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Alternatives to capitalist development and its sustainability implications

Degrowth in discussion with Buen Vivir: Allies to draw on Positive Sustainable Futures?

Master's thesis in Industrial Ecology

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Thesis on the possibility for degrowth and Buen Vivir to draw positive sustainable futures.
A qualitative study through theoretical analysis and expert interviews
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Cover: painting from the Zapatista movement (EZLN) encountered in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico, during the writing process.

“Un mundo donde muchos mundos quepan,” translated from Spanish into English: “A world where many worlds fit”.

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Abstract

While improving the material living conditions for a large share of the global population, the Capitalocene has led to an unprecedented overshooting of social and ecological limits that now threaten life on Earth. Just transitions are called for to bring societies within the planetary boundaries while fairly sustaining populations' needs worldwide. This thesis aims to present alternative philosophies that underpin transformations towards sustainable futures. Literature provides explanations of the current polycrisis and offers transition pathways but only considers the world's multiple relational worldviews or ontologies – the pluriverse – to a limited extent. Therefore, I ask how pluriversal philosophies, such as *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir*, can coexist and inspire sustainability transformations. Through a grounded theory approach, *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* are brought into dialogue. Based on a theoretical analysis of the two philosophies complemented by interviews with *degrowth* experts, I highlight the worldviews and values embedded in both *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* and analyse their similarities, differences, and possible synergies. *Degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* both aim to foster wellbeing among communities made of humans and more-than-humans. This approach recognises that human civilizations are entrenched in nature, therefore moving beyond anthropocentrism seems reasonable. A pluriversal approach and active decolonisation, to enable the emancipation of countries under European imperialism, are needed to recognize and embrace differences of diverse realities striving for similar fulfilment. The findings also show that post-development societies need to be aesthetically co-imagined to meaningfully unfold. Contributing to the literature about pluriversal alternatives, I end the thesis by discussing the necessity of coexistence between *degrowth*, *Buen Vivir* and other sustainable philosophies. The values proposed by these can drive deep cultural shifts that are needed for just sustainability transformations.

Keywords: Degrowth; Buen Vivir; Sustainability; Pluriverse; Decolonisation; Positive futures

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List of acronyms

GDP – Gross Domestic Product

IPCC – Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

RQs – Research Questions

SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals

WEIRD – Wealthy, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic

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1. Introduction

The last two decades have been shaped by fast-changing environments and life conditions. Contemporary societies are facing challenges threatening life on Earth (IPCC, 2023), plunging human civilisations into a context of polycrisis (Lawrence et al., 2022). While the hegemonic economic and political paradigm endorsed by the global North has led wealthy nations to progress and develop through economic growth (Herrington, 2021), capitalism still appears as an unsustainable way to organise societies from a systemic perspective, causing adverse social and ecological effects (Adler, 2015; Feola, 2020; Parrique, 2022). Climate change, biodiversity collapse, and air pollution are evidence of hazardous damages harming life (Steffen et al., 2015; Rockström et al., 2009), while current ways to organise societies do not seem able anymore to accordingly meet the needs of the population in wealthy nations (Keller, 2021). Despite an overall increase in life conditions, adverse social and ecological struggles faced around the world question the essence of our ways of living, stressing the need to radically change the dominating patterns of societies (Acosta, 2023; Chertkovskaya, 2020; Parrique et al., 2019; Scharmer, 2023). Far beyond a one-sided picture, tackling these challenges will be emphasised in this thesis as an exciting personal, collective and societal endeavour.

To address the socio-ecological struggles faced by modern civilisations, empiricism shows political and economic attempts to reorientate societies in sustainable pathways. Indeed, research has expanded the horizons, showing different possibilities to operate politically or economically but a gap remains between theory and implementation (Fazey et al., 2018; Bentz et al., 2022). Indeed, most of the proposed solutions advocate for shallow adjustments (Meadows D., 1999), rarely questioning the deep foundations of the northern imperialist way of living (Abson et al., 2017). On the other hand, empiricism reveals fruitful examples of alternative paths that are socially and ecologically consistent (Escobar, 2015; Brossmann & Islar, 2020). These movements often advocate for *strong* sustainability, rejecting the idea of systematically substituting natural capital with man-made capital (Ruggerio, 2021), enabling a gentler relationship between humans and more-than-humans. Yet, grassroots movements promoting alternatives often lack visibility or suffer from competition from organisations favoured by political and economic organisations (Demaria et al., 2023). Possible alternatives take many forms and shapes, offering plural answers to shared struggles and, therefore, need to be considered in their complexity (Latouche, 2014). Among them, alternative philosophies appear to be relevant ways to organise societies in meaningful ways, carrying populations in a project built on shared values.

1.1. Buen Vivir and degrowth in the pluriverse

As diverse as cultures, landscapes, and people are, it is reasonable to name it a pluriverse of realities: “a world where many worlds fit”, according to the Zapatista movement of Chiapas, Mexico (Escobar, n.d., 2011, 2015; see also Demaria et al., 2023). The northern imperialism exemplified by rich nations is just one side of the story, and a vast range of realities can be found around the world (Henrich, 2020). In a pluriversal world, differences are recognised and embraced to find local solutions to local struggles (Latouche, 2014). Initiatives, projects, communities, and lifestyles around the world show alternatives for life of humans and more-than-humans to thrive on Earth. Therefore, evidence of sustainable futures can be found within this myriad of emerging or existing realms (Escobar, n.d., 2011, 2015). *Degrowth* in the global

North and *Buen Vivir* in the global South stand out as positive, desirable futures (Acosta, 2023).

Buen Vivir or *Vivir Bien*, roughly translated in English as Living Well, is a Latin American philosophy rooted in the cosmivision of Andean indigenous people (Díaz-Muñoz, 2024; Inuca Lechón, 2017). *Buen Vivir* is built on the opposition to leading capitalist development (Gudynas, n.d., 2011, 2014) and sustainable development (Richter, 2023), proposing alternative ways of having meaningful, balanced and beautiful lives (Gudynas, 2011). In this vision, local communities play a central role in human and more-than-human coexistence, recognising the interconnectedness of different forms of life and questioning anthropocentrism (Díaz-Muñoz, 2024). *Buen Vivir's* philosophies express the pluriversality of our common but shared world (Escobar, 2015). Initially expressed in indigenous languages of Ecuador and Bolivia as “Sumak Kawsay” (Quechua and Kichwa) and “Suma Qamaña” (Aymara), *Buen Vivir* has been recently coined in Spanish, finding an echo beyond indigenous communities (Acosta, 2020). This seizing came with a taming of *Buen Vivir's* meaning, leading to a “generic” use of the term (Gudynas, 2014), notably in the political arena of Ecuador and Bolivia, where *Buen Vivir* is written in both constitutions. Yet, the substantive meaning of *Buen Vivir* is a radical critic of all forms of development at their conceptual foundations, offering post-capitalist and post-socialist alternatives for Latin American populations to take control of their destiny (Gudynas, 2014) and liberate from northern imperialism (Teixeira, 2021).

