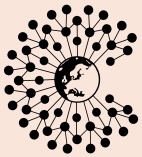




Abstract

Living well on a finite planet
Building a caring world beyond growth



Commons
Network



A Commons Network Publication,
Amsterdam, November 2021.

Lead author: Winne van Woerden,
lead researcher Caring and Degrowth at Commons Network.

Co-author: Thomas de Groot,
co-director at Commons Network.

Contributing authors: Dr. Remco van de Pas,
senior research fellow Global Health, Institute of Tropical
Medicine, Antwerp and Sophie Bloemen,
co-director and founder at Commons Network.

Expert reviewers: Stacco Troncoso,
commons advocate and co-founder of DisCO.coop and Guerilla
Translation and David Hammerstein,
senior advisor at Commons Network.

Editor: Luke Bailey.

Artwork and formatting: Mick van Dijk.

<https://www.commonsnetwork.org/>

This report is published under the Creative Commons-license
CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0.



**Commons
Network**

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 fu-

ture beyond growth. In Chapter 4: Towards a care-full Degrowth Transformation, 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 degrowth 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.

