



Group Assembly Process (GAP) - Stirring Paper

Self-providing as a motor for Degrowth

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Our proposal focuses interdependencies between the system of provision in place, the political economy and hegemonial economic practices.

Provision currently is organised on the base of capitalist markets and long value chains. The political economy underlying the existing system of provision prefers short term material efficiency and uses quantities as a measure. It is based on, and requires, ongoing, everlasting growth. Meanwhile, it neglects long term effects, both social and environmental, leading to systemic repercussions. These effects concern the ever increasing demand for material supply, which on the one hand is a systemic requirement. On the other hand it has been identified as part of a problem, leading to wastefulness in the use of material resources, to increased social inequality, to a loss of social meaning and therefore shared values. Looking at economic practice, it becomes apparent that within the described economic formation, dominant practices depend on monetary exchange in capitalist markets, deal with industrial products and imply high material usage.

In short, our paper proposal is based on the following thesis: Organising consumption mainly via capitalist markets with long value chains results in inefficient use of resources and forces growth. A system of provision designed around these parameters leaves little room for people to be part of value creation and thus to interact with their material surroundings in a meaningful way. The main option it offers is to purchase industrial products, without much actual connection to the environmental and social impact of their

production. Technologic efficiency reducing material consumption is annulled by rebound. In this system, degrowth is impossible.

Furthermore, whether the product is needed or used becomes secondary over the act of purchasing. As a consequence, demand is never ending. Accordingly, there is a self sustaining dynamic to this system; it re-creates its own conditions. This persistence is further enhanced by deskilling the consumers: The more people rely on monetary exchange and industrial products, the less they know about self-providing. And they don't now that there is a way out, a choice in how to organise provisioning within individual needs, skills and local material resources.

We argue that self-providing allows for experience that lays the ground for a way out of growth-increasing production and consumption, towards an economic path of degrowth. Our thesis on the relevance of self-providing for degrowth is based on a study conducted in Austria in 2011 (Vosse 2013). Practical suggestions we derive from the making of a Brandenburg based organisation for exploring economic practices, the 'Akademie für Suffizienz' (www.akademie-suffizienz.de).

Self providing is defined as providing goods mainly for use and for sharing, on the basis of own efforts - time, knowledge and skills - while drawing on resources locally available where possible. *Consumption* we define as the bundle of social practices exercised in order to provide the desired way of living. It depends on existing systems of provision, but it also draws on orientations, competence, ideology, knowledge, cultural framing. *Degrowth* is understood as a process of shifting an economy, including both mental structures and economic institutions, towards local systems within a global framework, operating circular instead of linear, while applying investment cycles in time frames that are manageable for humans.

Making or altering clothes, growing and preserving food, building and fixing things as well as bringing images, texts and any symbolic meaning to live all are forms of self providing or making. Those able to do any of this are, first of all, able to satisfy own needs. Most likely, this experience helps clarify needs and thus affects how consumption is framed and practiced. Self-providing is a concrete learning experience and opens up individual

opportunities for taking part in value creation and exchange. Meanwhile, such experience is likely to also influence someone's economic orientation, meaning the normatively shaped perceptions of economic processes and the practical understanding of economy. Such motions are likely to introduce some trepidation to the hegemonial system of provision, and on the long run even to political economy. Yet, self providing is not seen as an alternative to industrial production but as an additional form of organising consumption within communities, which makes use of resources locally available.

The relevance of self-providing for degrowth can be described on three levels: Micro, meso and macro. Firstly, it affects individual consumption by shifting preferences and by generating competences, directing consumption towards a degrowth path. Secondly, providing as an economic practice means applying individual productive capacities and utilising local resources and that way generates short value chains. Thirdly, providing as a social reality implies less demand for industrial products and thus will have an influence on the system of provision, supporting local exchange and decreasing material output altogether, leading to a shift of the political economy.

