogy, and curating a traineeship program introducing participants to hands-on activities directly. This is a great challenge to members, whose time and energy is exhausted by mandatory practical, organisational and networking activities. Still, everyday struggles in the collective's operation require reflection on the social, economic and political context in which the collective is embedded.

Participatory action research in Cargonomia

Members of Cargonomia engaged in a participatory action research process (2016–2018) within the framework of a doctoral research project conducted by one of its founding members (Lazányi 2022). The participatory action research process was a collective learning process and analytical work which allowed us to reflect on practices in the light of degrowth theory and to critically review our actions, achievements and challenges. Research questions emerged around two dilemmas in particular:

- *How might we appropriately integrate the ecological aspects of our operation within our economic and educational activities*?
- *How might we navigate challenges posed by the dominating growth-oriented economic system to limit compromises?*

The action research process was characterised by cycles of planning-acting-reflecting in which all members of Cargonomia became active as co-researchers. One cycle was followed by another one, iteratively building on one another. This cyclical process provides the framework for participatory action research. Planning and action phases related to the mission of the collective via its grounded activities – such as outreach events, use of cargo bikes, and the development of a cargo bike sharing system.

Co-researchers collected data methodically through observation, field notes, interviews and research diaries. Following these activities, during joint discussions, co-researchers reflected on these tasks in terms of degrowth theories, principles and values. Reflecting on actions, achievements and on lived experience is a crucial aspect of participatory action research processes. It allows co-researchers to critically review results, processes and challenges. It can reveal issues which otherwise would remain hidden, and aims to ensure the research is valid.

In the reflection phase, critical questions focused our attention on each activity in terms of these topics and dilemmas:

- How far does this activity respect the ecological and social limits to growth?
- In which ways does this activity create independence from the surrounding growth-oriented economic system?
- What kind of technology(ies) are being used, and what are their role(s) in this activity?
- What are the main resources used in this activity?
- What is the underlying logic of the interactions with partners?
- How are the decisions being made?

While the questions and directions of the participatory action research was a continuously emerging process, some key points were learned.

It is clear that Cargonomia is actively trying to move away from the growth-oriented system and creating an alternative economic model based on degrowth philosophy and principles. The collective prioritises reciprocal and solidarity relations with its partners and community members value solidarity and reciprocity over market-based exchange. Without the pressure of maximising profit and following the substantive understanding of the economy of Karl Polanyi (2001 [1944]), a plural economic model is developing, which allows the collective greater scope to comply with ecological criteria. Some examples follow. The group has established and maintains a functioning public commons cargo bike sharing system. While eschewing scale-incentivised development pathways, cargo bicycle mobility has expanded to thousands of citizens. Cargonomia is collectively renovating an adobe house. Volunteers join an annual supervised construction camp to help develop Cargonomia's community house and benefit by learning traditional architectural techniques with natural materials.

However, ecological criteria and societal considerations continuously present the collective with operational challenges and contradictions. How can we make organic, local vegetables more widely available across social classes? Should we encourage people to use electric cargo bikes when electric batteries are environmentally harmful? How many carbon emissions do we create travelling to international conferences? While we compromise, we recognise the importance of making these dilemmas explicit. Discussions and debates assist us in identifying partial solutions. Yet, many contradictions relate to systemic social and political contexts. For instance, as long as agro-industries are supported by subsidies and use chemical fertilisers and sprays, and sophisticated technology, food produced by such carbon-intensive agriculture is more affordable for low-income communities than products from our organic farm (Strenchock 2021).

Our high level of activity and public outreach prevents us generating greater income. Individual members of Cargonomia apply diversified practices to fulfil personal needs. Beyond monetary income from paid work, members gain material and in-kind resources through Cargonomia to contribute to their well-being. They do not identify as volunteers; their 'lifestyle' connects them to their community. Personal relations, the knowledge acquired, networks, opportunities to carry out meaningful activities, and the conviviality achieved all contribute to a 'good life'. Consequently members gain various advantages, while strategically increasing their independence from the growth-oriented economy.

