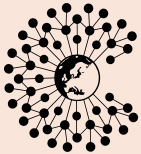


Living well on a finite planet

Building a caring world beyond growth



Commons
Network



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Prologue

‘The crisis we face as a global community must be understood not only as a public health crisis, or as an economic crisis of the capitalist mode of production, but also, fundamentally, as a crisis of the reproduction of life. In this sense, it is a crisis of care: the work of caring for humans, non-humans, and the shared biosphere.’

“The pandemic is a historical rupture . . . we take this opportunity to reflect on how we can, from our diverse positions, face this moment, organize, and collectively imagine radical alternative modes of living: those with more time for community, relationship building, and care for each other as well as the non-human world.”

These are the opening lines of a public statement by the Feminisms and Degrowth Alliance (FaDA) published in

the spring of 2020 (FaDA, 2020). Their words, like many others', elucidate the ways in which the pandemic exposed the neoclassical theory of value, its disregard for non-monetary values, and the effect this has on human and planetary well-being as a result. For us, it was emblematic of the rethinking process we envisioned when starting this research project in January 2020. It has been incredibly inspiring to notice that, as our research has progressed, so too has the movement of activists, policymakers and scholars exploring feasible alternatives to growth-centric thinking and acting. The search for a new political economic story has become more relevant than ever.

The degrowth story is about societies that are becoming slower by design, rather than by disaster. As we will see throughout this report, it concerns a deliberate shift to a world that is more autonomous, ecologically sufficient and caring. We argue that a careful degrowth transformation requires a new discourse of health and care, guided by different dynamics and practices.

Thankfully, we don't have to start from scratch. There is a growing global movement of pioneering citizens who are prefiguring the path to change from within the confines of the growth-oriented system. They have

strengthened forces within their communities to collectively engage in what we call caring commoning practices. These caring commoning practices are increasingly found in The Netherlands as well, which is where we are based.

What can we learn from these practices as we shape the future of health and care beyond growth? Last year, while Covid-19 was bringing the global economy to an involuntary standstill, we researched caring commoning practices in the Netherlands. This report is a result of our research.

This report is structured in 4 chapters. In Chapter 1 we argue that we need to move from growth-based thinking in order to build a healthy world that is socially just and ecologically sane. In Chapter 2 we will further dive into the language of degrowth and of commoning, and will start reframing health and care. In Chapter 3 we will look at the case of Dutch citizens' initiatives to have an idea of what commoning in care may mean in practice. We will discuss eight dynamics that emerged from our conversations with those engaging in caring commoning practices at Dutch citizens' initiatives, as well as with experts active in this field, to identify how their approach can help us shape a more caring future be-

yond growth. In Chapter 4 we will turn our attention to the requirements of these dynamics, structuring what we deem to be the crucial policy steps for a care-full de-growth transformation. We will close our report with our reflections on the road forward and the importance of storytelling to collectively imagine a different world.

Executive Summary

Much of our world is organized around the imperative of economic growth, so much so that we've come to believe in it, as something above reproach entirely. The relentless pursuit of economic growth by a few wealthy countries has led to ecological overshoot and climate crisis, leading to a mass extinction of species and representing a lethal threat to human health. Those that contributed least to the current planetary crises are suffering most of the consequences, most notably in their health.

Green growth is an illusion: our focus on GDP growth is driving energy demand so rapidly that we are not in an energy transition but in an energy expansion. Economic growth does not equal human progress or welfare. Economic equality and distribution does. Wealthy countries have long ago surpassed the threshold beyond which any extra economic growth is translated into extra social welfare. Every capitalist system needs growth to accumulate more capital and produces

inequality somewhere during its accumulation process. The fight against inequality and the fight against ecological breakdown are both part of the same path towards a post-growth future.

The new field called ‘planetary health’ studies the health of human civilization and the health of Earth at the same time. Planetary health implies radical new ways to organize society - degrowth makes this explicit. Degrowth is a critique of current growth-focused economics and politics, and it’s also a proposal for a different kind of social organization, built on autonomy, sufficiency and care. When looking for signs of this new world, we should look towards the commons. In the movement of citizens’ collectives for instance, particularly those involved in care, we begin to find traces of degrowth.

The degrowth movement has its roots in the 1970s and wants to help us un-learn that economic growth is desirable. In fact, degrowth lets us deconstruct ‘the economy’ as a social construct. As a paradigm, degrowth presents three core values: autonomy, sufficiency and care. The commons convey the space where communities write their own rules, while stewarding resources collectively, presupposing activity, communication

and democratic stewardship. The commons embody a forgotten and undervalued segment in our society and economy. They also show us what degrowth could look like.

Many citizens' collectives are putting into practice traces of commons and degrowth. As they reinvent care and re-define health, those collectives that work on health and care follow in the footsteps of the work of Aillon and Dal Santo, who's work in turn was inspired by Ivan Illich. Shared self-reliance can be turned into collective autonomy when communities take matters into their own hands, to steward the health and care of the community.

Strengthened social relations in the neighbourhood are an outcome of communal caring practices while solidarity becomes a motivation for stronger well-being. Caring collectives share a belief in a different, more holistic kind of health, reframing and reinventing what it means to be healthy and to care within a community. A healthy community makes individual people healthier too. Self-organized care works because it is local and often place-based, but also because it is freed from the bureaucratic system. Human needs are seen as holistic, not to be organized in separate silos or categories.

Through strengthening community life, localising economic activities and using resources in a more sustainable manner, the act of organizing care through commons promotes a shift to a more ecological economy, one more in line with degrowth's core value of sufficiency. A network of mutually trusting partners from different layers of caring domains, formal and informal, bureaucratic and bottom-up, professional and communal, is essential for the success of localised self-organized care.

These networks are increasingly being made explicit by the formation of integral social care teams, organized by the municipality. Similarly, we see the role of a neighbourhood care coordinator being made an official job in these municipalities, brokering care on all levels for their citizens. Even though it is not their goal, community care collectives see a relief of pressure on the formal healthcare systems because informal caring practices prevent health problems in the community. Caring collectives increase a sense of belonging among the participants in the neighbourhood by emphasizing reciprocity and interdependence. Centering reciprocal caring practices means moving away from transactional relationships in a community, away from the ethic of

productivity and individualism, and towards an ethic of non-exploitation. It should however be noted that there is a risk of segregation and exclusion in any citizens' collective, and that needs to be addressed.

Citizens' collectives are self-organized and governed by the community. This bottom-up governance leads to a greater sense of ownership and embeddedness within the community. Because many caring collectives are founded as a reaction to the centralized bureaucracy of the institutional healthcare system they often have as few rules and processes as possible. This makes them more inclusive and more democratic, but they are only successful if they have clear guidelines that are agreed-upon by the community. It's a balancing act. Caring collectives, just like other citizens' initiatives, don't scale-up like commercial companies do - because they are intrinsically place-based - but they do spread out, sharing their insights with other collectives through networks of knowledge and skills exchanges.

The spirit that drives acts of commoning is in direct opposition to growth-centered normality. A careful de-growth transformation requires radical policies and actions. We will need to foster solidarity with each other and with nature, embracing a holistic understanding

of health. We will need to abolish GDP as an indicator of progress. We will need to introduce a Universal Care Income and we will have to cut working hours in half. We will need community currencies to foster local caring economies and we will need caring time banks everywhere. Public-Collective Partnerships will be needed to support these social-economic innovations and to bolster the commons.



1 Moving away from Growth

Insights in this chapter:

Much of our world is organized around the imperative of economic growth, we've come to believe in it as something above reproach entirely.

The relentless pursuit of economic growth by wealthy countries has led to a climate crisis, representing a lethal threat to human health. Those that contributed least to the current planetary crises are suffering most of the consequences.

Green growth is an illusion: our focus on GDP growth is driving energy demand so rapidly that we are not in an energy transition but in an energy expansion.

Every capitalist system needs growth to accumulate more capital and produces inequality somewhere

during its accumulation process. The fight against inequality and the fight against ecological breakdown are part of the same path towards a post-growth future.

Degrowth is also a proposal for a different kind of social organization, built on autonomy, sufficiency and care. When looking for signs of this new world, we should look towards the commons.

We live in a world that is organized around the imperative of accumulation. Growth is so deeply embedded in our economies and politics that it seems our contemporary societies can't survive without it. Likewise, at individual level, both amongst policymakers and the wider public, there remains a dominant belief that regardless how wealthy a country becomes, its economy – measured in Gross Domestic Product, or GDP - should continue to rise, as most people associate growth with an improvement in individual health and well-being. Growth has come to stand in for human well-being, even progress itself. This focus on economic growth as a societal goal for its own sake can be called 'growthism'

(Hickel, 2020). Due to growthism, questioning the continued expansion of GDP feels almost counterintuitive.

So why do we have this strong association with growth as something good? During the latter half of the 20th century, the global economy grew exponentially. We have seen enormous improvements in public health worldwide. Between 1950 and 2015, life expectancy soared from 46 to 72 years. During that same period, child mortality dropped from 225 to 45 per 1000 births worldwide. Many would argue that fewer people are living in extreme poverty now than in any time in history²⁰ (Whitmee et al., 2015; Myers, 2017). These are, by any measure, unprecedented humanitarian achievements.

Unfortunately, this does not tell us the complete story. As an increasingly large body of scientific research is showing, rather than leading to improved global health, it is in fact the prevailing model of growth-oriented economics and politics that lies at the core of the ecological and social predicaments that characterize the state of the world today. (CPHA, 2015; Kallis

²⁰ It is important to highlight that the definition of ‘extreme poverty’ is a hotly contested political issue with many vested interests. After all, the level of extreme poverty forms a very good indicator for the functioning of our global economic system. This makes it a very politically sensitive topic. For example, the work of Thomas Pogge reveals a lot on the manipulation behind the extreme poverty index (Pogge, 2009).

et al., 2018; Lovelock, 2014; Rockstrom et al., 2009; W. Steffen, Richardson, et al., 2015; Whitmee et al., 2015; Zalasiewicz, Williams, and Steffen, 2010).

The ecological limits to growth

The growth of the global economy during the latter half of the 20th century has created an accelerated demand for energy worldwide leading to an unprecedented increase in the extraction of natural resources, known as ‘The Great Acceleration’ (Hibbard et al., 2007). As a consequence, we have been pushing the natural systems of Earth into a state of distortion (Whitmee et al., 2015).