Despite the issues mentioned above, global North societies continue to show “faith” towards capitalist development (Latouche, 2019a). Albeit different origins to *Buen Vivir*, *degrowth* arose as a counter-hegemonic way to organise society, opposing the all-encompassing economy of growth and development (Acosta, 2023; Kallis G., 2018; Parrique, 2019). *Degrowth* is a way to democratically plan the reduction of ecological loads in affluent regions of the world while increasing population welfare through inequality decrease and quality of life improvements (Parrique, 2023a). Initially proposed by scholars and activists revolting against the idea of development in the early 2000s in Europe (notion further developed in 4.1.2.1), *degrowth* is a relatively young field of study (Kallis et al., 2018). *Degrowth* is built on philosophical works expressing concerns with the imperialist way of living (see Latouche, 2014). Fortified by growing literature, *degrowth* unfolds beyond the economic field and stands for radically different ways of living (Buch-Hansen & Nesterova, 2023; Latouche, 2014; Parrique, 2022). Autonomy, sufficiency and care (Parrique, 2019) are at the core of convivial societies (Deriu, 2014) promoted by *degrowth*. Striving for simplicity and decommodification, degrowing societies aim at bolstering happiness among humans while ensuring a better relationship with more-than-humans (Parrique, 2019). Yet, empirical evidence of *degrowth* remains scarce (Escobar, 2015), and the field is affected by limited public seizing.

Both *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir*, albeit recent in their internationalisation, have been discussed and compared in the scientific literature (see for example Acosta, n.d., 2020, 2023; Chassagne & Everingham, 2019; Chertkovskaya, 2020; Escobar, 2015; Gudynas, n.d., 2011, 2014; Kothari et al., 2014; Monni & Pallottino, 2015; Richter, 2023). Mainly presented as two distinct alternatives to capitalist development, research has been analytical and focused on the differences between *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir*. Attempts to find synergies sometimes lead to neo-colonial approaches from European authors when Latin American authors seem to reject the idea of an international version of *degrowth* (see Escobar, 2015). There seems to be a tension ratio between the potential alliance of *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* in relation to capitalist development. Yet, few studies focused on the conditions and desirability for a coexistence of both paradigms. This thesis addresses this research gap.

The present research is an attempt to transcend *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* to meaningfully help the debate on positive and desirable futures. As this thesis will show, beyond competing visions, addressing the polycrisis requires transcending paradigms and seeking unconventional solutions (Latouche, 2014; Servigne et al., 2020). By comparing these two philosophies and finding synergies, normative values arise, whilst reflections and suggestions are made to bolster futures of peaceful coexistence where life can thrive on Earth. The theoretical discussion is supplemented by interviews conducted specifically to obtain in-depth expert knowledge, views, and opinions.

1.2. Research Questions

The aim of this thesis is, therefore, to investigate how *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* can be a meaningful coalition to draw on sustainable futures. In order to reach the stated aim, the following research questions arise and are answered:

R.Q. 1: What are the similarities and differences between *Buen Vivir* and *degrowth* as viable alternatives to capitalist development?

RQ 1.2: Given similarities and differences, to what extent can *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* be put together?

R.Q. 2: What desirable futures can *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* help draw?

1.3. Thesis outline

The following chapter presents the background motivations of the present thesis as well as a literature review of the *Buen Vivir* and *degrowth* movements. The third chapter includes the methodology used, which is the guideline-based interview such as the data collection method and grounded theory as the analysis method. The results in the fourth chapter come in two steps: (1) the results from the theoretical analysis and (2) the results from the interviews performed. The fifth chapter discusses the results in relation to the theoretical background and the empirical background, as well as elaborates on further possible research. Finally, the thesis ends with a compact conclusion.

2. Background

This section elaborates on the background and foundation of the present thesis. The context, as well as useful concepts to answer the research questions are presented. Following a brief description of important vocabulary, evidence of the necessity of sustainability transformations is presented. Systemic changes are looming, willingly or not, and the occasion is to be seized to make positive futures happen.

The motivations of this thesis as a meaningful contribution to sustainability literature lie in the evidence displayed in this section.

2.1. Lexicon

Because words are plastic and interpretation is subjective, important terms for reading this thesis are defined below. These definitions provide keys to reading and addressing knowledge gaps in crucial definitions.

2.1.1. Positive

Positive futures are possibilities for life on Earth to exist and thrive in the upcoming times. By ensuring the wellbeing of humans and more-than-humans, unpredictable futures can be contemplated serenely. Servigne et al. (2020) argued that positive future stories are a good balance between hope and honesty, accepting the negative emotions created by undesired events likely to happen. Using these negative emotions helps people to move into action (Servigne et al., 2020) and draw the lines between *preferable* and *possible* futures to foster transformation (Börjeson et al., 2006). The preferable approach is normative and not solely explorative. But on the interrogation of what is preferable, Gümüşay and Reinecke (2022) use the term desirable to theorise and imagine sustainable projects. The present thesis sticks to desirability as “avant-garde” research (Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022) able to shape social realities seeking sustainability for the most.

“The essence of dramatic tragedy is not unhappiness. It resides in the solemnity of the remorseless working of things” (Whitehead, 1967, p. 10). A positive narrative is not a fairy tale made of illusionary, optimistic wishes. It is about being consciously optimistic that the situation can be a source of life, joy, and well-being despite the atrocities happening in the world. One can be gloomy and sceptical regarding the Earth's conditions but remain optimistic that some aspects of life can be saved and embraced to ensure happiness and wellbeing for the people and the planet (Servigne et al., 2020). Yet, hope and optimism need to be used cautiously when combined with denial (Servigne et al., 2020). Hence, the importance of clear and tangible discourses not vanishing unpleasant realities.

Using Vaclav Havel's definitions, optimism is an expectation, based on the evidence at hand, that there is a reasonable likelihood of a positive outcome (IISC, 2011). Hope is the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it might turn out (Havel, 1990).

As the thesis later shows, *degrowth* provides a potential positive narrative for rich nations whilst *Buen Vivir* strives for positive blossoming in Latin America.

2.1.2. Futures

The future referred to in this thesis is an alternative future to the looming socioecological undesirable events that could be caused by the polycrisis stressed at various points of this thesis. It does not go far beyond the next 50 years and remains a fuzzy timespan that could range from a few years to a few decades away. In the eventuality of no significant sustainable transformations in current societies, the current polycrisis experienced by the thermo-industrialised civilisation (Servigne & Stevens, 2020) could lead to a civilisational collapse (Servigne & Stevens, 2020) likely to happen numerically (i.e., step by step, one little thing at a time collapsing), threatening humanity's survival (IPCC, 2023). Therefore, humanity's future is already hypothetical. Yet, the present thesis focuses on the alternative positive and preferable futures still achievable through radical civilisational transformations. To facilitate such transformations, normative scenarios are to be designed (Börjeson et al., 2006), allowing creativity for backcasting. Therefore, the future of this thesis remains blurry, lying between different realities and considered to have different maturities upon topic specifications and the reader's sensibility.

