

03/2010

Sustainable degrowth, economically and environmentally beneficial



This month's edition of the periodical "Journal of Cleaner Production", a leading international journal on industrial and technological innovation, publishes the results of a coordinated study organized by Giorgos Kallis, Francois Schneider and Joan Martinez-Alier from the ICTA at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB). The publication, which involves 15 analytical and empirical articles from distinguished economists, social scientists and environmental scientists, reflects on the idea of "sustainable degrowth", i.e. an equitable downscaling of economic production and consumption that will improve environmental conditions while enhancing human well-being.

The expression, "Beyond GDP", is in fashion in Brussels among some European civil servants and politicians, 40 years after Commission President Sicco Mansholt had already criticized GDP, and proposed zero economic growth in rich countries. The slogan in Brussels is "the greening of the economy: beyond GDP". But "Beyond GDP" should mean not only to devise better indicators to measure human welfare, but also to go beyond the single imperative of economic growth in the rich countries.

This was the motivation behind a project coordinated by ICTA, UAB. Distinguished scientists from the fields of ecological economics, sociology and environmental studies, most of them

contributors in the 1st International Conference on Economic Degrowth (Paris, 18 and 19 of April 2008) were invited to reflect, in the light of the current economic crisis, on the possibility of a “smooth landing”, i.e. a process of economic degrowth that does not have negative social impacts. Among environmentalists, the idea of degrowth has recently gained currency, given disillusion with the lack of political progress in Copenhagen in December 2009 and the realization that improvements in environmental technologies alone will avert neither climate change nor biodiversity loss, if the economy keeps growing at its usual pace. But reasonable concerns about the impacts of degrowth on employment and poverty have always been strong.

Scholars from different fields seem to converge in the view that economic degrowth is not only desirable, but unavoidable, as physicist-economist Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen argued already in the 1970s. The economy cannot grow indefinitely in a finite planet. Financing and debts are used to hide this basic fact, but the underlying inability of the real economy to keep up with unrealistic expectations of growth, is revealed in times of crisis. The question then is how to manage smoothly and socially equitably the process of degrowth and the transition to a “steady-state”, where the economy will neither shrink nor grow. Different proposals are put forward in this edited volume, ranging from theoretical explorations on reforms to the social security and pensioning systems and reduction of working hours, to more radical calls for changes in the structures of the economic and political systems and importantly, concrete proposals about low-consumption, shared housing schemes. Together the fifteen articles presented in this issue offer a complex picture of the rich scientific debate about the desirability and possibility of sustainable degrowth, and open a range of important research questions for the future.

The study is published in time for the Second International Conference on Degrowth, which will take place in Barcelona, 26-29 March 2010, under the auspices of ICTA/UAB, the University of Barcelona, Research & Degrowth, and Ecologistas en Accion and with the financial support of the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation and the Generalitat de Catalunya. Some 400 participants from all over the world will participate in the conference, expected to be a landmark event in the development and diffusion of the idea of sustainable degrowth.

[More information](#)

Giorgos Kallis

giorgoskallis@gmail.com

References

"Growth, Recession or Degrowth for Sustainability and Equity?". Giorgos Kallis, Francois Schneider and Joan Martínez-Alier. *Journal of Cleaner Production*. Volume 18, Issue 6, Pages 511-606 (April 2010).

[View low-bandwidth version](#)