The research process felt very different – slow and ineffective – compared to the dynamic, practice-oriented reality of the collective. Still, participatory action research pushed us to learn new aspects about our activities and ourselves, to critically review our actions and conceptualise 'reality' in new ways. This is particularly important for degrowth-inspired initiatives. 'Degrowthers' seek to imagine new forms of social relations and organisation but developing such processes is time- and energy-consuming. If ambitious prefigurative projects were acknowledged as pilot research projects, and financially supported as such, they might generate significant research outcomes. Transformative projects are necessarily anti-systemic. A key learning is that growth economies strangulate all efforts to live counter its constraints.

Researching Can Decreix

Can Decreix (2011–) has offered life experiences for researchers in a practical low-tech degrowth ecosystem (Schneider 2022). Can Decreix evolved from discussions about car free ecovillages in a car free cities group established prior to us discovering degrowth. The launch of a car buster network and the march for degrowth inspired intense discussions about a demonstration site for

degrowth practices. Finally, R&D's Filka Sekulova and François Schneider launched Can Decreix ('house of degrowth' in Catalan) on the French–Spanish border, one of the few eco-projects foregrounding degrowth as and in practice (Can Decreix 2024).

We feared becoming simply a vacation site for intellectuals and urbanites. So we consciously decided on a site close to a train station with syndicalist issues (including neoliberal closures of long-distance services) and near a border embroiled in migration control. Three old houses on a steep hill, an abandoned honey farm, vineyard and peddler house, overlook the Cerbère station. This site did not offer a leisurely natural environment. Our motto was to 'deal with limits but challenge borders' and to encourage the 'transformation of fruits and societies', with a rural project that 'refuses to conquer new virgin territories'. There are 6 ha of terrain perfect for low-tech encounters and activities within small houses and ruins and a little arena. We radically adapted to our surrounding conditions with a radically preventive approach.

People came for summers of collective wall plastering with local clay. We got rid of vehicular access, TV antennas, electric heaters, water toilets and fridges. We set up compost toilets and a collective washing station and slowly created a more coherent degrowth low-tech ecosystem. We built solar ovens, rocket stoves, grey water irrigation to plants, and transformed the collective washing station into several generations of pedal washing machines. We slowly improved each system based on feedback from usage. We improved our social relations with and operation of the tools. Can Decreix is a place not only where we design and develop new ways of doing things and disseminate information about them but also live with low-technologies 24/7, testing them coherently over the long term in integrated ways.

A massive problem with mainstream research, including much degrowth research, is analysing tiny changes to current lifestyles, mainly limited to societal studies and hypothesising. In Can Decreix we have worked to create a holistic low-tech ecosystem. Rather than working in 'silos' we define and delegate transformative roles and models concerned with cascades of resources, different types of recycled materials, managing flows of natural elements, and caring for humans and other animals and plants. Figure 23.2 shows a 'wood cascade'. Wood