2.1.3. Transformation

The process of paradigm transformation requires profound modifications in the existing frameworks within societies. Extending beyond gradual changes prompted by the term transition, a transformation mandates a radical turn, distinct from previous organisations, because the opportunity for a seamless transition towards sustainable societies has now dissipated (Robinson, 2022). Current wealthy societies live beyond the planetary means (Rockström et al., 2009), and the *degrowth* of ecological and material footprint will happen, driven by conscious choice or imposed by the Earth (this assumption is further developed in 2.3). Humanity overshoots planetary boundaries, and human-constructed frameworks have to transform radically and rapidly (Parrique, 2022; Meadows et al., 1972).

Transformation can be understood as having a temporal and societal dimension often summarised in a three phases process (Sandén & Karlström, 2007). The so-called X-curve provides a framework for transformation for emerging systems. Figure 1: Three stages of transformation from the GSDR 2023 displays the three different phases of the X-curve. The red curve represents the decline of a dominant system in three steps: (1) destabilisation, (2) breakdown, (3) phase-out, and the green curve represents the rise of sustainable emerging systems. The green rising curve follows the S-curve framework, including feedback and different penetration stages into society (Sandén & Karlström, 2007). As described in the Global Sustainable Development Report (GSRD) 2023 (IGS, 2023), the S-curve comprises 3 phases: (1) the emergence phase, which is made of innovations that will disrupt the situation; It is made of deliberative processes to build shared narratives, visions, and missions collectively; (2) acceleration phase, observing a rapid increase and adoption of the innovation across sectors owing to market, policy, and social adoption; (3) stabilisation phase, observing a deep adoption and penetration of the innovation into the market becoming anchored in infrastructure, regulations, user habits, and standards (IGS, 2023). The rapid rise of systems has been extensively proven empirically (see Steffen et al., 2015). Because transformation does not happen in a vacuum, both curves are interconnected. When a new system emerges, a decline in another one is often observed.

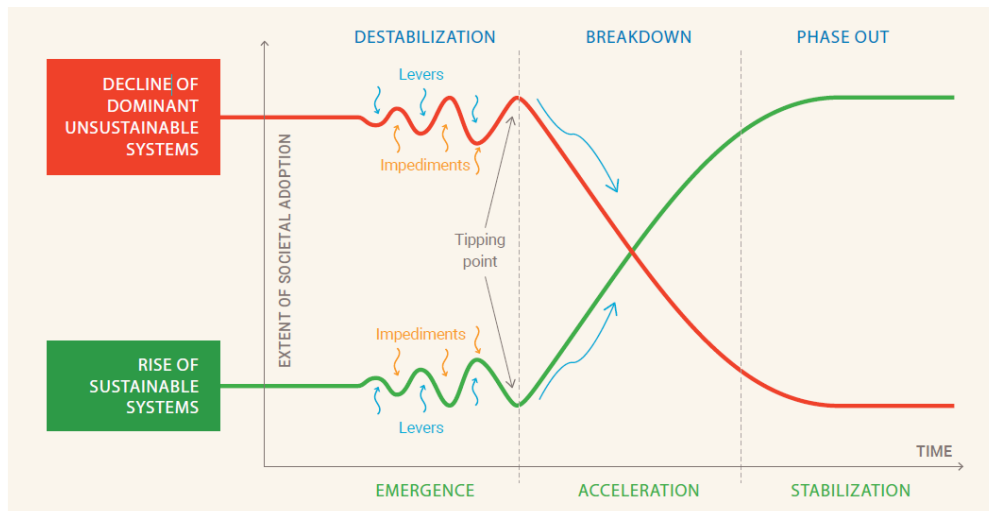


Figure 1: Three stages of transformation from the GSDR 2023 (IGS, 2023).

When looking down on the anti-capitalist forms of transformation, Wright (2012) identified three strategic logics of transformation: *ruptural*, *interstitial*, and *symbiotic*. The ruptural transformation implies a sharp break with existing institutions and social structures. Close to a revolutionary approach, the ruptural transformation aims at changing the name of the game by facing the enemy in a war structure. The interstitial transformation operates on the margins of the existing structures, building a new reality within the belly of the beast. Close to the anarchist movement, interstitial attempts offer pockets of resistance that help envision alternative realities. Finally, the symbiotic transformation is more of a reformative approach, aiming at changing the operating structures in order to steer systems towards a better version of themselves. Closely linked with the social democratic movements, this approach also relies on popular social empowerment (Chertkovskaya, 2020).

2.1.4. Paradigm

A paradigm is a set of widely accepted beliefs, values, practices, and assumptions that shape how individuals within a particular field of study, culture, or society understand and interpret reality (Kuhn, 1997). A paradigm offers a view of the reality we are living in. It provides visible and invisible frameworks to guide decision-making, problem-solving, and the development of theories or models within that context. Hereby, the term paradigm is used because of its structural role in human behaviour beyond the scientific use presented by Kuhn (Göktürk, 2005). Paradigmatic change is inextricable from a profound transformation. According to D. Meadows (1999), paradigms are the strongest and deepest leverage points to change a system. It is sort of the "strongest" and "largest" value possible in system thinking.

In this thesis, *degrowth*, *Buen Vivir* and capitalist development are considered to be paradigms. These paradigms are briefly introduced in the introduction and further discussed at the core of this thesis. Therefore, the terms are not further explained here.

2.2. Transforming paradigms: Blueprint and Limitations

In 1972, *The Limits to Growth* stressed the risk of overshooting the limits of what our planet can bear—followed by growing scientific research on the limitations of expenditure on a finite planet (Meadows et al., 1972). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), born in 1988, released its first assessment of the alarming climate situation in 1990. Rockström et al. (2009) published the result of their first assessment of the “Planetary Boundaries” in 2009. This work has been updated multiple times, and in 2023, at least 6 out of the 9 identified biological assimilation capacities of the planet are overshoot (Richardson et al., 2023). These successive warning signs provided by researchers are probably known by most stakeholders. Yet, the global ecological situation does not show drastic improvement over the last 50 years (Herrington, 2021).

The context of polycrisis is characterized by ecological overloads and the failure to meet the social decent minima (Lawrence et al., 2022; Raworth, 2017). As a response to this situation, global institutions have realigned to promote an alternative form of development. Promoted by the United Nations, the term “sustainable development” is an attempt to melt sustainability into capitalism (Veland et al., 2022; WCED, 1987). Nevertheless, evidence shows the incapacity of sustainable development to solve real issues (Horton, 2014). In 2023, halfway through the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) set by the Agenda 2030 of the United Nations (UN), out of the 140 targets established for the SDGs, only 12% are on track to be achieved (ECOSOC, 2023). Furthermore, 30% have either seen no movement or regressed below the 2015 baseline of the assessment. Overall, Europe is further away from fulfilling the goals of the 2030 Agenda in 2023 than it was in 2022. As a response, scholars on *degrowth* and alternatives to development turn their back on sustainable development. Demaria et al. (2023) claimed that “what is needed is an alternative to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (p. 60) when Horton (2014) censures “the SDGs are fairy tales, dressed in the bureaucratized of intergovernmental narcissism, adorned with the robes of multilateral paralysis, and poisoned by the acid of nation-state failure” (p. 2196). In other words, these critics argue for approaches that go beyond the SDGs and question central assumptions in sustainable development.