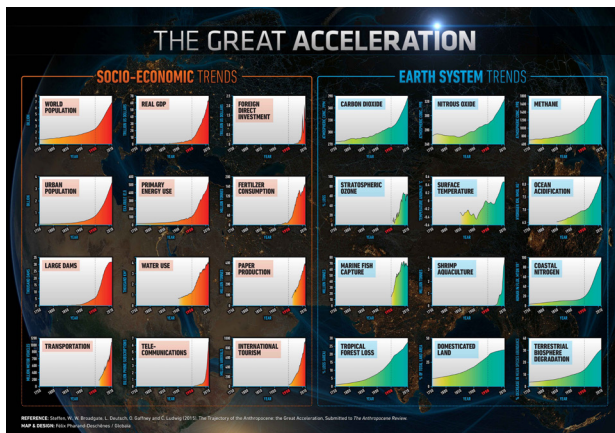


Figure 1. Illustration of ‘The Great Acceleration’ as a signature of the Anthropocene (Steffen et al., 2015)

As shown in Figure 1, when any indicator for global en-

vironmental impact is plotted over time, it results in a graph with a hockey stick figure: a horizontal line showing little change over centuries, until the end of the 20th century, when environmental impacts accelerate and the line becomes nearly vertical. A similar figure is shown when GDP growth is plotted over the same time span, illustrating that an acceleration of GDP is tightly coupled to an acceleration in environmental pressures (W. Steffen, A. et al., 2004). This unprecedented impact of human activity on the global environment has led Earth-scientists to label the current epoch as ‘the Anthropocene’²¹, which positions human action as the main geological force that is determining the current state of the Earth (Lovelock, 2014; Steffen et al., 2015).

The United Nations have put ‘sustained economic growth’ as one of the core pillars of their Sustainable Development Goals. Sustained economic growth would mean continuing to follow a trajectory of 3% annual exponential growth in GDP, as most conventional econo-

21 We are reluctant to use the term ‘Anthropocene’, as it implies that human beings as such are equally responsible for today’s ecological crisis. While in fact, today’s ecological crisis is caused by a particular growth-focused political economic system that has disproportionately benefited a small proportion of humanity. In other words, where ‘anthropo’ refers to humans, it is caused specifically by white, wealthy people in the north west of Europe and North America. Rather than pointing towards individuals living in the richest parts of the world for fixing the ecological crisis, we will need to enter the terrain of political economy, much like \ Jason Moore is doing in his book *Capitalism in the Web of Life* where he reframed the term as ‘Capitalocene’ (Moore, 2015).

mists agree that such a growth rate is ideal for a ‘healthy economy’ (Jones, 2016). This means that we are aiming for an economy that doubles every 24 years, quadruples every 48 years and increases 16 fold over a century (Kallis et al., 2020). ‘Compound growth is the madness of economic reason’, political economist David Harvey writes in his latest book *The Contradictions of Capital* (Harvey, 2014).

With carbon emissions on the rise, ecological catastrophes are occurring more and more frequently. In 2009, the earth-scientists Rockstrom and colleagues coined their groundbreaking Planetary Boundaries framework, quantifying the limits of Earth’s natural systems crucial to maintain a healthy biosphere. The authors referred to their framework as ‘the ceilings of a world considered to be safe for continued social and biological human well-being’ (Rockström, 2009). When the scientists were able to do a first analysis on the status of Earth’s systems in 2015, they found that four out of nine boundaries were surpassed already: those indicating biodiversity, climate change, changes in the land-system and atmospheric biogeochemical flows (W. Steffen, Richardson, et al., 2015).

These critical disruptions to the structure and function

of Earth's natural systems interact with each other in complex ways, representing a growing threat to human health and well-being (Myers, 2017)²². 'Nature is declining globally at rates unprecedented in global history', the 145 scientists writing for the *2019 UN Report on Biodiversity* conclude. At the end of the last decade, The Lancet projected that climate change alone would cause 250.000 additional deaths per year between 2030 and 2050 and labeled it the 'the biggest global health threat of the 21st century' (Costello, 2009).

What's crucial to understand here is that those who contributed least to the current distorted state of Earth are bearing the biggest share of the health burden of environmental breakdown. In 2010, 98% of the estimated 400.000 people who died from climate-related causes were living in Low- and Middle-Income Countries

22 The link between biophysical changes and human health is highly complex, with the connection between climate change and health in particular being increasingly well documented. We now know that climate change affects human health in both direct and indirect ways. Examples of climate-induced human health risks are infectious diseases, non-communicable diseases, malnutrition, displacement and conflict and mental health. They are caused by amongst others alterations in air quality, food production and access to fresh water. (Haines et al. 2006, McMichael 2013; Myers, 2017)

(LIMCs)²³ which are home to those who contributed least to the ecological mess we are in. In 2015, the world's richest 10% generated half of total carbon emissions with the poorest 50% of humanity accounting for only a tenth²⁴ (Oxfam, 2015).

Today's High Income Countries (HICs) - comprising only 19% of the global population - are consuming 80% of the global natural resources, which are being predominantly extracted from poorer resource-rich countries. This is not only because rich people consume more but also because the things they consume are almost always more resource-intensive. Profits are predominantly invested back into ecologically harmful industries, exacerbating the climate and biodiversity crisis (Hertwich et al., 2010; Hickel 2020a; Oswald et al., 2020; Steffen, Richardson, et al., 2015).

A dominant belief amongst conventional economists (and amongst the policy makers they are advising)

23 In this report, we adopt the World Bank's 2021 definition of a high-income country (HICs) as one with a gross national income (GNI) per capita exceeding \$12,056 and a low- and middle income country (LMICs) as one with a GNI per capita lower than \$4,095. (GNI is calculated by adding gross domestic product to factor incomes from foreign residents, then subtracting income earned by non-residents). For a recent country classification, see https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906519#High_income

24 These figures become more unbalanced higher upon the ladder of wealth distribution, with the richest 1% emitting thirty times more carbon than the bottom half. (Oxfam, 2015).

holds that we can continue to pursue exponential growth by decoupling GDP from its ecological impacts, so that growth becomes ‘green’. Unfortunately, green growth does not exist. Not only is there no empirical evidence of long-term absolute decoupling of GDP from environmental pressures (measured by material footprint of resource use) on anywhere near the scale needed to combat the current ecological crisis, such decoupling appears unlikely to happen in the future quickly enough to stay within safe carbon budgets if the economy continues to grow at its present rates (European Environment Bureau; Hickel and Kallis 2020; Vaden et al., 2020; Vaden et al., 2020b).

Carbon emissions have not gone down. In fact, they continue to rise. Our relentless pursuit of GDP growth is driving total energy demand up so rapidly that new energy sources aren’t replacing the older ones. They are complementary to them. As long as we continue to follow a growth-based route in our aim to make the global economy more sustainable, we will not see an energy transition, but an energy expansion (Hickel and Kallis, 2020; Raftery et al., 2017; Schröder and Storm,

2020). Rich countries have pushed Earth's natural systems across and beyond safe thresholds. Global health is severely jeopardized, with the biggest burden falling on the poorest people.

The social limits to growth

The ecological limits of growth aside, one might argue that, since GDP growth can spur significant improvements in human welfare, abandoning growth would mean abandoning progress itself. It is a dominant story amongst policymakers and conventional economists today, but also one that, when we unpack it, does not stand up to scrutiny.

In 2009, the epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett published a seminal book called *The Spirit Level*. In it, the scientists argue that it's not national wealth, but economic equality which is most related to levels of social welfare. Greater economic equality correlates far more closely with high rates of longevity, literacy, security, political participation and happiness. In the words of Wilkinson and Pickett: 'inequality damages the social fabric of the whole society' (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010).

Their findings reveal a simple truth: it is not so much the growth of an economy that matters, but rather how the wealth is distributed within it. There is no direct relationship between human wellbeing and GDP growth. While tax revenues may increase with growth, what matters are progressive governments that invest in a robust public welfare system. Although this undoubtedly demands the necessary financial resources, we know now that this does not require an infinite acceleration in GDP (Steinberger and Roberts, 2010). The link between GDP and human welfare seems to play out on a saturation curve. In the beginning, a rise in GDP is certainly necessary to achieve certain social outcomes, but beyond a certain point – a point that richer nations have long since surpassed - GDP growth ceases to translate into any improvements in social welfare. The relationship falls apart completely. (Hickel, 2020).

There are many examples, both past and present, where high levels of human welfare have been achieved without high levels of GDP. In his book *Capital in the 21st Century*, Thomas Piketty exposes that the mid-20th century reduction in income gaps was not the result of growth, but rather a destruction of wealth during the Great Depression and World War II - a phenomenon that was followed by strong egalitarian policies in

both Europe and North America (Piketty, 2013). This is well-illustrated by Franklin Roosevelt's seminal speech introducing his New Deal in 1932. Roosevelt argued that the task at hand was 'not the discovery or exploitation of natural resources, or necessarily producing more goods, but the soberer, less dramatic business of administering resources and plants already in hand...of distributing wealth and products more equitably' (Scott et al, 2007)²⁵.

The fact is that any capitalist system needs growth (to accumulate more capital) and thus produces inequality somewhere during its accumulation process (Harvey, 2014). In other words, as the economist Kate Raworth puts it: a growth-dependent system is 'a system that is divisive by design'²⁶ (Raworth, 2017).

25 We know that Costa Rica has achieved some of its biggest gains in life expectancy during the 1980s, when its GDP per capita was both small and not growing at all (Hickel, 2020). Today, there continue to exist countries who are achieving remarkable outcomes in terms of social welfare with low levels of GDP per capita, due to their relatively high spending on public health, education and access to other public services, amongst which being Cuba, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Bangladesh (Hickel 2018).

26 Many mainstream economics might still argue that inequality is an economic necessity for countries to become more prosperous. This argument is rooted in a theory known as the 'Kuznets Curve' - after its creator Simon Kuznets. Kuznets argued that inequality would be an inevitable phase all countries need to go through to eventually become more rich and equitable, supporting his argument by drawing an inverted-U with income on the x axis and a measure of national income inequality on the y axis. Although the Kuznets Curve has by now been compellingly debunked for its lack of empirical evidence, it is still lending credence to the myth of trickle-down economics as an economic law of motion'.

Indeed, we know that with the proliferation of growth-dependent capitalist economics and neoliberal politics from the 1980s onwards, wealth concentration and global income inequality has increased significantly (Anand and Segal, 2015; Piketty, 2014). In essence, as the world has become more rich, it has also become more unequal. Since the 1960s, the real per-capita income gap between HICs and LIMCs has more than tripled. (Hickel, 2017). In 2018, Oxfam reported that the world's 42 richest people were holding more wealth than the poorest half of the world's population (Oxfam, 2018). Notably, national inequality figures vary greatly across countries, but what is striking is that in most rich countries, the gap between the rich and the poor is now at its highest level for 30 years (Cingano, 2014; Jackson, 2018). These inequalities are not just there because this is 'how the world works', they are the inevitable consequence of a particular growth-dependent economic system, and the neoliberal political choices that have come with it.