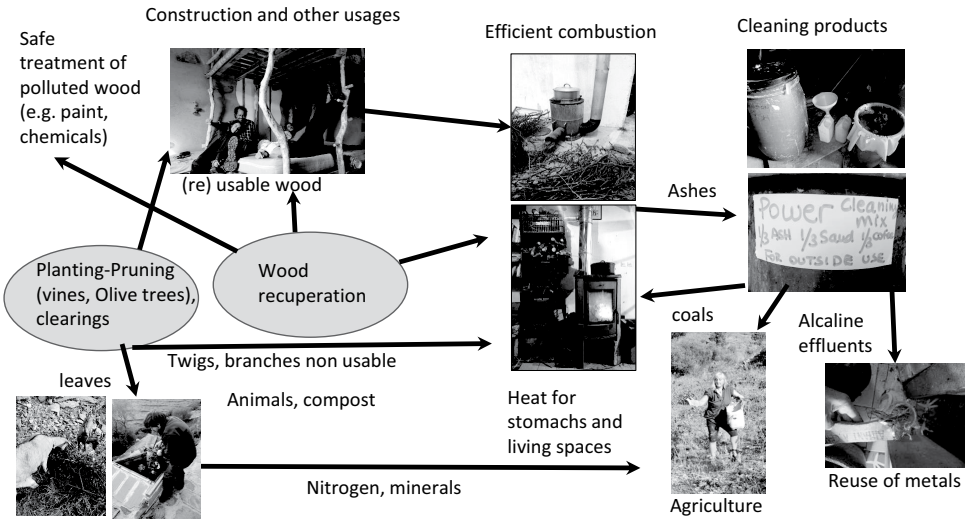

Figure 23.2 The wood cascade at Can Decreix. Credit: François Schneider.

otherwise burned in the open-air (wasting heat) is used for construction or making wooden objects. So-called unusable agricultural wood or waste wood (without chemicals) is used for efficient cooking and heating in slow combustion stoves. Ashes are recycled to make ash water, used for cleaning and irrigation, and to reduce soil acidity. Some leaves and small branches are composted or used as mulch.

Can Decreix has offered an immersive life-experience for researchers via one-off events, in organised activities for degrowth master's students and participants of degrowth summer schools, which included intense training, scenario and role playing. Since 2014, numerous degrowth apprentices, interns, activists and writers as well as WWOOFs ('willing workers on organic farms') have passed through Can Decreix. More recently the demonstration site has enabled degrowth master's students to dive into degrowth, creating a wonderful welcoming and convivial atmosphere for students, scholars and training practitioners.

In the past decade Can Decreix regularly hosted 5–10 mainly short-term inhabitants either as individuals or in groups, and sometimes for several months at a time. It is the base for R&D France, Cerbère-Cactus, and an association of train users. In 2024 we linked to a locally emerging low-tech lab and are establishing an agricultural project for investigating in transformative ways with new local plants, especially cactus. Until recently our posture has not appealed to many mature degrowth researchers except to curious short-term visitors wanting a little bit of hands-on practice. It has been more attractive to young researchers with open minds and a variety of intellectuals and practitioners, engineers and creative people. Consequently, we are still far from integrating academic research and practice.

Can Decreix has received very little support from academia; few academics have asked for our feedback. However, this has enabled us to develop without external pressures and in the last couple of years, a growing number of students have come to Can Decreix to do projects. Can Decreix is in the countryside while, in parallel, a project of low-tech degrowth practice is being developed by us in a urban context near Paris. Our Can Decreix eco-space enables us to run hypotheticals, scenarios and role plays. We offer spaces not only for low-tech and biological experiments but also for organisational and cultural experimentation (Vetter and Fersterer, Chapter 11, this volume), including potential degrowth experimentation in autonomous processes for everyday living (Sitrin, Chapter 4, this volume).

Future degrowth conferences: inclusivity

International and regional degrowth conferences offer opportunities for newcomers and established members of the degrowth movement to experience degrowth immersion over several days of talks, creative activities and workshops. Conferences embrace a wide range of disciplines and integrate the local and regional culture in situ in degrowth forms of conviviality and sustainability. However, the active and formal participation of the growing base of practitioners should be encouraged within conference programming to showcase and focus attention on prefigurative and other practical models. Such models provide opportunities for novice degrowthers to experience degrowth practices and engage with existing practitioners beyond conferences.

Currently, conference and network organisers endure pressures to ensure that conferences, seminars, sanctioned academic courses and related programming, achieve credibility within frameworks of international higher education and scientific research communities. But they risk becoming an elitist community of 'academocrats' who have lost touch with grassroot practitioner movements. The nature of conference organisation, largely funded and facilitated by university academics negotiating the use of impressive spaces, has shifted participation overwhelmingly towards

student-researcher participants in recent years. *We recommend reintegrating practitioner-activists as a priority in future conference programming*.