2.2.1. Science and Public Understanding of Science

Science can be both part of the solution and the problem regarding the current polycrisis (Fazey et al., 2020). In sustainability, extensive literature assesses the situation and limitations of societal schemes, proposing alternatives, but implementation is still lacking. The gap between theory and application is important and seems to not resorb despite well-documented desirable pathways in scientific publications (Bentz et al., 2022).

Implementation delays partly because science is not policy-prescriptive. Implementation is viewed as political, normative, and future-oriented and hence not amenable to scientific analysis (Fazey et al., 2020). This phenomenon is highlighted by the work of influential organisations, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which has focused on providing evidence of the problem and identifying broad pathways (Fazey et al., 2018). The messages from the IPCC and many other organisations shed light on threatening ecological predicaments but remained limited in their effect on politics. The IPCC became more solutions-oriented through the creation of Working Group 3, which first released a report on mitigation in 2021 aiming to provide solutions from the scientific literature. However, being solution-oriented has also been criticised. The traditional role of science is neutral without

interference with politics, and the separation between knowledge and action, as well as fact and value, remains dominant in the science-society interaction. Keeping this gap reinforces compartmentalised echo-chambers, hindering trans-sector communication and effective transformation. In a polycrisis situation, action is urgent, and the traditional way of establishing extremely robust evidence before taking action is by some framed as a barrier to purposeful transformation (Fazey et al., 2020). If some academics opt for civil disobedience, others try to melt personal sensibility in their work (Steinberger, 2023).

Scarce emotions in scientific discourses are another reason for the lack of public understanding and consideration of science (Veland et al., 2022). Veland et al. (2022) argued that post-World War trauma led to a deficient trust in humankind. At that time, humans perpetrated such atrocities that they, us, could not be trusted anymore. Hence constraining content, art, and story creators to root their work in cartesian neutrality. Humans changed their role to object rather than subject. Predominance of facts, evidence, and neutrality made science become distant from scientists, and the dominant civilisation has been locked in a rational and impersonal approach (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1993). Researchers tend to limit personal involvement in their work, differentiating the object of study from the observer, the so-called 1st order science (Fazey et al., 2018). All this together made human beings believe that they can overcome subjectivity because they are observers of nature, the object of study, which they are disconnected from. This view is limited since every observer is undergoing natural biases that benefit from being clearly stated (MacCoun, 1998). Furthermore, science is a very personal field. Despite being a-partisan, research is not a-politic. Research serves the prosperity of humankind, and findings are intertwined with practice (Barrau, 2023). Oppenheimer's nuclear bomb creation is a relevant example. Regardless of his talent and the inextricable question of his research, he sincerely believed that science was not policy perspective but rather a go-between between reality and politicians (Oppenheimer, 1958). Nevertheless, he could not help but have mixed feelings about the use made of his work on fission and nuclear weapons, raising questions on the role of a scientist and the goal of scientific discoveries.

From this perspective one can argue that classic, rational way to solve problems is too long and ineffective for current predicaments (Fazey et al., 2018). To maintain the habitability on Earth for humans and more-than-humans, there is a need to speed up the traditional science role to transform societies.

Second order science

“Meaningful Education includes initiating new perspectives on the world, questioning, processing, and not taking things for granted” (Schönert, 2023, p. 9). Considering the emergency context of the polycrisis humanity faces and the uncertainty about the future, a movement argued that a new scientific approach must be adopted. When facts are uncertain, values in dispute, stakes high and decisions urgent, the post-normal science (PNS), later called Second-order science, recommends acting differently, combining the strive towards scientific truth with “extended peer community”, including all stakeholders in the dialogue, for evaluating the quality of scientific information for the policy process (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1993; 1994). The second-order science movement is a call for a change in the role of scientists, affecting the role, the aim, and the way to conduct research. Fazey et al. (2018) characterise second-order science as a methodology aligning more closely with the complexities of reality. In this approach, researchers have a more active role in knowledge sharing. This proactive engagement serves to mitigate distortions of information that might

occur through mediums or other appropriation of the knowledge. It emphasises the active role of researchers and knowledge-holders in society.

2.2.2. Separation nature-culture

“There are many kinds of life. Humans always assumed that theirs was the only kind that mattered. That's how you destroyed your planet,” says Robot Spike in the dystopia *The Stone Gods* (Winterson, 2007, p. 94). Over the last centuries and probably rooted in the Enlightenment, nature and humans have been fragmented to see them as two separate systems (Robinson, 2022). Human beings took over nature to establish domination over all other life forms, forgetting that “nature is us and we are nature” (Sadik, 2020).

Reconnecting emotionally and physically to nature has the potential to address the overarching predicaments currently faced (Ives et al., 2018). Numerous scholars consider reconnection to nature as the fundamental solution. In their framework to reconnect with nature, Ives et al. (2018) identify 5 concepts: philosophical, emotional, cognitive, experimental, and material. The philosophical and material ones are considered more “thoughtful” than “feelings”. In short, the philosophical and material aspects are more brain-related, whereas the emotional, cognitive, and experimental ones are more soul-related (Ives et al., 2018). According to them, the brain-related are represented at societal levels while the soul-related are more of an individual connection. Yet, it is upon critics to think that feelings are individuals and that societies are reasonable, cartesian systems. Societies may have an emotional part. The informal structures, such as taboos and rules of law, often arise from societal shared feelings due to shared values.

2.2.3. System transformations

The scientific literature depicts well the resistance to transformation processes in societies. To deeply enter a system, infrastructures and frameworks need to adapt at a root level, creating long-term choices and dependency. Nevertheless, situations such as lock-in or system inertia hinder the change despite the will of the stakeholders (Sandén, 2004). Scharmer (2023) defines system thinking as a way “to address the deeper layers of where not only the system operates but where we are a part of the making of the world”. This view entails the participatory role of system components. To operate a systemic transformation, there is a need to address the deep layers of the system subject to transformation (Meadows D. , 1999) (Inayatullah, 1998).

An example of a systemic approach gave birth to the canonical work *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972). In 1972, these three researchers from the MIT designed a simplistic model of humanity on Earth and forecasted the trends of that time. They found out that there are limits to growth, and Earth would eventually regulate itself to counterbalance the overshooting of human activities. The latest update of this work from 2021 reveals that empirical evidence fits two scenarios from the original study (i.e., “business-as-usual2” and “comprehensive technology”) and forecasts “a halt in welfare, food, and industrial production over the next decade or so” (Herrington, 2021).

In system thinking, current modern societies are named *complex systems*. A complex system is defined by three aspects: (1) the boundaries of the system (e.g., natural boundaries, social boundaries), (2) the components of the system (e.g., forests, roads, infrastructure, companies,

consumers, institutions), and (3) the interaction between the components (e.g., a consumer buying from a company, a tree breathing and releasing oxygen in the atmosphere) (Keller, 2021). The systems are complex and ever-evolving, therefore requiring constant adaptation and reconsideration of the system (Raworth, 2017). When stakeholders want to change the system, they tend to forget that the (2) interactions between components are highly complex and impossible to anticipate fully. Driving a complex system requires acting at the system level by driving the components and acknowledging a complex system's inertia and unpredictable aspects. For instance, trying to limit the use of fossil fuels in a society cannot be addressed by merely asking individuals to behave differently. An individual, or an institution, is part of an environment that they cannot change on their own will. Such matters can only be addressed if all system-components are triggered in order to modify their relationships. Yet, relationships between system components are highly complex, impossible to fully predict, and often lacks consideration when transformations are sought (Keller, 2021). Simplistic assumptions are being made by breaking down a complex system into numerous small, understandable systems to aggregate them and comprehend the big picture. This analytic expertise leads to a lack of context and communication between systems at the macro scale. Science is often too narrow and operates in silos (Wamsler et al., 2021).

