

How to define and assess needs and well-being in a degrowth perspective: debating concepts, tools and methods

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The aim of the session is to tackle the difficult issue of how to define and assess needs and well-being in a degrowth perspective. Degrowth (DG) has provided a very relevant critic of the mainstream conceptualization of needs (preferences and homo economicus of neoclassical economics VS the anti-utilitarian frame of Degrowth) and of the growth-development paradigm. Apart from publications on subjective well-being, however degrowth theory, largely lacks concepts methods and tools that can operationalize alternative conceptions of wellbeing that are in line with its principles. On the contrary, human development (HD) while remaining in a “quite consensual” sustainability discourse has developed some interesting tools, concepts and methods that could be very useful for the practical implementation of DG initiatives. Indeed, HD has developed a strong theory of capabilities that enables to move away from the concept of preferences. Similarly, Max-Neef's Human Scale Development approach has provided a strong theory of human needs which seems compatible with DG. Max-Neef explains that needs are finite and largely immaterial and develops a typology of satisfiers that is highly relevant for degrowth (destructive, inhibition, pseudo response, singular and synergetic, only the synergetic one is "sustainable" according to Max-Neef). In sum HD has developed concepts, methods and tools to better conceptualize, assess and improve human freedoms and needs and human agency both at the collective and individual level. These elements could be very useful to implement and operationalize degrowth discourses, as they could demonstrate the impact in terms of agency and well-being improvement of transition initiatives such as cooperatives, urban agriculture and many others.

The session will address the 2 or 3 of the following questions:

- Are there points of cross-over between life-satisfaction approaches, capability theory and HD that could be sought in the context of degrowth?
- Is the very idea of well-being assessment and needs definition compatible with degrowth? Even if the evaluation/definition is through a qualitative, participatory and multidimensional way?
- What are the advantages and limits of the concept of subjective well-being, capabilities and fundamental needs approach through the degrowth lens?
- What are the differences and complementarities between, on the one hand, conviviality and sufficiency principles and on the other hand, freedom of choice, agency and synergetic satisfaction of needs on the other? Can the concept of “bounded capabilities” represent a docking point between DG and HD?

The session will be structured as follow. Two main participants will introduce briefly degrowth, capabilities and fundamental human needs focusing on the issue of needs and wellbeing definition. The discussion will then be structured around the questions abovementioned.