On the micro level, making provides insights into how a good is being produced, what resources are needed and what processes are involved. It orients the practitioners' attention towards immediate, available resources and provides opportunities for repairing, re-use and re-appropriation. It raises sensibility and contributes to regionalising and decentralising consumption, exchange and, generally speaking, economic practice. Making releases individual creative potentials, it provides a frame both for covering own needs and for the production of symbolic meaning. It offers opportunities to gain social recognition.

On a meso level, making provides an actual base for an economic self-conception as an active economic entity. Makers participate in the economy as a social sphere, leaving the passive role on the receiving end of the supply chain. This implies a sense of responsibility for the design of economic structures and for the consequences of economic activity. Such a perception invites or even demands questioning materialistic orientation and instead promotes sufficiency as a value. Practically, this implies that goods are not being accumulated but acquired as needed and consumed. Further, such a conceptualisation of economy assumes a long term perspective and is reflective of invisible and unintentional

consequences, thus in line with degrowth. Economy moves into the perspective of organising reproduction, away from a means of accumulating private wealth.

On a macro level, self-providing as a consumer practice draws on local resources and that way expands local exchange. It requires and comes along with complex social interactions. On a large scale, such practice contributes to raising social responsibility and motivates commitment, thus structurally mobilising social capital. Self-providing can prove as a strategy of social innovation, in terms of doing things differently rather than using different things. It enhances a reproductive understanding of economy, a perception of value in the context of production and consumption rather than of status and growth. Not only the product and its value are important in this perspective, but also the distribution of costs and benefits in its making. Consequently, the experience of self-providing, and of production for local markets, should lead to less resource intense consumption practice. Makers go beyond the system of provision in place and create additional options, for themselves and potentially for others.

In the long run, this interdependency should bring out less resource-intensive and more sufficient forms of production and consumption, which implies changes in the system of provision, and altogether a shift of the political economy towards post-growths. But this dynamic can unfold only if self-providing becomes a common practice. Only if such practice of production and consumption can be scaled, it has an impact toward degrowth. Otherwise it will remain in a niche of hobbies.

In the GAP, we propose to discuss how self-providing as a socio-economic practice can be relevant for degrowth policy, and how the problem of scaling can be tackled. We suggest the following three dimensions to structure our exploration of the topic:

1. How to create opportunity and infrastructure for self-providing and for sharing knowledge and experience in society at large? Repair cafes, fab labs, open shops, CSA are practices to build on and move toward a larger scale.
2. How to cultivate networks to support, grow and diffuse such practices and needed structures? Doing things differently brings out different values and needs, here time preference over accumulation of material wealth, being and doing instead of having, embedded exchange over added value.

3. How to scale these practices and structures? Organise transfer, promote social innovation / invest in doing things differently, rather than using different technology.

Drawing on the concepts laid out in this paper we propose to develop ideas for programmes to strengthen forms of production, allocation and consumption compatible with degrowth. As an empirical case we would like to introduce the 'Akademie für Suffizienz', a laboratory for providing and open exchange in the making. An additional framework for consumption in a degrowth context lies in reflecting the hegemonial economic structure. Therefore, in addition to drawing on practical strategies mentioned above, we propose to reconsider older economic theories and ideas of non-capitalist exchange, namely Franz Oppenheimer, the discussion of “alternative economy” and of a new co-operative movement in Germany in the 1980s, to apply them to the challenge of degrowth-strategies and the scaling-problem described above. The underlying goal of our proposal is to formulate well grounded policy recommendations as well as to devise concrete tools for a diffusion of self-providing as part of production and consumption in a post growth society.

We would like to draw on the following methods, approaches, theories in the GAP: Practice theory will be used to analyse consumption. Policy analysis will be used to deal with hegemonial structures, institutions, and processes. We'll approach exchange as a social practice both in hegemonially structured markets and in embedded markets. Concepts of social innovation will be used to conceptualize and understand the task of scaling.

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