The twelve leverage points designed by D. Meadows (1999) reveal how to act in complex systems where a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything. Acting upon those components of a system fosters significant changes. Despite the extensive literature on leverage points, an effective understanding of systems interconnections and feedback remains scarce (Dorninger et al., 2020). Therefore, a macro understanding of systems is required to make effective deep and shallow transformations. Abson et al. (2017) saw 3 major leverage points to transform societies: (i) the role of institutions and institutional decline and failure in systemic change (*re-structure*); (ii) people's connections to nature and their influences on sustainability outcomes (*re-connect*) and (iii) knowledge production and use in transformational processes (*re-think*). Leverage points are interdependent, and reconnecting helps to re-think and accept to re-structure. The present focus of the thesis lies within the re-structure and re-connect. Furthermore, *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir's* philosophies can help to re-think, as the results of this thesis show.

2.3. A civilisation to degrow, willingly or not

A prerequisite to the present discussion on *degrowth* is whether the degrowth of northern economies will happen willingly or not. The difference between both options is the willingness to anticipate *degrowth* and plan it in a safe and democratic context (Parrique, 2022). On the other hand, if industrialised overshooting economies do not plan democratic *degrowth*, it might happen in a uncertain and undesired ways and, therefore, with negative socioecological repercussions.

As early as 1972, *The Limits to Growth* demonstrated the unfeasibility of unlimited production growth. Without formally naming it, this work under the lead of D. Meadows paved the way for the *degrowth* movement (Meadows et al., 1972). Thereafter, an approach using energy throughput is presented to demonstrate the boundness of *degrowth* or recession¹.

¹ An alternative approach using Kaya's identity is presented in the appendix. Both the energy throughput demonstration and Kaya's one are reaching the same conclusion.

The relationship between the energy input in thermo-industrialised civilisations and the GDP has been studied and proven over the last decades (Menegaki, 2014) (Soytas & Sari, 2003). Energy is about 10% of world households' expenses (Auzanneau, 2014), but the entire economy of every nation relies on it. Simply imagine a day without petrol. Trucks could not run, and most of the urban areas could not supply the food demand of the citizens. As fossil fuels power 98% of the world's transportation systems, societies would shortly become static. In just a few days, the whole economy would crash because basic needs could not be met (e.g., how to run ambulances without petrol? How would the Netherlands remain the 2nd biggest food exporter in the world without gas to heat their greenhouses?). In 2019, fossil fuels provided about 84.3% of primary energy globally, showing almost no evolution over the last two decades. It was 86.1% in 2000, and energy consumption increased by 47% worldwide between 2000 and 2019 (Ritchie et al., 2022).

Conceptually, it is also easy to understand that GDP growth relies on energy input into the economy. GDP is a flow indicator, it measures the activity of an economy (i.e., how much goods and services are exchanged within the economy in a limited timespan, generally assumed to be a year). Goods and services need energy to be produced, exchanged, or transported. Services are materialistic because they rely on materialistic flows (i.e., there would be no car insurance or car marketing agencies without cars), and only intellectual labour such as tuition or discussion avoid this rule. As energy is a unit measuring the state change in a system (i.e., production, transport, heating, etc.), a link can be drawn between economic activities and the underlying energy input. Auzanneau, in his enquiry *Oil, power, and war: a dark history* (2020), elaborates on this idea and demonstrates that fossil fuels, oil at the foremost, enabled the expansion of the global North over the last centuries and drive the current world economy (Auzanneau, 2020; Jancovici, 2018).

This conjecture can prove on empirical evidence. Figure 2 shows the linkage between the GDP as a measure of the economy and energy use. It appears that great variation in energy use comes together with a similar variation in the GDP. As mentioned earlier, energy use remains mostly fossil-based, emitting GHG and having hazardous ecological consequences. Therefore, the radical decoupling of global GDP and GHG emissions, the so-called green growth, does not prove theoretically or empirically (Parrique et al., 2019). Furthermore, climate change is only one of the nine Planetary Boundaries. An absolute decoupling of GDP from all socio-ecological negative outcomes could be even more complicated to obtain.

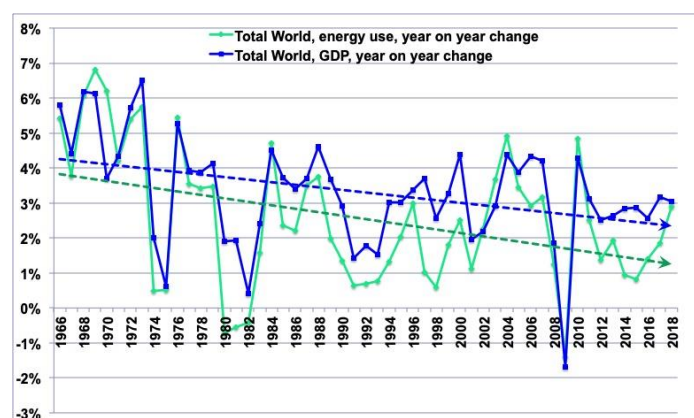


Figure 2: Relation between world energy use and world GDP from Jancovici (Jancovici, 2018)

From this position, therefore, the debate benefits on not only focussing on the eventuality of systemic change and *degrowth* but also on the organisation of a convivial *degrowth* (Parrique, 2019).

3. Methodology

Based on the presented literature review and theory discussion, a research gap in the coexistence of *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* for desirable positive futures was elaborated. By bringing both philosophies into a discussion, this thesis addressed the research gap and contributes to enriching the debate on positive futures.

The analysis was made of two steps:

(1) comparing theories and suggesting synergies by analysing a mix of texts and articles found in the scientific literature; and

(2) analysing interviews with experts in the field of *degrowth*.

The first step was a theorisation based on literature. A profound process of analysing *Buen Vivir* and *degrowth* paradigms separately emphasised their individual specifications. Thereafter, examining them in mutual connection helped build on the theories for a meaningful duet. As the current literature only deals with both terms together to a limited extent, own empirical research follows. The Critical Realist Grounded Theory has been used to analyse interviews with experts on both concepts. These interviews came with two aims: validating the theories previously built and further elaborating them.

3.1. Positionality

Using lenses to look at reality helps to process the overwhelming flow of information reaching individuals. Lockton and Candy (2019) describe lenses as "the modular collection and deployment of approaches to examining, thinking about, and acting in various situations" (p. 910). Thus, these lenses impact the perception of reality and, therefore, the resulting actions. As a means for the reader to better understand my lenses, "positionality" has to be considered while ensuring scientific professionalism (Deppe et al., 2018). Describing the researcher's context and bias helps identify loopholes and understand the motivations for the research. As a result of this, I acknowledge my active participation in the research. As England (1994) argues, researchers are part of their work, and research does not happen in a vacuum. Therefore, my intentions and reactions might have affected the present thesis output. This emotional subjectivity and implication, or even devotion, bring an opinion that is acknowledged and openly shared so the limitations are identified.