Such realisations illuminate the somewhat paradoxical way in which our modern economies are organised: indefinite growth year-on-year is not the panacea for constant improvement in living standards many believe it

to be; it is, in fact, an effective way to consistently increase the level of inequality and the socio-economic ills with which it is so closely associated.²⁷ Economies of growth are detrimental to human well-being. The fact that an increase in growth-induced inequalities is strongly coupled to an increase in environmental disasters, as we saw in the previous section, exposes the continued pursuit of growth in high-income nations not only as ecologically impossible, but also socially unacceptable. (Woodward, 2015) Put differently, the fight against global inequality and the fight against ecological breakdown are part of the same transition path: the path to a post-growth future. In the words of the anthropologist Jason Hickel, ‘justice is the antithesis of growth - and key to solving the climate crisis’ (Hickel, 2020).

The advance of planetary health

The past two sections teach us that if we want to safeguard human health and well-being now and in the future, transitioning to a society that is more ecological and more just becomes an urgent priority. This acknowledgement lies at the heart of a recently launched

²⁷ The ecological economist Herman Daly calls this ‘uneconomic’ growth: when more growth begins to create more ‘illth’ than wealth (Daly, 2014).

field called ‘planetary health’. Planetary health is about attaining the highest standard of health, wellbeing, and equity worldwide through judicious attention to the human systems—political, economic, and social—that shape the future of humanity, as well as Earth’s natural systems that define the safe environmental limits within which humanity can flourish (Horton, Beaglehole, Bonita, Raeburn, and McKee, 2014).

In other words, planetary health is the health of human civilization and the state of the natural systems on which it depends (Whitmee et al., 2015). In their recently published book *Planetary Health: Protecting Nature to Protect Ourselves*, Myers and Frumkin write: ‘fundamentally, planetary health places us in new ethical terrain. It teaches us that all people on this planet, those alive today and in the future, are connected to one another’ (Myers and Frumkin, 2020).

The social and ecological limits to growth as well as advances in the field of planetary health presuppose a radically different approach to organizing our growth-dependent economies and the destructive elements of our

societies – one that can allow the human species and the natural systems on which it depends to thrive, both now and in the future. So what could such a transformation look like?

Towards a degrowth vision for planetary health

Degrowth is a paradigm that brings together a movement of people who are rethinking and redesigning a good life for all within planetary boundaries and beyond the hegemony of economic growth. In essence, degrowth proponents argue that the pathway to a future of increased social justice and enhanced ecological conditions is to be found in a ‘deliberately democratic and redistributive downscaling of the biophysical size of the global economy’ (Schneider et al., 2010; D’Alisa et al., 2014).

The degrowth movement focuses its attention on rich, high-income countries, calling solely on those nations who have overshoot planetary boundaries to fundamentally decrease their energy and resource use, and to recognize the ecological and social limits to growth. Fundamentally, besides forming a critique to current growth-focused economics and politics, degrowth is a proposal for a different kind of social organization. One

with alternative, community-driven ways of providing for our wants and needs. As we distribute the wealth we already have - share more, protect more, and care more for one another and for the environment – more growth is rendered unnecessary. (D’Alisa et al., 2014; Kallis et al., 2018). Core values that will stand at the heart of such an economy and society are autonomy, sufficiency and care (Parrique, 2019).

Finding clues in caring commoning practices

What would a degrowth transition towards a society that is more autonomous, sufficient and caring mean for how we think about health and organize care? To answer this question, we look at those places that already exist. All around the world, there are citizens who are doing things differently by forming community-based citizens’ initiatives.

Such acts of self-organization and direct action in a community is what we refer to as ‘commoning’.

As people engage in commoning practices, they form ‘commons’. Commoning can take many forms as it is about providing our essential wants and needs. We may distinguish

food commons, energy commons, housing commons, but also digital commons, cultural commons and indeed, caring commons (Bollier, 2014; Bloemen and De Groot, 2019).

How people work together in these initiatives, how they collectively steward and provide care, is the essence of caring commoning. At citizens' initiatives engaging in caring commoning practices, we find crucial traces of degrowth's core values. These practices reveal clues of what a degrowth society and economy built around care, autonomy and sufficiency could look like.



2 Changing the System

Insights in this chapter:

The degrowth movement demands that we un-learn that economic growth is desirable. The core values of degrowth are: autonomy, sufficiency and care.

The commons convey the space where communities steward resources collectively. Commoning is an act of provisioning, governance and forming social relations.

Many citizens' collectives working on care are putting into practice traces of commons and degrowth, as they reinvent care and redefine health.

At this point, the word degrowth may still sound negative to you. However, it is precisely the positive connotation of the word ‘growth’ that the degrowth movement wants to confront and dismantle. Degrowth is an effort to decolonise our imagination from growth as a one-way future. As Serge Latouche, considered as one of the founders of the degrowth movement, puts it: ‘the unquestionable desirability of growth in the common sense needs to be confronted if a discussion for a different future is to open up’ (Latouche 2009). Degrowth is a deliberately subversive slogan.

In this chapter, we hope to show you that degrowth is not a bad thing. It embodies a vision for a world that we think is much more attractive than the one we described in the previous chapter. One that is more just and more sustainable, characterized by different practices and guided by different values.

Understanding degrowth

Degrowth has its modern roots in the 1970s, when the first post-growth voices started to emerge, leading to several provocative publications (D’Alisa et al., 2014).

Amongst them is the landmark 'Limits to Growth' report from 1972, written by a group of MIT Scientists affiliated with the Club of Rome. In the report, the group forecasted grim outcomes for the future of humanity's sustainable presence on Earth and stated that the collapse of human civilization was inevitable should growth continue. Consequently, the authors of Limits to Growth concluded that the world needed to change course to an alternative path - creating a condition of 'ecological and economic stability that is sustainable far into the future' (Meadows, D. H., Meadows, D. H., Randers, J and Ill, W. W. B., 1972). During that same period, the concept of 'degrowth' was introduced in academia by André Gorz, who spoke of '*décroissance*' when questioning the compatibility of capitalism with the Earth's balance (Gorz, 1972).

The Limits to Growth report received worldwide attention for its apocalyptic message, but its impact was nowhere bigger than in the Netherlands. A recent biography of the founder of the Dutch Liberal Democrats (D66), Hans van Mierlo, describes how Limits to Growth became a literal bestseller in the Netherlands (Smeets, 2020). Of the 700.000 copies sold worldwide, half were bought by the Dutch (Van Haastrecht, 1999).

The political impact was so massive that Van Mierlo convinced the major left-wing parties to team up, leading to a joint election platform in 1972 ('Keerpunt 1972', or 'Turning Point 1972'). This manifesto explicitly declared the need to 'move away from economic growth' (PvdA, D66, PPR, 1972; Smeets, 2020; Snel, 2021)²⁰.

However, the ideology of neoliberalism was gaining ground among policymakers, and instead Dutch politics moved in the other direction. Instead of representing a critical juncture in the success of the degrowth movement, it was the right that captured the transformative rhetoric at this pivotal time. The moment instead became the advent of neoliberalism's pervasive reign, with privatizations, deregulation and austerity the new economic imperatives following Thatcher's 'there is no such thing as a society' speech and of Lubbers' 'no-nonsense' slogan (Oudenampsen, 2020).

At the beginning of the 21st century, as the world was facing the legacies of a global financial crash, while climate crises were on the rise, and inequalities were deep-

²⁰ This unique (and since never repeated) left-wing collaboration in the Netherlands led to an election victory and the most progressive coalition in the 20th century in the Netherlands. It would turn out to be the last truly progressive moment in Dutch politics, because all governments since then have been conservative and/or neoliberal.

ening, the degrowth movement started to strengthen once again, forming what Demaria et al. (2013) call an ‘interpretive frame for a new (and old) social movement where numerous streams of critical ideas and political actions converge.’ Today, organisations like Commons Network consider degrowth to be one of the crucial pieces in a puzzle that we need to solve in our search for a new social, economic and political system.

Degrowth is often stripped to its core message: the need to denounce GDP growth. Yet, rather than simply arguing for the reduction of energy and resource use and a top-down shrinking of GDP, degrowth implies the creation of a society that has a different structure, with new modes of organization that serve a new function (D’Alisa et al., 2014). Consequently, as Thimothée Parriqué puts it, ‘one of the complicated features of degrowth is that its objective cannot be stated in economic terms as its purpose is precisely to supersede economic rationality with extra-economic criteria’. It is about building a system with a different logic, one based on values that would be considered as ‘non-economic’ by the incumbent model. Parriqué argues that the essence of degrowth can be captured in what he calls ‘de-economisation’ (Parriqué, 2019).

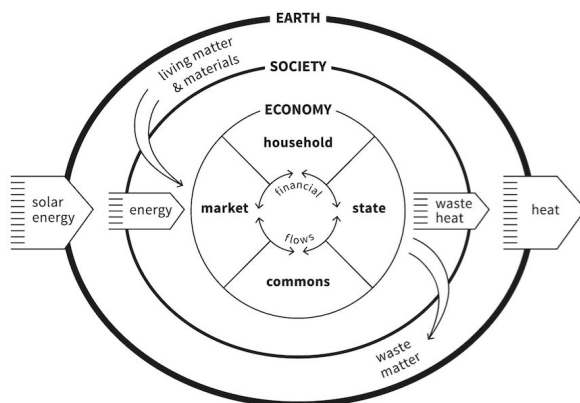


Figure 2. An 'Embedded Economy' (Raworth, 2017)

It's important to stress that a process of de-economisation is more about reclaiming the word²¹, not demonizing it to describe new economics. It represents a reduction in the importance of economic thoughts and practices in social life, so that we can create an economy that is brought back in proportion to its social and

21 As often highlighted by feminist economists and other progressive political economists, the word 'economics' comes from the Greek 'oikonomia' meaning management of the household. In essence, the process of de-economisation that Parrique identifies as the core of the degrowth agenda is about bringing economics back to its core. (See for example: Gibson-Graham, J. K. (1996))

ecological hosts.²² (Parrique, 2019).

This sounds much like what Kate Raworth described as an ‘Embedded Economy’²³: an economy that is nested within society and within the living world (See Figure 2). It means expanding our understanding of economics from solely being about monetized activities to all those activities needed in a society to provide for ‘the survival and flourishing of life’. (Nelson, 2009). It means recognizing the diverse ways in which the economy can meet people’s needs and wants. (Raworth, 2017).

It becomes clear that a crucial feature of the degrowth movement is to politicise the economy by revealing it as an idea rather than a given. Once we accept that the economy is something that has been socially constructed, we can begin to imagine how it may be recon-

22 Parrique argues that such a process of de-economisation consists of two interrelated movements, which are both needed for making a degrowth transformation work. The first transformation is cognitive, and entails that people and organizations reframe their governing and provisioning activities around a diverse set of social and moral incentives and not only economic ones. It is related to the *imaginary component of economic growth*. The second transformation is concrete, and entails reducing the *scale* and the *pace* of the economy. Reducing the *scale* of the economy means that certain goods and services cease to be commodities, whereas reducing the *pace* of the economy means reducing the volume of commodity exchange, which would decrease environmental pressures and allow for democratic planning, liberating time for other pursuits

23 Raworth’s Embedded Economy model can be traced back to the thinking and writing of Karl Polanyi, who introduced the concept of ‘Embeddedness’ within political economic thinking in *The Great Transformation* in 1944. (Polanyi, 1944).

structured. We start to think about contested values and assumptions, about power and ownership, and about having a democratic debate on who and what we want our economy to serve.