As announced in the opening of the 10th International Degrowth Conference in 2024 in Pontevedra, in 2027 a new format for international degrowth conferences will be trialled, aiming to emancipate the movement from the constraints of academic frameworks without losing our academic networks or excellency. Many participatory formats exist to challenge typical academic sessions consisting of individual presentations, often allowing very limited time for discussion and cooperation. Participatory workshops – using 'fish-bowl' methods, role games, world cafés and more – involve audience–participants and collaborative work. Creativity should go beyond Western societies' dominant communication through verbal and printed expression to involve other senses, and even emotions, to fruitfully diversify conference participants' experiences and, indeed, opening novel aspects for researchers. Art and artists should play an important role in conferences, as was successfully experienced during the 5th International Degrowth Conference in Budapest in 2016 (among others).

There is the risk of losing academic support and communities, which might, in turn, become more esoteric and misrepresent degrowth in their theoretical content and methods. However, possibilities for strategic alliances with like-minded networks, including academic ones, might well allow and encourage greater diversity of membership within the movement. Communities contributing to organising degrowth conferences have an impressive track record of collective action for communal benefit. Veterans in conference organising, still active participants in the IDN and scholarly researchers have strong networks and capabilities to expand links with practitioner support networks in degrowth and aligned movements.

Although increasing the impact of alternative agricultural communities has been a widely referenced 'allied goal' within degrowth, conference programming and quips found in the "what can degrowth look like" portions of scholarly research, a wide gap exists between degrowth scholars and agricultural practitioner movements. In the European context, most countries in the EU official and self-organised networks for agroecology, regenerative organic agriculture and permaculture exist with varying levels of formalisation, structural support and political representation. Sustainable agriculture, and the protection of the right to pursue agrarian livelihoods which preserve and enhance cultural, natural and social ecosystems, have concrete demands which, adapted to a holistic degrowth approach, offer ways to spread in reach and scope in the future. Collaboration with such networks and projects would support opportunities for citizens of the future to thrive in good health, while earning a living in tune with natural ecosystems (Nelson and Edwards 2020).

There is greater opportunity for constructive engagement between degrowth and agricultural transition movements. Recent literature has further explored the potential of collaborations between degrowth advocates and agriculturalists, while outlining pathways for collective organising in solidarity with diverse stakeholder groups (Pixová et al. 2024; Guerrero et al. 2023; Ujj and Bálint 2020). The potential of systemic cross-disciplinary collaborations between degrowth advocates and agroecology actors is only one example of synergistic, transdisciplinary collaboration, which could result in parallel benefits for all parties involved. We can collectively imagine a future where scholars' poetic visions of the future are enhanced with the stark reality of peasant wisdom, while consecutively supporting a maturation of agricultural transition narratives to be empowered with the tools of a political economy approach to strategy formulation. Such connections with low-tech or DIY, transition and ecovillage networks can also be maintained and reinforced.

Degrowth and practice-based training programs

The establishment of two ICTA-UAB master's degree courses in degrowth in 2019 and in 2021 (D'Alisa et al. 2023) and other degrowth-focused higher education study programs in Europe and North America all legitimise growth-agnostic intellectual exploration (see too, Prádanos, Chapter 21, this volume). These courses include talks, readings and workshops by practitioners. However, the costs and selective nature of such programs exclude many, especially more practice-oriented, youth who seek alternatives to entrapment within growth-centred work and study. The limited amount of academic and continuing educational programs on degrowth do not properly serve this wide audience. Ideally, mainstream academic institutions would, but very few do. This is where in situ, well-organised and robust practice-based training courses blending practice with theory but with practice a priority could play a significant role.