As a white-skinned, cis, hetero-man, wealthy enough to have time to write this thesis, when looking at the multitude of cosmologies in the world, my background is privileged. As an engineer, a cartesian who believes in numbers, charts, and other complex figures that most people would have nightmares about, I have been dotted with tools to understand the world in a peculiar way.

To illustrate this positionality, Joseph Henrich (2020) studied people with a Wealthy, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) background to discover that they are very peculiar regarding the pluriversality of our planet. Far from a duality of WEIRD/non-WEIRD, the significant findings of his work show that WEIRD people often are one extreme on the spectrum of perceptions when comparing different groups of people (Henrich, 2020). WEIRD people are driven by guilt over shame, with low conformity to traditions, believing that a world

truth exists. WEIRD people perform analytical over holistic work and show patience and the ability to focus on the main elements of a work, distinguished from their background. Relatives are important to WEIRD people, but universal laws are over the importance of kin-based advantages. As a WEIRD, I surely show such biases in this thesis and try to detect them to improve the reader's quality and understanding of the context. Yet, WEIRD people are overrepresented in scholarly works (Henrich, 2020). Writing this thesis as a WEIRD, mostly for WEIRD readers, and interviewing WEIRD people, the viewpoint of this thesis is surely influenced by the positionality. If you are reading this thesis, you might be WEIRD yourself. Therefore, it seems necessary to remember that not everybody around the world is living in the same reality as the WEIRD people.

3.2. Theoretical analysis

To compare and identify synergies, *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* have been viewed theoretically through the lenses of five categories. The inspiration for the methodology and the framework to adopt mainly came from the study of Ross and Mitchell on *Transforming Transdisciplinarity*. In this research, the authors mapped the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm through six meaning systems: Cosmology, Ontology, Epistemology, Axiology, Anthropology, and Social Vision (Ross & Mitchell, 2018). This framework has been used to pick and add the relevant categories for the Theoretical Analysis. As a result, the categories analysed for this thesis have been Cosmology, Temporality and Spatiality, Axiology, Social Vision, and Supporting Movements. In the timeframe available, minimal coding has been performed to fill in the five decided categories. Then, the findings of the texts have been analysed in order to understand codes between the lines and understand implicit knowledge. These codes are underlined in Table 3 for later confirmation during the expert interviews. The literature analysed was a mix of published articles and books in the field of *Buen Vivir* and *degrowth*.

The theoretical analysis helped this thesis by providing strong empirical foundations for the results. Beyond the literature review, the theoretical analysis led to include a wide range of sources. It also enabled a rich soil for the interviews, enabling discussion with experts, focusing on the blind spots of ideas rather than the knowledge that could already be acquired from the existing knowledge.

Buen Vivir's theoretical analysis remained shorter than the *degrowth* one because of the nature of the interviews. Since interviews have been conducted with *degrowth* experts, a deeper analysis of this concept has been performed to enable advanced discussions.

3.2.1. Categories

To build the categories to analyse *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* philosophies, inductive construction from the empirical data and deductive construction based on categories proposed in the literature have been used. Table 1 presents the categories used for the analysis and their construction.

Ross and Mitchell (2018), mapped six meaning systems to analyse the beliefs of the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm: cosmology, ontology, epistemology, axiology, anthropology, and social vision. Adapted to suit the present research, cosmology, axiology, and social vision have been conserved respectively to analyse the origins, definition of reality, and organisation

of society for *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* (Ross & Mitchell, 2018). These parameters helped outlining the commonalities and differences between *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* because they grasp the unwritten as well as practical frameworks of the philosophies. These categories have been decided deductively.

Yet, to get a grip on the philosophies, more categories needed to be built. Because *degrowth* is a rather recent field that emerged in Europe, whilst *Buen Vivir* has older roots in Latin American indigenous cultures, it appeared relevant to analyse the spatiality of both philosophies. Furthermore, *degrowth* necessarily appears as a temporary phase for affluent societies. In the same way infinite growth on a limited planet is not possible, infinite *degrowth* is not relevant nor desirable. On the other hand, *Buen Vivir* offers a different temporality in the long run, showing a non-linear approach to life. Therefore, looking into temporality and spatiality appeared as a relevant angle for the analysis.

Finally, both movements are peculiar to their locality and unfold in different social contexts. Because this thesis aims at feeding discussions on possible futures, it is of important relevance to analyse the maturity and appropriation of the two philosophies. Investigating their supporting movements (i.e., places in society where they exist and find an echo) helped to understand their strengths and weaknesses and helped understand the way they actually unfold. As a result, temporality and spatiality, as well as supporting movements, are categories that have been built deductively from the research.

Category	Construction
Cosmology	Deductive
Temporality and spatiality	Inductive
Axiology	Deductive
Social vision	Deductive
Supporting movements	Inductive

Table 1: Construction of categories for the theoretical analysis.

3.3. Interviews

For this thesis, a qualitative research approach was chosen to complement the theoretical literature discussion. Since the literature has limitations with regard to the combination of *Buen Vivir* and *degrowth*, an empirical addition was deemed appropriate. The individual views and perspectives of experts is more relevant in order to obtain detailed explanations and expert opinions. Therefore, the qualitative-empirical approach of expert interviews was chosen.

Interviews were performed with some core authors of the literature used in the theoretical analysis. With these interviews, there were two aims: (1) Acknowledge and validate the interpretations made in the theoretical analysis; (2) Discuss the synergies between the interviewer's paradigm of expertise (i.e., *Buen Vivir* or *degrowth*) and the other one. The first aim was addressed by asking a set of questions related to the findings of this thesis. By sharing some of the conclusions reached in the theoretical analysis, I sought acknowledgement and, if not, corrections on the mistakes. The second aim is more visionary, to pinpoint synergies that are not self-evident in the author's work.

3.3.1. Grounded Theory

The methodology used is Grounded Theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) under a Critical Realism paradigm (Oliver, 2012). A critical approach using Grounded Theory can be used as a means to critique and transform dominant social structures. In this approach, the role of the researcher is recognised.

The Grounded Theory after Corbin and Strauss (2008) is a deductive-generative style of theory to analyse qualitative data, in this case, interviews, and draw out crucial information. The combination of prior theoretical knowledge and the heuristic value of new insights through interviews make the Grounded Theory valuable in its methodology and analysis. It is suitable when not all relevant knowledge about the phenomenon of interest has been found, as well as when theories that address current social challenges are to be developed. The research process is characterised by an open question defining the phenomenon under investigation. The researcher needs not only the ability to work with codes but also the ability of theoretical sensitivity in order to develop a deeper understanding as well as theories.

3.3.2. Field access

The experts were contacted by e-mail, in which it was described that, on the one hand, follow-up questions would be asked about their publications and, on the other hand, further questions relevant to my research would follow. They were also informed of the research ethics and that the information would only be used for the purpose of academic research. In an attempt to collect various visions, seven experts accepted the interview: Hubert Buch-Hansen, Nick Fitzpatrick, Felix Garnier, Serge Latouche, Anitra Nelson, Iana Nesterova, and Christopher Olk.