Key values of degrowth: autonomy, sufficiency and care

If degrowth is about rethinking the economy by making it political, what then are the values that stand at the core of its vision for change? Although there are multiple themes that are repeatedly discussed by degrowth advocates, there are three core values that capture the degrowth paradigm in its essence: autonomy, sufficiency and care. We will briefly discuss each of them.

Autonomy

Autonomy in this political economic context refers to the ability of a collective to decide its future in common,

freed from external imperatives and givens.²⁴ We end up with an economic system in which people can determine their own role and decide for themselves how they want to participate in providing for their needs and for the community. Autonomy could usher in a political system that assures broad and deep deliberation to make good decisions where the public is as much involved as possible. Practices that signify a degrowth transition promote such an autonomous system. They often involve voluntary work and are governed and shaped directly by their participants. They require ‘convivial tools’: tools that are understandable, manageable and controllable by their users (Illich, 1973).

Degrowth calls for a smaller use of energy and resources not only because of the ecological limits to growth as we explored in the first chapter of this report, but also because a high use of energy supports complex technological provisioning systems. Complex systems call for specialized experts and bureaucracies to manage them. They inevitably lead to non-egalitarian and undemocratic hierarchies. People lose their autonomy

²⁴ When discussing the concept of autonomy, many degrowth scholars refer to the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, who provided a comprehensive discussion of the term at the end of the 20th century. For Castoriadis, autonomy refers to the ability of a collective to decide its future in common, freed from external (heteronomous) imperatives and givens, such as the laws of religion and the laws of economics (Castoriadis and Curtis, 1991; D’Alisa et al., 2014).

(D'Alisa et al., 2014).

Sufficiency

Introducing the concept of sufficiency within our politics and economics means that we want to organize human (economic) activity in such a way that no one falls short of their essential needs, while at the same time no one accumulates too much in relation to the carrying capacity of the planet. Sufficiency is about the satisfaction of the needs of both present and future generations. As it concerns the distribution of wealth in both a just and sustainable way, it may be understood as a principle of distributive justice (Parriqué, 2019).

This idea of merging the principle of sufficiency together with economic design stands at the core of Kate Raworth's Doughnut Framework (see Figure 3). As Raworth argues in her 2017 book *Doughnut Economics: seven ways to think like a 21st-century economist*, economics needs a framework to fit humanity's long term goals for the 21st century: 'to meet the needs of all within the means of the planet'. Through her Doughnut Framework, Raworth aims to design such a frame. The inner circle of the Doughnut illustrates 'the social foundation', setting out some of the basic prerequisites for

human well-being. The outer circle consists of the planetary boundaries as introduced by Rockstrom and his colleagues, which Raworth calls ‘the ecological ceiling’ of the economy. In the space between the social foundation and the ecological ceiling, or the inner part of the Doughnut, resides the ‘safe and just space for humanity’ (Raworth, 2017).

Care

Care can have many meanings. Care refers to giving and receiving care and attention, taking care of, being careful, taking responsibility, looking after and caring about something or someone. Care can be understood as a fundamental but deeply gendered²⁵ and time-consuming activity performed to support the bodily, emotional and relational integrity of human beings (D’Alisa et al., 2014). It concerns our collective ability to provide the conditions that allow the vast majority of people and living creatures on this planet to thrive, along with the planet itself (Chatzidakis et al., 2020).

²⁵ As Kallis, Demaria and D’Alisa write in the Introduction of *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*: ‘growth is unjust (...) because it is subsidized and sustained by invisible reproductive work in the household’ (Kallis et al., 2014), they are attributing to feminist economics the insight that the majority of this work has been, and is still being done, by women (Gregoratti, and Raphael, 2019).

From a degrowth point of view, care can be understood as an ethic²⁶, inspiring us to reorient our economy towards goals different from growth. Embracing care as an ethic becomes a way to promote solidarity in our human and non-human relations. If we agree that solidarity is the opposite of exploitation (both of humans and nature), care becomes an ethic of non-exploitation. (Parrique, 2019)

Drawing on the work of feminist economics, for example that of Marilyn Waring and Maria Mies, putting care centre stage in how we organise our economy will mean stimulating and empowering two spheres in our economy that are often invisible, undervalued and highly gendered, where much care work occurs in the form of unpaid labor: the household and the commons. Together, they can therefore also be called the domain of the caring economy (Warren, 1988; Mies, 1997; Himmelwet, 1995)

26 A key figure in promoting an understanding of the 'ethic of care' and its relationship to politics and the structure of society is Joan Tronto, most notably with her work *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (Tronto, 1993). Later, in *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality and Justice*, she traces the reasons why care is currently too far disconnected from the concerns of politics, arguing for the need to make care the central concern of democratic political life (Tronto, 2013).

In its mission to reorient the economy around different values so that it serves the health and well-being of both humans and the planet, the degrowth paradigm shows many similarities with other new economic lines of thought that are beginning to gain public attention, such as that of Doughnut Economics and Wellbeing Economics. Furthermore, it is important to stress that although the term ‘degrowth’ first gained traction in France and later in the rest of Europe, degrowth draws on and engages with long-standing ways of thinking and traditions in the Global South, like Buen Vivir in Ecuador, Swaraj in India and Ubuntu in South Africa (Kothari, Salleh, Escobar, Demaria, and Acosta, 2019).

On degrowth and commoning

As we saw, degrowth can be understood as a proposal to radically restructure our societies so that they become autonomous, ecologically sufficient and caring. If we want to explore what a careful degrowth transformation could look like, we propose to look at already existing progressive modes of social economic life. One way to conceptualize them is called ‘commons’. The commons are the domain of people taking collective action to tackle issues that concern them as a community in a

self-organized way. In commons, people address their shared wants and needs through generating wealth with minimal reliance on markets nor states (Ostrom, 1990; De Angelis, M. and Harvey, D, 2014;).

The commons convey the space where communities write their own rules. They presuppose activity, communication and democratic stewardship and embody a forgotten and undervalued segment in our society and economy (Bloemen and De Groot, 2019). The huge diversity of practices we see happening in the commons is what we call ‘acts of commoning’, or ‘commoning practices’.

In *Free, Fair and Alive: The Insurgent Power of the Commons*, David Bollier and Silke Helfrich explain that commoning may be best understood as an integration of three spheres: 1) a social practice 2) an act of provisioning and 3) a form of peer governance. Importantly, these spheres shouldn’t be understood as isolated entities of the practice of commoning, but as ‘three interconnected spheres influencing each others’ functioning’ (Bollier and Helfrich, 2019). We will briefly discuss each sphere.

The social sphere concerns the ways people relate to

each other as they engage in commoning practices. It shows that at its core commoning is based on dense interpersonal connections and interdependencies. Commoning is by definition a collective process and we call people in these processes ‘commoners’.

The provisioning sphere refers to the role the commons play in the economy. Commons-based provisioning is about creating wealth in a regenerative way, rather than an extractive one. It is not about production but the provisioning of goods and services (or ‘reproduction’²⁷) that have an ongoing importance for both providers and receivers. Bollier and Helfrich speak about the reproduction of non-monetary ‘care wealth’: ‘the process of effective labor converting a commodity into something that is cared for’. As such, commoning allows for the reintegration of care in how we frame the economy, much like the degrowth paradigm envisions (Bollier and Helfrich, 2019).

Lastly, the governance sphere concerns the way com-

27 The term ‘(re)productivity’ was introduced by the feminist scholars Adelheid Biesecker and Sabine Hofmeister (2010), in order to overcome the structural devaluation of non-monetized caring activities and the natural environment which occurs in an economic paradigm that focuses only on the monetized economy. As they put it: “it is the structure of separation between the productive and the reproductive that has given rise to the present socioecological crisis situation.” (Biesecker and Hofmeister, 2010).

moners relate among themselves. This process of governing through commons, described by Helfrich and Bollier as ‘peer-to-peer-governance’²⁸, is distinct from governing for people (or top-down decision-making) and from governing with people (or limited participative decision-making). Instead, it is governing through people, from the bottom-up. As Bollier explains in his other book *Think Like a Commoner*, ‘since commons ask us to consider social rules that are compatible with a more cooperative, civic minded and inclusive set of norms and practices, governing through commons is more about stewardship than about ownership’ (Bollier, 2014).

Understanding commoning as a unique social life form with particular provisioning and governing qualities opens up space to recognise the diversity of forms that it and its practices can take, as well as their dynamism; it helps illuminate the existing and proliferating forms of commons and commoning practices (D’Alisa et al., 2014).

28 Much has been written on the concept of peer-to-peer (often shortened as P2P) by scholars exploring the commons and commons. A lot can be found on the website <https://primer.commonstransition.org/>. As for example laid out in the article *What are P2P and the Commons, and how do they relate?:* “P2P is a relational dynamic through which people (“peers”) freely collaborate with one another to create value in the form of shared resources, circulated in the form of commons.”

Where degrowth is first and foremost a vision, the commons represent both a vision and a real-life practice emergent from the bottom-up as people engage in commoning practices. There are crucial convergences between the world that the degrowth vision puts forth and the world that the commons promote. Indeed, degrowth advocates often put the commons center stage in their proposals on how to construct more caring, autonomous and ecologically sufficient societies.

As Giorgos Kallis, a key figure in the degrowth movement, writes in *In Defense of Degrowth*: ‘With the formal economy falling into a social and ecological crisis, degrowth alternatives are flourishing. (...) The commoning practices that can be found at these different initiatives display various facets of degrowth’ (Kallis et al., 2017).

On degrowth, health and care

What would it mean for how we think about health care to put degrowth into practice? Those discussing degrowth and health often refer to the work of Ivan

Illich²⁹. In the 1970s, Ivan Illich focused extensively on the impact of industrial society on care. In his provocative book ‘Medical Nemesis, the expropriation of health’, Illich makes the argument that the predominance of medicalized healthcare has become an obstacle to human health – a phenomenon which he called ‘iatrogenesis’.

From this point of view, the focus on industrial output of new treatments creates a dependency on hospitals, medicines and insurance companies which prevents citizens from understanding their own power for self-care. It reduces people’s autonomy. In his book, Illich calls the alternative ‘localization’, which would affirm self-organization, self-reliance, self-limitation, and self-rule (Illich, 1976).