At the 9th International Degrowth Conference (2023) in Zagreb, a focused practitioner working group was informally convened and later officially recognised as a working group within the IDN, but progress has been limited by lack of institutional and financial support and time. A one-week post-conference volunteer camp with an emphasis on practical skill building and convivial exchange was organised to follow the International Degrowth and European Society for Ecological Economics Conference held in Pontevedra (Spain) in June 2024. Participants in the 'practice' work group continue to exchange with one another in monthly online sessions, while multiple members submitted concepts for interactive open workshops to be convened at the combined 18th Conference of the International Society for Ecological Economics and the 11th International Degrowth Conference scheduled for mid-2025 in Oslo. A tangible outcome of the international conference format is an increased level of activity of working groups who communicate regularly leading up to the conference and engage in face-to-face interaction throughout. We recommend building on the knowledge and contact base of the IDN resources to promote and develop opportunities for structured, practice-based degrowth pedagogy and continuing education, drawing on curating a functional network for practical learning composed of degrowth practitioners assisted by academic and organisational allies. Collective effort is required to focus on identifying and defining existing (and later potential) alternative initiatives with the capacity to host learners, document learning opportunities offered, assess the conditions for learning exchange, and provide a flexible pedagogical structure. A method for determining what type of organisations and what activities are compatible with degrowth would need to be established (Prádanos, Chapter 21, this volume). It would be critical to maintain fair power structures, rotating positions and non-hierarchical decision-making processes to avoid an elitist or 'practocratic' controlling and certifying body selecting 'worthy' practitioner hosts, specific and narrow pedagogical approaches and references (Leahy 2021, pp. 69–71, 194–6). Alternative economic models should be created based, as much as possible, on commons and non-monetary cooperation.

Traineeships

Ideally, open universities of degrowth, with theory and practice should be accessible to all, in numerous languages on various topics and at introductory through to advanced levels. Cargonomia is trying to open such pathways through an ambitious traineeship programme launched in 2015 into which have welcomed more than 70 students. It has mainly attracted international students who typically spend a period of three to six months immersed in the cooperative's work. Their activities cover intellectual theory and physical hands-on work.

Figure 23.3 Logan and Cargonomia trainees Melen, Aymeric, Paco and Nicholas offer vegetables from the Cargonomia study garden at a market in Budapest. Photograph credit: Cargonomia.

Interns participate in Cargonomia's urban outreach activities – workshops, discussions, public events. They learn about and analyse degrowth and related narratives. They devote time examining specific practical details with team supervisors. They assist with distributing weekly organic vegetable boxes from the farm, with the cargo bike sharing system, spend time at a community bicycle-kitchen partner (Cyclonomia) learning about self-sufficient bike repairing, or participating in various civic activities within the extended Cargonomia network active in Budapest (Figure 23.3). They volunteer at least two full days each week at the organic farm and in Cargonomia's study garden in the same village supervised by the farm team. Such trainees reinforce collaboration with Cargonomia's organic farm partner Zsámboki Biokert which, in turn, supports knowledge exchange around the social, financial and structural challenges of maintaining a functioning alternative farm model with strong social and environmental ambitions all the while embedded within globalised and extractivist agricultural structures (Strenchock 2021).

Narratives of degrowth and Cargonomia's experiments with agroecology, community organisation and the application of appropriate technology have attracted students from varying disciplines, including political sciences, international relations and sustainable tourism studies. Initially, engineering students had most frequently begun to question their current and future roles as engineers in contemporary society (Gaillard and François 2019). Usually, they have come from French grand écoles, where a more favourable environment for student mobility exists and the likelihood of previous non-institutional exposure to degrowth is higher. Also, students enrolled in international master's degree programs in Hungarian or Czech universities have come in search of practice-based case studies for theses. Several students have elaborated their thesis and final project works based on internship experiences, including topics such as examining the role of engineers in contemporary society, the applications of appropriate technology, providing technical solutions to on-farm challenges, or work in Cargonomia's own study garden. Therefore, the traineeship program contributes to their formal education too, in addition to providing opportunities to engage in an everyday alternative degrowth life for a few months.