3.3.3. Interview Method

The interviews conducted are semi-structured, problem-centred expert interviews. On the one hand, the interview guidelines enabled structuring the interview situation and, at the same time, the necessary openness for surprising information. Also, the guideline enabled later comparability. The interview guide combines narrative prompts and detailed questions, with the latter only being asked if the narrative prompts were not sufficient. The questions were flexibly adapted to not interrupt the interview flow. The approach is distinguished by a problem-centred orientation towards socially relevant problems (Witzel & Reiter, 2012). Both the problem-centred and expert interview approaches “highlight the perspectives and opinions of the interviewee and aim at formulating new theories by systematising and interpreting individual statements” (Döringer, 2021, p. 269). Semi-structured interviews with experts allow to expand horizons and incentivise researchers to be creative in knowledge creation and communication.

I attempt to work as a neutral researcher. Still, I undoubtedly influenced the voices of the interviewees despite my aim to step back and put their points of view and opinions in the foreground². Limitations regarding the methodology are presented in 5.1.

² The interview guide is available in the appendix.

3.3.4. Interview Analysis

Following the conducted interviews, the passages relevant to answering the research questions were transcribed³. In this way, essential contents can be compared and discussed under category sorting.

Grounded theory involves three coding forms after Corbin and Strauss (2008). *Open Coding*, *Axial Coding*, and *Selective Coding*. These techniques are applied in a circular process to both use and continuously revise the data.

In the first step of coding, **open coding**, the data was divided to examine similarities and differences. By coding into different categories, concepts were grouped, and data can be logically represented and related. This step entailed notes, decoding and encoding of paragraphs and direct quotes copied to an Excel sheet. The Excel sheet collected is made up of 4 categories made up of 23 sub-categories. Each sub-category was filled with quotes from the interviews and summarises of longer paragraphs. Another Excel sheet was used to summarise relevant information, such as matching and diverging opinions on important topics. In the same sheet, every interview has been summarised in three core ideas that helped defining the red thread of the results.

The second step, **axial coding**, selected from the categories that provide insight into coding. The codes were read several times, re-allocated, and the categories were re-named and re-organised. This step allowed the development of a coding paradigm to represent the relationships between phenomena and provide an order between concepts and categories. Generating and reviewing data made it possible to develop a better, more practical understanding of the material. In the same step, the core ideas from the quotes were put in bold characters.

Finally, in **selective coding**, axial coding has been extended, and the central categories were elaborated from the various cases. By reviewing all the codes, synergies and interconnections were identified. The overarching theory was then formulated and revisited in light of the findings. The review process ended when theoretical saturation was reached, and no new insights emerge. A theory pattern emerged based on the interrelated cases. This step helped to shape the layout of the results.

Overall, the interviews enabled the researcher to go beyond the written knowledge found in the literature. To some extent, it also helped approach *degrowth* more informally in discussions where discourses are less conformed to the scientific requirements. The interviews were the component that gave singularity to this thesis, providing a profound humanistic motivation to this endeavour.

The results of this thesis will now be presented. First, building on the Theoretical Analysis and then with the analysis of the Interviews, the major findings of the research are presented.

³ The interviews were conducted in English and in French for the two French interviewees: Latouche and Garnier. In these cases, I used the French text for analysis and translated the quotes used in the results.

4. Results

The results of the research that was achieved are presented in this chapter. The theoretical analysis provides a comprehension of the literature and theories addressing the research questions. Later, the interviews conducted with experts help deepen the understanding and open up the struggles and potentiality for *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* to draw on sustainable futures.

Both opposed to capitalistic development, *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* share numerous similarities in the rejection of the imperialist way of living, the recognition of more-than-humans, and the democratic role of communities to satisfy the needs and foster wellbeing. Yet, differences exist in the spatiality and temporality of these philosophies. They show a different maturity and could, therefore, learn from each other experiences. *Degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* require a pluriversal vision of the world to unfold without hurdles. Indeed, decolonisation from northern nations is required to facilitate the emancipation of constrained nations and give them room to decide their own destiny. If doing so, positive, sustainable futures can be drawn. Such futures will require much effort and innovative ways to deal with upcoming challenges. Yet, the interviews revealed humanistic hope for the future, calling for creativity and embodiment in sustainable discussions.

4.1. Theoretical analysis

The following theoretical analysis provides the theoretical knowledge for the thesis research. The analysed theories reinforce the call for change in societies and provide answers for sustainable futures. This section is a deeper analysis of capitalist development as an unsustainable paradigm (2.3) and *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* as potential alternatives. By seeing them individually and then as a duet, conditions for *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* to coexist are drawn.

The findings of the theoretical analysis show that *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* stand for post-development futures within a pluriversal world. Sharing common pillars, such as the wellbeing of their communities, these philosophies happen simultaneously but in different regions. They reject current ideologies of work, power and organisation and plan to unfold in different ways according to their traditions and local specifications. *Degrowth* is deemed to be a temporary-state for the global North to come back within ecological limits while better redistributing existing wealth. On the other hand, *Buen Vivir* strives for emancipation from imperialism so that humans and more-than-humans can coexist in nonlinear ways. Yet, neither philosophies show the same maturity, from a more recent theoretical emergence for *degrowth* to an older existence and public support for *Buen Vivir*.

To ease the search of information in this chapter, Table 2 shows in which subheading are the categories for the theoretical analysis of *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* addressed (see 3.2.1).

Headings	Subheadings	Cosmology	Temporality and Spatiality	Axiology	Societal vision	Supporting movements
Degrowth	Origins of degrowth	X				
	Societal vision of degrowth			X	X	
	Current use and support					X
Error! Reference source not found.	Origins of Buen Vivir	X				
	Societal vision of Buen Vivir			X	X	
	Current use and support					X
Similarities and differences of a meaningful duet	Focused on the wellbeing of communities			X	X	
	Temporality		X			
	Inextricable question of colonisation		X	X	X	

Table 2: Organisation of categories treatment for the theoretical analysis

4.1.1. Capitalist development

Over the course of history, the development of civilisations remains impossible to explain entirely despite evidence of geographic, climatic, discoveries, or political movements. In the vastness of explanations possible, increasing energy use plays a major role and has been perhaps the most important fuel for economic expansion (Auzanneau, 2020; Smil, 2018). Indeed, capitalism arose in its modern form in the 18th century when fossil fuel power was unleashed with coal, followed one hundred years later by oil and then gas. The access to virtually infinite energy sources allowed civilisations to grow and develop at a pace never observed in history before (Smil, 2018). In this abundance context, where societies had to learn how to manage their increasing throughput, capitalism arose as the ultimate framework of the new thermo-industrial civilisation, organising societies and steering new trajectories (Servigne et al., 2020) (Feola, 2020). Capitalism came with the idea of progress, a concept that existed before but was not named, and capitalist organisations started seeking development to achieve progress in the human condition.

Phasing out capitalism and the entire set of paradigms it carries can be viewed a necessity for facilitating deep changes (Meadows D. , 1999) to enable alternative societies to emerge at a macro-scale. GDP seems obsolete in wealthy nations where economy does not reflect on the entire social welfare, calling for growth agnosticism (Latouche, 2014; Raworth, 2017) and post-development research (Demaria et al., 2023; Monni & Pallottino, 2015). This section deepens that notion to elaborate on the exit of capitalism and define more precisely this endeavour.