Building on the work of Illich, in 2014, Aillon and Dal Santo devised a framework for putting degrowth into practice in the field of health.³⁰ Their ‘Health and Degrowth’ paradigm (see Figure 3) combines Illich’s in-

29 The health field has not been a core object of analysis by degrowth scholars until very recently, as more and more scholars are exploring the connections between degrowth and health now. (Aillon and Del Santo 2014; Borowy 2013; De Vogli and Owusu 2015; Missoni 2015; Borowy and Aillon 2017)

30 Aillon and Dal Santo’s Health and Degrowth paradigm has been further developed the recently launched book *Health in the Anthropocene: Living Well on a Finite Planet* by Katharine Zywert and Stephen Quilley (Aillon and D’Alisa, 2020)

tutions with Latouche's 8 steps of a degrowth agenda: re-evaluate, reconceptualize, restructure, redistribute, relocalize, reduce, reuse and recycle.

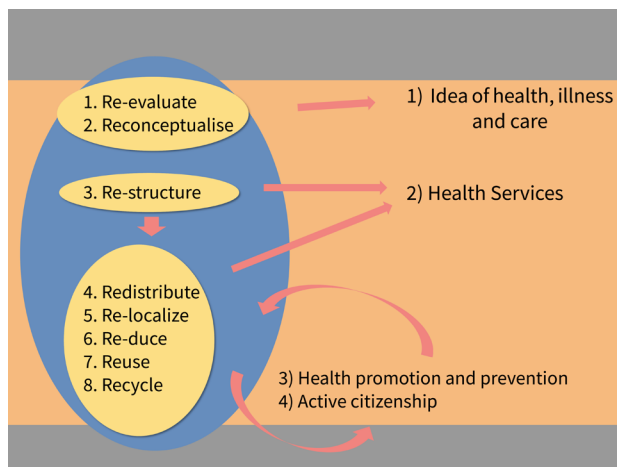


Figure 3: The four steps constituting Aillon & Dal Santo's Health and Degrowth paradigm

Aillon and Dal Santo's framework consists of four steps. These steps are: the re-evaluation and reconceptualization of the ideas of health, illness and care; restructuring health services following the new health conceptualization; health promotion acting on the social determinants of health; involvement of citizens in health management, promoting autonomy. (Aillon and Dal Santo, 2014)

Interestingly, such an approach is much in line with

the idea of primary health care (PHC) enshrined by the Alma-Ata Declaration of 1978 already. As the Declaration goes: 'Primary health care requires and promotes maximum community and individual self-reliance and participation in the planning, organization, operation and control of primary health care, making fullest use of local, national and other available resources' (WHO, 1978). Although the declaration was at that time signed by all of WHO's member states, the declaration is failing to fulfill its promises till this day.

As we will see throughout the rest of the report, what's happening at caring commoning practices follows these steps of D'Aillon and Del Santo's Health and Degrowth paradigm. What are the different dynamics that characterize these practices? What insights do they give us? These are the questions we will turn to now.



3 Sparks of degrowth in the spirit of caring and commoning

Insights in this chapter:

Shared self-reliance can be turned into collective autonomy when communities take matters into their own hands.

Citizens' collectives are self-organized and governed by the community. This leads to more sense of ownership and embeddedness within the community.

Communal caring practices lead to strengthened social relations in the neighbourhood.

A healthy community makes individual people healthier too. Caring collectives share a belief in a

different, more holistic kind of health.

Self-organized care works because it is local and often place-based and because it is freed from the bureaucratic system. Through strengthening community life and localising economic activities the act of organizing care through commons promotes a shift to a more ecological economy.

Caring collectives increase a sense of belonging in the neighbourhood by emphasizing reciprocity and interdependence. This also means moving towards an ethic of non-exploitation.

‘What we are doing here is what I see as the step before primary care, it is step ‘zero’: informal care that is organized in such a way that it is formally governed by locals themselves, and where most care tasks are performed on a voluntary basis’

- Co-founder of Austerlitz Zorgt

The degrowth vision propagates the production of pleasurable and meaningful lives in resilient societies and environments. Acts of commoning respond to this aim in myriad ways from the bottom-up. Degrowth en-

visions a world that is already in the making in places where commoning practices are flourishing. A relevant example is the growing movement of citizens' initiatives in the Netherlands.

The first Dutch citizens' initiative that was concerned with the organization of care was established in the southern part of the Netherlands in 2005, called Zorgcoöperatie Hoogeloon, in the village of Hoogeloon. Since then, many other people and communities have been inspired by the work done in Hoogeloon. This has led to the establishment of countless other initiatives active on the crux of (health)care, welfare and housing, varying greatly in terms of their size, their geographical location, and their social and economic characteristics.

During the most recent tally, NLZVE found that there were approximately 1500 active citizen initiatives in the field of care and wellbeing in the Netherlands (see Figure 4)²⁰.

For our study, we looked at five citizens' initiatives that emerged from different geographical locations in the Netherlands, all part of the national network

20 More information about the initiatives of NLZVE can be found at: <https://nlzorgtvoorelkaar.nl/monitor+zorgzame+gemeenschappen>

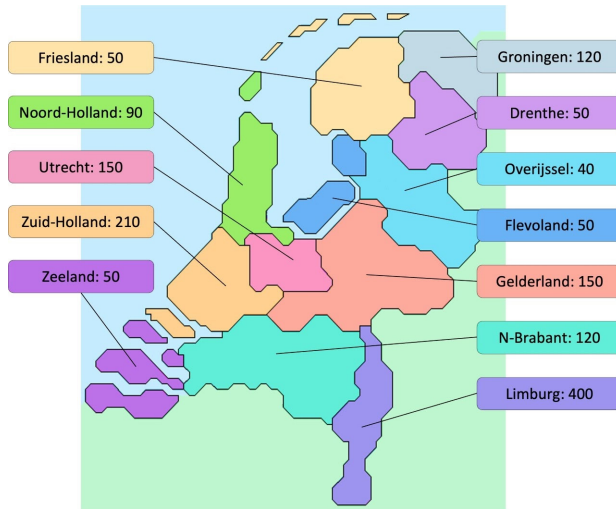


Figure 4: Active citizens' Initiatives on care and welfare in the Netherlands in 2021 per province, created by the National Board of NLZVE

for citizens' initiatives on care, housing and well-being called NLZVE (short for 'Nederland Zorgt Voor Elkaar' or in English: The Netherlands Cares For Each Other). These initiatives were: Zorgcoöperatie Austerlitz; Buurtcoöperatie Oostelijk Havengebied; Dorpscoöperatie HollandscheVeldt Verbindt; Stichting Dorpenzorg en Stichting Na buur.

All initiatives differed greatly in size, geographical location and socioeconomic characteristics (see Figure 5). Consequently, as all five initiatives emerged from different communities with varying needs and concerns, they had different ways of organizing and governing

themselves. All of these initiatives were self-organized. They all showed ways of devoting time and energy to care for the well-being of themselves and their community. At all initiatives, there were one or two paid community care workers involved, each working closely with a network of local volunteers on a variety of caring activities within the community. Examples of ways through which these initiatives were showcasing sparks of commoning varied. Where professional care workers took on the physical care tasks, others in the volunteer network supported those in need with other, more basic, caring tasks – just as essential for people’s social well-being and mental health.

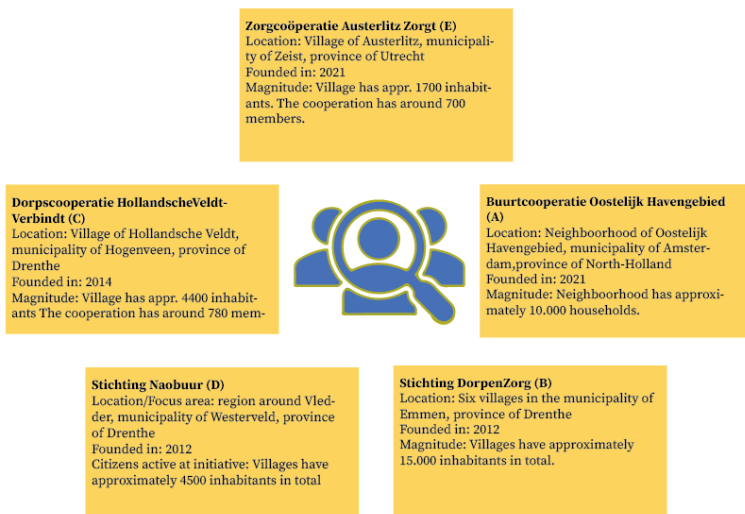


Figure 5: Specificities of the case-studies included in our study (Own creation)

Most of the initiatives set up all sorts of social gatherings regularly - these might include community dinners, outdoor activities and sports events, skills exchange workshops, repair and reuse cafes and so on.

At each initiative included in this study, we spoke to two commoners, one involved with its creation and one with the current coordination/pursuance of caring activities and services in the community. Besides speaking with community members involved at the citizens' initiatives at local level, we also spoke with five citizens involved in the NLZVE network at regional and/or national level, either via the National Helpdesk or via the National Board. We also reached out to several experts working on the topic of commoning and social-ecological transformation, to have an in-depth discussion with them about the topic of our research.

Throughout the rest of this chapter, we will explore eight insights that emerged from all of our conversations. These themes are not intended to be exhaustive, but rather illustrative of the dynamics that make caring commoning practices distinctive. They reveal clues of the potential that can be unlocked if the movement of citizens' initiatives actively organising care through commons is not side-lined, but rather stimulated and

empowered.

These dynamics show us how caring commons operationalise the reorientation of socio-economic imperatives around goals that are unassociated with and independent of growth – precisely the shift that degrowth envisions. They approach health and care holistically, with a focus on promoting collective autonomy and solidarity. They aim to be needs-driven, integrative, collaborative and self-governing; nurturing trust, reciprocity and diversity, all while holding a commitment to remain locally-grounded.

Although the caring commoning practices expressed by the initiatives discussed here are not pursued in the name of degrowth as such, we understand them as prefiguring a socioecological degrowth transformation centered around autonomy, sufficiency and care.

Approaching autonomy and self-reliance collectively

All the initiatives included in our study were founded in the period between 2012-2014. During this period, the policy landscape of social security in The Netherlands

changed significantly, with the so-called transformation from a 'welfare state' (characterized by strong investment in a public caring infrastructure) to a 'participating state' (characterized by an eagerness to shift the organisation of social security from the national to the local level and to include citizens more in the provisioning of care, and with significant budget cuts). This political transformation turned out to be a decentralisation of institutional care and a shift of responsibilities to municipalities, paired with huge cuts in the state's budget for the public sector (Bredewold et al., 2018).