Cargonomia's traineeship programme, which has become like a small-scale degrowth university pilot project, intends to create nurturing self-organised conditions for learners to develop practical and theoretical skills, informed by degrowth, within an open environment that provides structure and flexibility for individual pursuits. It is challenging to maintain a traineeship program catering to learners from diverse backgrounds, fields of interest, with varying levels of experience in physical and 'hands-on' tasks. Reflections and research by current and former trainees on topics such as gender issues are addressed by our team members. Consequently, the traineeship programme involves reciprocal exchange between learners who gain experience to work on individual pursuits after completing the program and supervisors who strive to incorporate challenges and try to respond appropriately to feedback from each group in our ever-developing programme, a work in progress.

The Cargonomia traineeships complement and supplement institutional 'classroom' knowledge, offering informed perspectives of alternative organisations focusing on survival strategies, communication mechanisms and organisational skills. We challenge mainstream pedagogical paradigms by prioritising practice-based skills development along with critical thinking. Regularly, and iteratively, we orient new participants to the operations and priorities of an established cooperative, encouraging open dialogue. Observations and critiques of trainees contribute to the metamorphosis of the host cooperative's structure and activities, as well as the programme, over time. Cargonomia offers novel experiences and imaginaries to rethink not only practice-based training but also, ultimately, university courses and even school-of-life experiences – co-constructing commoning spaces and tools, sharing knowledge and know-how, researching while doing.

Conclusion

The growing visibility of degrowth in academia over the past decade has reversed the initially multifaceted approach of a diverse social movement, practising degrowth theory as an art, with emphases on creativity and functionality. Degrowth first really started when both practitioners and activists using degrowth as a common slogan, and highly critical non-academic intellectual networks, closed to post-development and anti-utilitarianism endorsing degrowth, met. We have argued that re-embedding degrowth academic research and learning within practice and activism should be a priority. Epistemological critiques of academia should always be prioritised. We invite academic degrowth pursuits to embrace pluralistic and participatory relationships with degrowth practice and practitioners.

Impactful, well-informed research should always articulate a reflective praxis – practice and theory embodying strong and robust relational engagements. This is important because we can only envision the degrowth metamorphosis as an ongoing process of feedbacks between generations of ideas and their implementation, and certainly not as a top-down prescription of thinkers to doers when their ideas and theories are ripe. Degrowth is about important transformation, and intellectuals cannot be aware of it if they do not practice, envision and feel the reality of systemic changes, or at least question how to resolve those issues that are in the making. Also practitioners will not change the world if they simply stuck with the day-to-day struggle.

The degrowth field of studies should ambitiously stretch to engage further with prefigurative and other practices in a range of settings, of which, among others, Cargonomia and Can Decreix are examples. Fruitful knowledge, know-how, and practical experiences existing within degrowth and aligned networks should be supported, documented, discussed, analysed and learnings shared. There are great opportunities for more cooperation and solidarity with practitioners within a political movement with utopian goals of conviviality and a good life for all within environmental

boundaries. Examples of good practices include action research, living labs, open alternative educational programmes, practical internships, and re-invigorated degrowth conferences and summer schools. The key challenge is determining how novel practical approaches can be integrated and co-constructed in resilient and inclusive ways. Arguably, independent practitioner-based learning offers more space for audacious and creative experimentation outside of academic institutions. But convivial cooperation between practitioners and academia would be the degrowth ideal.

Isn't it just as legitimate for a practitioner or grassroots activist to speak out on degrowth as for an academic or famous intellectual to do so? The origins of degrowth as a slogan and movement highlight the importance of unison. Indeed, degrowth principles highlight inclusiveness and deliberative democracy, complementary approaches and voices. The organisation of the first international degrowth conference created a fantastic dynamic around degrowth with multiple voices. It gained legitimacy, credibility and visibility for degrowth. But degrowth must offer practical ways forward. We convivially invite non-practitioners into our spaces and to engage with us on more practical futures for degrowth.

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