When discussing people's motivations to establish their citizens' initiatives, participants noted a perceived fear in their communities of what might still be expected from the government in terms of care services and facilities. They wondered how much more citizens could handle, having to rely on themselves and their direct family members. The concept of 'self-reliance' ('zelfredzaamheid' in Dutch) came up repeatedly, but not just as a neoliberal directive from the right-wing government: also as a genuine desire for self-autonomy. A shared feeling to take 'matters into their own hand' led to the decision to organise community gatherings - a decision that would ultimately lead to the founding of many initiatives. Together, neighbours sought to ex-

plore how care could be organized in a way that would effectively meet the rising need as people become older, and in spite of diminishing governmental spending on public health. As a result, each initiative would unfold differently, depending on the specific dynamics of the community from which it emerged.

Interestingly, we saw in Chapter 2 that the concept of autonomy stands at the core of the degrowth vision, as degrowth is about citizens deciding for themselves how to provide for their wants and needs. Likewise, the authors of the degrowth-health paradigm D'Aillon and Dal Santo (2014) emphasized the need to increase autonomy and for 'active citizenship' to put degrowth thinking into practice in the sphere of health, so that people are enabled to increase control over, and to improve their health.

As one of the members of NLZVE's helpdesk put it:

'With the introduction of the Participation Act, we were thrown back to our self-reliance. At NLZVE, we look at this collectively and turn it into joint-reliance (in Dutch: 'samenredzaamheid'). And you don't do this on large scale; you do this on small scale, on cooperative level, in your own community.'

'When you are doing something like this, you constantly need to do things in consultation. There really is an informal, open and secure environment here. This has to do with the fact that we rely on each other for our health and well-being - we don't see this dependence as a weakness but as a strength.'

- Caretaker at Stichting Naobuur

Promoting solidarity in interpersonal relationships

Many participants mentioned strengthened social relations within the neighborhood as a crucial outcome of their caring collective. When neighbours know each other more, the sense of social cohesion and belonging within a community improves. Promoting solidarity in the neighborhood becomes a way to improve individual health and wellbeing.

'It really brings people closer together. (...)That sense of solidarity ... that social cohesion has really improved.'

- Co-founder of Stichting Dorpenzorg

'A strong social cohesion is an important condition for making it work. In Austerlitz it has always been quite strong, but

I have been part of the initiative since the beginning, and I have really seen it improving with the caring activities and facilities that we have built up here.'

- Caretaker at Austerlitz Zorgt

Likewise, the need to be of purpose and to 'do something meaningful for another human being' was often noted when discussing people's motivations to get engaged with the initiatives.

'You know we're neighbours aren't we? You just have to take care of each other a little bit right? What we are aiming to do here is basically just about being human, keeping an eye on each other. It disappeared a bit, this feeling of community life, but I really see it as a challenge of our cooperation to bring it back.'

- Caretaker at buurtcoöperatie Oostelijk Havengebied

It becomes clear that many of the citizens' initiatives included in our study, by centering people's health and well-being, in turn place a strong focus on the social environment and on community life.

In essence, the shift from the individual to the collective level, as detailed in the above, provides for us a new understanding of health and care. Both are approached

in a holistic and integral way, with specific attention for the social determinants of health. Improving the health of the community as a whole is considered a means to safeguard individual wellbeing. Several participants raised the concept of ‘positive health’ - an increasingly popular definition whereby health is understood as ‘the ability to adapt and self-manage in the face of social, physical and emotional challenges’ (Huber et al., 2016).

Such a reframing of health forms an important step in our pursuit of understanding health and care from a degrowth-point of view. Still, degrowth thinking means expanding the way we think about health and the way we care from the realm of humans to that of non-humans and the natural world. It means acknowledging that healthy people depend on healthy ecosystems. When degrowth scholars call for a ‘reorientation of practices and policies around care and community solidarity’ (Kallis et al., 2020), they don’t refer to the human community alone. They refer to Earth’s community as a whole. This insight that human health is embedded in environmental health is what the concept of planetary health is all about.

Of course, not all of the individuals engaged in acts of caring commoning also appreciate this understanding

of health and care as inclusive of the natural world. Zywert (2017) discusses such health conceptualizations, or ‘ontologies’, in the context of socio-ecological transformations, and argues that ‘embedded within more encompassing cultural worldviews, ontologies of health both inform and reflect the socio-ecological context in which they arise’.

As Katherine Zywert explains in *Human Health and socio-ecological systems change: Rethinking health in the Anthropocene*, in pre-modern cultures, where people are often more communal and more dependent on their local environment, caring is more likely to be a communal process about maintaining or rebalancing relations between the human and non-human world. Most modern cultures have seen a shift over the last five centuries from such community-centered ways of living towards a society-centered mode of social organization that is displaced from local ecologies. It is ordered by the market economy, the state and the rational transactions of autonomous individuals. It is urbanized and professionalized, with a political economic system characterized by disembedded markets and health and social care systems that rely on state infrastructure (Greenfield, 2009).

The health ontologies of citizens living in modern cultures such as the Dutch one, have been significantly shaped by these trends, resulting in increasingly materialistic, reductionist understandings of health and disease and mechanistic views of the body (Zywert, 2017).

‘We created a vision for our village inspired by the concept of ‘positive health’. Our vision states that truly building a caring society requires an integral and holistic approach to health, where the medical and the social domain are supporting and strengthening each other. It means that health-care is provided close to the people whom it concerns with a strong focus on strengthening people’s sense of autonomy and self-resilience.’

- co-founder of Stichting Naobuur

Providing care where it’s needed, comprehensively

Putting a holistic approach to health in practice requires an ability to think outside the box. Citizens concerned with care-provisioning activities stressed the broad scope of their work and the importance to reason from the unstructured yet burgeoning real world of care recipients, rather than from the structured system. The aim is to truly provide care in a needs-driven and comprehensive way.

As one of the members of NLZVE's national helpdesk stated: *'A citizens' initiative simply looks very specifically at concrete things that are needed, it looks at the real need and aims to come up with workable solutions together with the person whom it concerns.'*

Interestingly, while most local care workers responsible for providing community care were either paid by the municipality directly or through municipal subsidies the initiatives received, they were granted full autonomy by the municipality for deciding the scope of their work. As participants emphasized, this autonomy is crucial for enabling them to truly respond to local care needs in a horizontal and holistic way, freed from the vertical approach of the municipality and the way the system works.

Citizens' initiatives always work at the local level. This allows them to integrate a demand for care with other human needs crucial for people's well-being, such as the need for proper housing, enough green spaces and clean energy. This focus on integration rather than specialization is a unique characteristic of the initiatives. Importantly, this shift in approach also leads to many challenges.

'The fact that we are not just addressing one thing, but all what is deemed an issue of concern amongst the people in the community, makes it difficult to collaborate with 'system parties'. Within the system, services are nicely 'ordered' in categories, but we focus on cohesion rather than categorization, so we continually run against the boundaries of these silos.(...) Our ability to transcend and connect makes us unique, and it is vital for addressing the 'big' social themes.'
- co-founder of buurtcooperatie Oostelijk Havengebied

Three initiatives were in the process of developing a local, multifunctional organisation to integrate the provisioning of healthcare with other social services such as housing and education into one community building. Remarkably, when discussing the possibility to combine social activities with environmental activities, responses differed greatly amongst participants. Although 'sustainable' practices such as the sharing and reusing of products and resources within the neighborhood were omnipresent, they weren't per definition rooted in ecological concerns.

'Since you always aim for solving problems within the community at local level, without needing to rely on external parties and to use their facilities, an initiative like this does

indeed lower the overall use of material resources (...) But that was not the aim of putting this up. The aim was to improve the feeling of social security by setting up a care cooperative together'

- Caretaker at Austerlitz Zorgt

The crucial thing here is that citizens' initiatives are driven by the concerns of the people living in the community from which they arose and in which they are embedded. Consequently, whether initiatives integrate acts of care with environmental activities will remain dependent on what is deemed a pressing issue by the citizens concerned.

Still, through strengthening community life, localising economic activities and using resources in a more sustainable manner, the act of organizing care through commons does promote a shift to a more ecological economy - one in line with degrowth's value of sufficiency. In the words of The Feminist and Degrowth Alliance: 'The sustainability of life is promoted by collaborative and relational activities necessary to sustain life over time, including both its material and symbolic dimensions, the human and non-human forms of life and their interdependence. This is the reason why care is the main commons for instituting a degrowth society

that wants to sustain life.’ FaDA (2020)

‘Citizens’ initiatives are putting the narrative of the commons in practice. As a result, you have developed an entity, a physical and political space where various societal issues can be addressed in an integrated manner. There certainly are citizens’ initiatives that have started with care and welfare activities and who are now starting to get their hands on sustainability issues, but this really depends on the dynamics of each particular community. This is very important. There has to be a perceived need, a sense of urgency, from bottom-up to start doing these kinds of things and to start thinking about human and environmental health in an integrative manner.’

- Member NLZVE’s helpdesk

Striving towards collaboration built on a culture of trust and respect

What is crucial to make a citizens’ initiative successful? When discussing this, fostering strong collaboration with other care organizations, formal and informal ones, was stressed as fundamental. The goal is to establish a rich community caring network such that the wide remit of human need is met in the most optimal

way for health. To achieve this, establishing a culture of trust and mutual respect within such a network is fundamental, where tasks are divided based on each parties' strengths and capabilities in a supportive manner.

'By going into dialogue with each other, you together draw the boundaries of each others' work and point out each other's duties and roles (...). We have a totally different role on a completely different level and deal with questions that come directly from the people, while they look at what type of formal care is deemed truly needed from a professional perspective, so it complements both sides. (...) This is why establishing a strong collaborative network is so essential, so you know who to reach out to and when, and people trust each other.'

- caretaker at Buurtcooperatie Oostelijk Havengebied

Several citizen initiatives established a social neighborhood team ('sociaal wijk team) in their community. These teams consisted of multiple actors from various organizations, each working in a collaborative way to improve the provisioning of care so that it served the needs of the community. As the co-founder of Dorpenzorg reflected on the matter:

'It just works really well, instead of competing with each

other and standing each other in the way, we got the local care organizations to work together and to strengthen each other'.

co-founder of Dorpenzorg

Like we saw with the shift in approach from specialisation to integration, the initiatives' shift in focus from competition to collaboration also formed a key challenge when partnering up with other formal organisations. It clashed with market dynamics still prevalent in today's Dutch healthcare system of efficiency and productivity.

Paradoxically, as was pointed out, since citizens' initiatives work at community level, they can in fact improve the efficiency of the formal healthcare system. Many problems are already solved at the 'frontside of the system'. In essence, allowing citizens' initiatives to organize care differently within their neighborhood means working on health prevention and health promotion at community level, precisely as the authors of the Degrowth and Health paradigm - and their inspirator Ivan Illich - envisioned when theorizing what implementing degrowth into the realm of health may mean.

The board members of the NLZVE network informed

us that they were currently working to document the role citizens' initiatives are playing in health prevention and promotion. The idea is that the associated savings in health expenditure could incentivize policymakers to invest in the organization of care through commons.

Essential acts of care that improve people's health and well-being are provided by those parts of the economy not measured in calculations of GDP. By using GDP as a measure for societal progress, we are neglecting crucial caring practices taking place in the domain of the commons and the household. By focusing solely on the 'productive' practices of the economy, we neglect what can be called the 'reproductive' practices: the work done to reproduce ourselves in the caring economy. This is why feminist scholars have long been calling for an integration of reproductive unpaid care work, of which the majority is done by women, in how we see the economy.

'It is of course not our aim to relieve the burden on the formal [healthcare] system, but that really is a result of our initiative. Our aim is to keep the people in our community as vital and healthy as possible and to prevent (health) problems by being there early. (...) You can reduce the pressure on the health care system a lot if you organize informal care at community level properly'

- co-founder of Austerlitz Zorgt

Nurturing accessibility and practicing reciprocity

The informal approach to care of citizens' initiatives makes care services more accessible ('laagdrem-pelig'). Most initiatives included in this study had a so-called neighborhood (care) coordinator (in Dutch a 'Dorpsondersteuner or Dorpscoördinator') who formed a clear point of communication ('aanspreekpunt') for citizens within the community. This citizen served as a so-called 'spider in the web' within the collaborative network of organizations and fulfilled a crucial role in the aim to bring care close to the people.

'I am really a point of contact where people can put all of their concerns. Why it works really has to do with accessibility and familiarity, and the small scale of our initiative. The threshold to seek help from 'formal care organizations' is really quite high for many. People often do not dare to use these formal services as they consider their concerns as not important or relevant enough.

- Caretaker at Dorpenzorg

A key characteristic of the citizens' initiatives is the fact

that care is provided in a reciprocal way. Members of a citizens' initiative can take on the role of a neighbor but also of a caring volunteer. People can take on the role of care recipients when they need care, but also that of care providers when they have the capacity to do so effectively. In this way, care is turned into a provisioning service that creates wealth for the community as a whole in a reproductive way, rather than as a service exchanged from a provider to a receiver.

Through the citizens' initiative, people in the neighborhood can become participants in building the caring conditions in which they want to live. All of this changes the dynamic between the caretaker and care receiver. It is characterized by a sense of meaningfulness and a feeling of responsibility. Acknowledging and responding to our need for reciprocity is a crucial feature of citizens' initiatives.

'If you enable people to take responsibility for themselves and for the people around them, by allowing them to organize things themselves in the way they think is best for the neighborhood, you are creating a huge sense of belonging to the neighborhood. People feel more responsible and want to contribute to the livelihood of their community. As more people are getting involved, you really feel more connected

with each other, I think this is really important for so many people.'

- Caretaker at buurtcoöperatie Oostelijk Havengebied

This is precisely what degrowth scholars mean when they speak about the ethic of care (Parriqué, 2019). Recentering our economy around reciprocal caring practices means moving it away from transactional ones. A system that stimulates citizens to feel a sense of responsibility for maintaining the reproductive wealth of their local livelihood is radically different from a system that promotes individuality and productivity.

'The whole mechanism of 'markets' that was once invented (...) removes people from collective facilities and promotes the display of consumer behavior. (...) The moment you start getting involved with the provisioning of care through a citizens' initiative in your community, you yourself are becoming a producer of your own social network. And when you are pushed more into that producer role, there is much more of a sense of responsibility involved.'

- Member of NLZVE's national helpdesk

Importantly, although this distinctive approach of car-

ing commons can play a major role in making care more accessible for many people, this same approach might also unconsciously exclude people that don't adhere to the dominant social norms of each initiative. Who gets to be a part of a collective? These questions of the risk for segregation and exclusion need to be adequately addressed by local policy makers in consultation with the people in a community.

Letting those concerned decide

We already spoke about the collective approach citizens' initiatives take to the need for autonomy and self-reliance. Building on this insight, it seems that a unique aspect of citizens' initiatives is that they are self-governing. Decisions are made by those affected by them as much as possible. Putting such a 'bottom-up' approach to governing care in practice means ensuring local support (*draagvlak*, in Dutch) and a sense of 'collective ownership' (*collectief eigenaarschap*) within the community. As one respondent put it: 'what characterizes a citizens' initiative is that citizens feel that it is truly theirs.' The aim is to make a citizens' initiative truly stewarded by those living within the community. As such, it becomes truly embedded within the

local neighborhood, as part of the social fabric of the community.

As many citizens' initiatives arise from a certain frustration with the narrow-minded official procedures of the formal healthcare system, initiatives often have a governance model characterized by as few bureaucratic necessities as possible. Minimizing bureaucratic procedures speeds up decision-making processes and promotes the involvement of as many community members as possible. That being said, it remains crucial to have clear rules and agreements, and these should follow from the collectively agreed upon goal of the initiative. In essence, when organizing care through commons, the goal is to strike a balance between unnecessary bureaucracy and clear, agreed-on community guidelines.

'If you want to achieve something, you need certain rules and agreements, linked to your vision, and these should be clear. (...) But we do not have strict procedures or guidelines that should be followed. We do have a board, but there is no hierarchy, people are granted a lot of freedom and many things are possible. That's where the strength of our initiative lies.'

- Co-founder of Oostelijk Havengebied

Such a way of organizing care aligns with what the authors of *Health and Degrowth* and Ivan Illich had in mind when penning down their ideas on how to reorganize healthcare beyond growth, so that, in the words of Aillon and D'Alisa 'healthcare becomes actively stewarded as a commons' (Illich, 1976; Aillon and D'Alisa, 2020). Likewise, it builds upon the vision of primary health care (PHC) enshrined in the Alma-Ata Declaration of 1978 that has been advocated by WHO ever since (WHO, 1978).

Staying locally grounded while building distributed networks for knowledge exchange

In order for citizens' initiatives to flourish, they need to maintain their small scale and they need to stay locally grounded. Meanwhile, many citizens' initiatives are having good connections with other such programmes within the region or on national level. In essence, the initiatives are expanding and enriching - something we consider to be different than the term 'scaling-up' - through building distributed networks of knowledge and skills exchange, both at the regional and the national level (in this case the NLZVE). Local lessons from initiatives at different development stages can then be

adopted to other geographic and socioeconomic contexts. Insights are shared not only for practical reasons, but in the hope to offer sources of inspiration to others.

'We really hope to inspire others to self-organize and keep on fighting against that system. Don't give a damn about the government because within our so-called 'participation society' there is only one group of people who are not really participating and that is those in power. Do what you think is right and you will get a long way, really a long way.'

- Co-founder DorpenZorg

Appreciating different approaches to changemaking

People involved with citizen's initiatives reflect very differently on their role in the process of societal change. People can be very much concerned with societal issues, and how the movement of citizens' initiative responds to these issues. We see this happening when people are rather than being (only) active at the local level, they are engaged with the movement of citizens' initiatives nation-wide (for example through joining the national board of the NLZVE). Conversely, when people are mostly focused on the local level and are occupied

with setting up services and activities to respond to the care needs of their local community, they may be less concerned with issues at societal level. Being pragmatic and being idealistic can be hard to combine under a system that upholds the status quo.

'People do want to change, and especially now with corona, you can see that we can change at a very rapid pace if we really want to. But you have to offer them the right perspective, and in this case the right alternative, with that right perspective. (...) I do feel there is a realization from 'within the system' that a new actor with a different purpose and approach is emerging and we are moving from a two-dimensional to a three-dimensional playing field of market, government and the commons'

- Citizen involved at NLZVE's national board

'I am convinced that the movement of citizens' initiatives, or the 'commons' do have and are an important part of the answer to the growing feeling of unrest amongst people on how we have organized our society and the follow-up question of what to do next. (...) The thing is, participating in the public debate on societal transformation is actually not so interesting for us as NLZVE. We simply offer a very straightforward and carefully constructed alternative that originated and exists outside the system. When we enter this debate

and say 'well you can also do something you know, just join in, a lot is happening already', people suddenly don't find it very interesting because it doesn't give this exciting feeling that comes with criticizing and rebelling. This sounds very cynical, but it is an experience that I have a lot.'

- Citizen involved at NLZVE's national board

As Derk Loorbach reflected on the matter during our talk: 'Citizens active at commons initiatives often don't feel any urge to push for transformative system change. Fact is that many of these initiatives started because people wanted to rebel against the system, not so much change or transform the system itself (...) I don't think you should bother these people with talks about systemic transformation, because a) it is their identity to exist outside the existing system and resist against it and b) they are already occupied with setting up services and activities to respond to the needs of their local community, often on a voluntary basis.'

It teaches us that, although societal transformation as envisioned by degrowth thinking is a process of multiple strategies involving different actors with different roles - or what Demaria et al. (2013) call a 'movement of movements changing both everyday practices and state institutions' - it will be fundamental to bring those different changemaking actors together if we want have a

truly democratic discussion about the society we want to live in.

Throughout this chapter, we wanted to reveal some of the key dynamics that make caring commoning practices distinctive. Moreover, we wanted to show how the act of organising care through commons is part of the radical act of building a caring world beyond growth. We argue that promoting the organisation of care through commons will be pivotal to departing from growth-oriented conceptualisations of health and care, replacing the growth imperative with degrowth's core values of autonomy, sufficiency and care instead.

How can policymakers and other changemakers inspired by these different insights support the organisation of care through commons? What institutional changes would steer the transformation to a caring world beyond growth forward? For these questions we will turn to the next chapter.

4 Towards a careful degrowth transformation

Insights in this chapter:

We need to foster solidarity with one another and with nature, embracing a holistic understanding of health. We need to abolish GDP as indicator of progress.

The spirit that drives acts of commoning is in direct opposition to growth-centered normality. A careful degrowth transformation requires radical policies and actions.

We need to introduce Universal Care Income, we have to cut working hours in half, we need community currencies and time banks to foster local caring economies.

Public-Civic Partnerships will be needed to support

these social-economic innovations and to bolster the commons.

‘It is becoming increasingly clear that things need to change, and the pressure is getting stronger and stronger. But it is tough, because when you look at how the system works, it is simply created to maintain what is already existing. There are plenty of officials who want to change things and do things differently in the same way that we want to. But they also run into the same systematic problems.’

‘While what we are doing here in the neighborhood with local residents, that originated outside that system, from the bottom up. So in that sense we are moving much faster than that system change, we are much further ahead.’

- Co-founder of buurtcoöperatie Oostelijk Havengebied

The spirit that drives acts of commoning is in direct opposition to growth-centered normality. A careful degrowth transformation requires radical policies and actions that create more space for degrowth-oriented caring commons infrastructures to develop. We believe

that this transformation happens at two levels. The first level concerns the way we think about health, well-being and progress. The second level concerns the way we organize.

Transformation I: Re-evaluate our concepts of well-being and health (at individual level) and wealth and progress (at society level) and the indicators we use to measure them

Promote planetary health thinking

The first shift we need to make concerns the ways in which we conceptualize human health and well-being. As degrowth scholar Serge Latouche puts it: we will need to decolonize our health imaginaries from growth (Latouch, 2009). As we saw, the degrowth movement has its roots in ecological thinking. The basic starting principle of ecology is: everything is connected. Consequently, an ecological-centered approach to human health means recognizing our interdependencies, both human and non-human ones, according to the concept of planetary health as introduced in the beginning of this report (Myers and Frumkin, 2021).

It is about seeing human beings as part of nature itself,

in harmony with it, rather than opposing mankind to nature through a logic of domination and control. This means promoting an understanding of health that embraces care as an ethic of non-exploitation (Parrique, 2019). It will not only be about fostering solidarity in our interpersonal relationships but in our relationship with nature as well. A vision of reality that sees everyone as disconnected individuals is likely to lead to a social order that privileges individual liberty at the expense of collaborative practices like organising care through commons.

Commoning practices promote a shift to more community-centered ways of living that are more place-based, where caring becomes embedded in patterns of social relationships and health is understood in a more holistic way. Placing our health understandings in the domain of ecology as envisioned by the concept of planetary health will become vital in a socio-ecological transformation. If we are to degrow, we need to promote the ethic of planetary health thinking.

When we see humanity as part of the web of life, it is easier to comprehend how our own health is intricately interwoven with that of the more-than-human world. For this, people living in the West have much to learn

from other more harmonious ways of living without exploitation nor accumulation. Buen vivir in South America, Swarai in India and Ubuntu in South Africa all provide illustrative examples (Kothari et al., 2019).

- Abolish the use of GDP as an indicator of a society's progress

If we are to reorient our society around care, autonomy and sufficiency, GDP forms a misleading progress indicator. GDP shows the aggregate of the consumption and production capacity of our countries, while entirely ignoring the economic externalities inflicted in the process. As such, when we use GDP growth as an indicator of a society's progress, we promote the indefinite increase of all that can be turned into capital, regardless of its social or ecological cost.²⁰ Crucially, and as feminist economists have been pointing out for decades already, by using GDP as a measure for societal well-being, we also exclude all of the essential life-making care work taking place in the domains of the commons and the household. (Waring, 1988; ; Jochimsen, M. and Knobloch, U., 1997; Biesecker and Hofmeister, 2010;

²⁰ For an elaboration of why GDP can be understood as an aggregate of a countries' consumption and production capacity, while not considering economic externalities inflicted, see for example: Deaton and Schreyer 2020).

Dengler and Strunk, 2017)

If we are to make our economy more careful by acknowledging and strengthening these caring commoning practices in our economy, we need more comprehensive indicators to measure a society's progress that include these reproductive acts of care. More and more governments across the world are responding to this need. A big step in the right direction has been the formation of a Wellbeing Economy Governments partnership (WEGo) by the governments of New Zealand, Finland, Wales, Iceland, and Scotland. They are committing themselves to build economies that put the well-being of their people and the planet first, of what they refer to as 'wellbeing economies' (WEAll, 2020). In the Netherlands, the creation of a 'Brede Welvaart Monitor' in 2018 likewise forms a hopeful sign (CBS, 2018).

Transformation II (Concrete): transforming our growth-oriented ways of political organizing

The conceptual shift described in this paper will be fundamental to imagining a healthy society beyond growth. Yet, solely moving towards more comprehensive and reality-based understandings of health and re-

lated measures of progress will not be sufficient in truly moving beyond our deep-rooted dependence on growth. We shall need to adopt transformative ways of political organization as well. We discuss three degrowth-promoting policy strategies here that support and promote the organisation of care through commons in a structural way.

Care income and reduced working hours (national policymakers)

The idea of a care income comes from the concept of a Universal Basic Income, or UBI, that is a monetary allocation to each individual as a matter of right. A care income in specific is a means to directly invest in people's capacity to take care of themselves, their community as well as nature (Paulson et al., 2020). As such, rather than being only a mechanism for profit-driven exchange, money becomes a tool to enable the provisioning of care in commons and the household and for guaranteeing everyone a right to livelihood. While the commercial use of money drives growth, such a public and social allocation of money would provide people with direct access to the resources they need (Mellor, 2010).

Besides being a way to promote the caring commons, a universal care income is a recognition of the unpaid care work that occurs in the domestic sphere and is predominantly performed by women. As feminist economics have pointed out, ‘cash for care’ programs like a care income may pose the risk of further institutionalizing gender inequalities, since they may reduce the incentive for some women to remain in the labor market (Ikkaracan, 2017). This risk could be mitigated by implementing a care income in conjunction with the policy vehicle of reducing working hours. By reducing working hours, people become liberated from time for paid work and are granted more time to spend on caring commoning practices (Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 2012).

Carbon fees and resource taxes alongside investment in the arts and cultural sector could disincentivize ecologically harmful choices and strengthen the relationship between reduced working hours and decreased environmental impacts and carbon emissions (Coote et al., 2010). As such, investing in people’s capacity to form caring commons is a policy step that addresses both social and ecological concerns. It is for this reason that the caring economy (that is the commons and the household) is sometimes called the ‘economy of so-

cio-ecological provisioning' (Dengler and Lang, 2021).

Reducing work hours and establishing a care income could be crucial ways to decouple human well-being and employment from economic growth in a just manner. Through granting everyone a guaranteed level of income while sharing the work performed on the labor market more equitably, people can satisfy their needs and wants without requiring a continuous level of income generated by market employment and thus without requiring more growth.

Community currencies and caring time banks (local policymakers)

The current Dutch welfare system significantly depends upon high energy systems. Its associated policy instruments all rely on fiscal transfers from a growing economy. As our economy becomes premised on low material and energy throughput, we will need to come up with new policies. Embarking on a careful degrowth transformation means introducing ways to base the monetary system in the real economy, while also using it to structurally promote those activities that make the economy more ecologically sufficient and caring.

Money can encourage socially and ecologically sustainable production and consumption, but only if it is reclaimed as a social and public representation of value, as Mary Mellor reminds us in *Money: Myths, Truths and Alternatives* (Mellor, 2019). How to turn caring commons and other commons into democratically governed economies in which money is treated as a collective resource for sustainable provisioning?

One way to do so is by expanding the current system for the financing of care with community-led currency schemes. As we saw, the caring commons have very distinctive ways of organizing care. Local community currencies can grant them the financial autonomy they need. It could be a way to respond to the challenges caring commoners experience with today's narrow financing flows not fit for their integrative, collaborative and community centered approach to care.

Community currencies can also contribute to downscaling and relocalizing economic activity, constraining the circulation of money within a community. They are a tool with which we can tackle the growth imperative that is built into the financial system as it exists today (D'Alisa et al., 2014). It is important to acknowledge

that local currencies alone don't make a money system. You need to have a monetary community. In order for local currencies to be inclusive, everyone in the community should be able to access them. The local currency system needs to be representative for the community (Mellor, 2019).

Another way to use money as a tool for strengthening and promoting the caring commons and for shaping the path to a careful degrowth transformation, is by introducing time banks. As D'Alisa et al. (2014) have put it, such local exchange trading systems can 'contribute to downscaling and relocalizing economic activity, constraining the circulation of money within a community'. We propose the introduction of caring time banks.²¹

Public-Collective Partnerships (local policymakers)

Public-Collective Partnerships, or PCPs, are innovative

²¹ The idea of a time-based economy was invented by Allen Butcher. Much can be found on his website <http://www.culturemagic.org/TimeBasedEconomics.html>, where he writes "In time-based economies, the world's natural resources are shared, and individual labor contributes to a common wealth by maximizing public goods and services, providing for individual happiness through systems of rational altruism. With a sharing of wealth, fear of economic loss or exposure (fear of scarcity) is reduced and greed is not rewarded. Happiness, then, is found as much in working for the good of all as in work for personal benefit."

approaches between public institutions and commons to co-produce ideas and policies, and deliver public goods and services collectively. Remaking the relations between the state and local levels to deepen collaborative decision-making are key to empowering communities to engage in caring commoning practices in a meaningful and structural manner. Just like commons, PCPs manifest themselves in diverse forms. They are shaped by the local and thematic contexts in which they are developed. Crucially, ambitious and well-funded public institutions will be an imperative for successful and strong PCPs.

PCPs can be self-sustained and self-extended when financing is well designed. Starting with local authorities' ability to capitalise financial resources (through for example the establishment of local community currencies), it is possible to develop locally owned and managed infrastructures that generate profits. These profits can then be reinvested into new projects organized by the local community. In this way, existing PCP's can finance new PCP's. PCPs are a long-term investment (Milburn and Russel, 2019; Groot de, 2021).

We acknowledge that the proposals discussed here are ambitious, under today's growth regime. These ideas

could transform not only the way we live and work, but how we relate to each other and the natural world. New ideas always demand political courage. But we hope that readers will find comfort and hope in the fact that most of these new ideas and models are already being put into practice by communities all over the world. It is up to us to help them flourish.

Epilogue

'You know, citizens' initiatives are like a dance: three steps forward, two steps back. But still, we are moving forward. It is a collective process that goes on and on.'

- Helpdesk member at NLZVE

In the beginning of this report, we argued that, rather than leading to more progress, growth-oriented economics is causing health problems for millions of people and is wrecking the planet in the process. It only really benefits a handful of private companies within a select number of rich countries. If we want to safeguard human and environmental health today and in the future, we cannot afford to continue to use the same extractive model that brought us to this situation in the first place. If we want to move towards planetary health, we need a radically different approach to organizing our economies and societies. We need to move away from growth. We believe that embarking on a degrowth transformation in the Global North is the most viable path towards a more ecological, just and healthy society. It means

moving to a world in which caring for each other and for the planet, not financial speculation and resource extraction, would be recognized as the real wealth. New metrics would guide progress, while a new understanding of health and well-being would inform our caring endeavors. Core values for our society would be care, autonomy and sufficiency.

A careful degrowth-transformation requires us to recognize and strengthen what already exists in the interstices of today's growth-focused societies, like in the realm of the caring economy where the caring commons reside. Slowly but surely the neoliberal story, with its fairytales of eternal economic growth, is falling apart²⁰ (Thunberg, 2021). The language of degrowth and its prefigurative practices can provide fundamental tools to write new stories and imagine new futures beyond the hegemony of growth. Revolution happens when old stories start to crumble.

20 In his latest book, *Out of the wreckage: A new politics for an age of crisis*, George Monbiot makes a compelling argument on the importance of storytelling for real transformation to come about. In his own words: "It is not political leaders who run the world, but big political stories. Humans try to navigate the world by means of narrative frameworks. (...) The stories which seize the public mind, determine the direction that society takes." Later in his book, Monbiot himself lays the groundwork for a new political story - one he refers to as 'a new politics of belonging' - of which the commons are forming a crucial cornerstone. (Monbiot, 2017)

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Chapter 1

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