4.1.1.1. Growth as a panacea

From an economic perspective, Parrique (2022) compares capitalism to a shark that needs to permanently move forward in order to survive. He argued that growth is vital for capitalism. In a capitalist context, growth is necessary to avoid unemployment, reduce debt, and fund public services; put another way, capitalist economies grow or collapse (Kallis et al., 2018). According to Parrique (2023b), the obsession for growth comes in three steps: (1) obsession for the economy; (2) economic obsession for the monetary added value; (3) economic obsession for the pace of the monetary added value: GDP. In current economics, GDP is not just a statistic but a means to organise society on the assumption that only markets create wealth. This approach led to the point where growth became an object-free term, directly referring to the growth of GDP.

The GDP was designed in the United States during the Great Depression to measure a geographic region's activity. GDP is linked to Keynesian efforts to counter the Great Depression and to plan expenditures for the Second World War and postwar reconstruction (Kallis et al., 2018). As the post-war recovery observed an increase in GDP and wellbeing, stakeholders made the assumption that a growth of GDP comes hand in hand with an increase in wellbeing. This situation has been strengthened by people's trust in numbers in the current Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm (Kallis et al., 2018). D. Meadows (1998) argued that "indicators arise from values (we measure what we care about), and they create values (we care about what we measure)" (p. 12). The GDP indicator arose from a need to assess the recovery of economies after the Great Depression and later created values and obsessions for economic growth. GDP is a poor map representing the vast socio-ecological territory.

Development is a multidimensional undertaking to achieve a higher quality of life for all people. Economic development, social development and environmental protection are interdependent and mutually reinforcing components of sustainable development. Sustained economic growth is essential to the economic and social development of all countries, in particular developing countries. (United Nations, 1997, pp. 1-2)

By making economic growth a priority in 1997 in the *Agenda for Development*, the United Nations recognised that the capitalist way of developing is materialistic. Development, through GDP, considers what is measurable in an economy, leaving the unpalpable services of society outside of the scope. Therefore, "the rise of the growth paradigm was integral to the invention of development" (Kallis et al., 2018, p. 296), leaving us with the conclusion that economic growth is necessary to achieve development (Cruz et al., 2009).

On the other hand, with the birth of the political economy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, France and Britain formed the economic sphere as separate from the state and nature. These two parameters became external to the economy: the state is assumed to be an external intervener that can hinder the economy, and nature as an unlimited and free reserve of resources to feed the economy (Kallis et al., 2018). Yet, the meaning of the term economy has been modified with modernity. Aristotle's definition of the *oikonomy* is "the art of organising the household" to improve wellbeing in a self-consumption way (Cruz et al., 2009). This "art of living and living well" has a use-value approach of satisfying the needs directly. On the other hand, *chrematistics* is "the art of acquisition" related to the transactions of economic purpose leading to accumulation. Using Polanyi's prism, Cruz et al. (2009) claimed that the chrematistics is just one of the four sides of the economy, namely: self-sufficiency (Aristotle's *oikonomy*), reciprocity, redistribution, and commerce (Aristotle's *chrematistics*). Nonetheless, modernity mixed up the terms, and the economy became an end itself, a term referring solely to the chrematistics. This confusion led to an isolation of the economy from humanity, and the

free-market became the central value that economists try to optimize. As a result, humanity became an externality of development, shifting the focus from needs satisfaction to monetary accumulation.

Over time and development, the economy alienated even more from the rest of society, helping growth become a paradigm. The growth paradigm refers to the entrenched cognitive framework in which economic growth is constructed and conceived as necessary, reasonable, and imperative (Kallis et al., 2018). Popularised by Daly (1972), the growth paradigm unfolds beyond science and can even be seen as a “growth ideology” (Parrique, 2019) that needs to be demystified in order to pave the way for post-development futures (Latouche, 2019a).

4.1.1.2. Post-(sustainable) development

Beyond the economic perspective, development is a broad term used widely to define unprecise concepts. Demaria et al. (2023) name it “amoeba concepts” or “plastic words” that cover a vast reality with oversimplistic words. The attempt to make development sustainable relies on permanent economic growth (Sustainable Development Goal 8) which seems unlikely given limited resources of the planet (2.3). Beyond the unfeasibility of potential sustainable development, Escobar (2012) criticises the roots of development for its undesirable outcomes: “Development planning was not only a problem to the extent that it failed; it was a problem even when it succeeded, because it so strongly set the terms for how people in poor countries could live” (Reid-Henry, 2012).

Decades after the notion of “development” was spread around the world, only a handful of countries can be called “developed”; others are struggling to emulate them, and all are doing this at enormous ecological and social cost. The problem is not in the lack of implementation, but rather in the concept of development as linear, unidirectional material and financial growth. (Kothari et al., 2014, p. 366)

From that point, criticising development intrinsically creates a criticism of modernity (Monni & Pallottino, 2015) and thinking beyond growth becomes a necessity. Development became a paradigm that growth has to serve through a perpetual increase in GDP. Yet, the unfeasibility of perpetual economic growth has been shown (Meadows et al., 1972), and economic growth does not come hand-in-hand with social improvement in wealthy nations (Parrique, 2022). Therefore, going beyond capitalism and (sustainable) development is urgent.

According to Demaria et al. (2023), the idea of post-development is related to at least five other emerging imaginaries: (1) Post-capitalism – questioning capitalism’s capacity to fully occupy the economy; (2) Post- or de-growth – decentring growth from the definition of both economy and social life; (3) Post-patriarchy – challenging the primacy of masculinist approaches to political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property; (4) Anti-racism – fighting the systemic racism and the oppression of marginalized groups; and (5) De-coloniality – untangling the production of knowledge from a primarily Eurocentric episteme. Some of these aspects emerged from the interviews presented in 4.2.

Now that capitalist development has been presented to be unsustainable and undesirable, *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* will be presented as potential alternatives.

4.1.2. Degrowth

Parrique defines *degrowth* as “a democratically planned downscaling of production and consumption in affluent regions of the world as a means to avoid ecological breakdown, decrease inequality, and improve quality of life” (p. 1113). A planned *degrowth* serves the objective of reducing the economy's size and slowing it down. In a rough analogy, degrowing the economy reduces the size of the bath and the faucet.

With philosophical origins struggling with the mainstream way of living, *degrowth* has emerged in economic literature as a possible way to tackle socioecological polycrisis. As expressed in *Degrowth: a vocabulary for new era* (Kallis et al., 2014), *degrowth* raises four main concerns: criticism of growth, capitalism, GDP and commodification. To this list can be added the criticism towards the development and the alienation of the economy from the rest of society. *Degrowth* proposes an alternative societal organisation based on democracy and values such as autonomy, sufficiency, care, conviviality, fairness, equity, and emancipation. Beyond the economic shrinking, *degrowth* calls for growth in other fields to better satisfy human needs in harmony with more-than-humans.

4.1.2.1. Origins of degrowth

Despite the recent materialist approach to *degrowth* through economic and physical lenses, the movement finds origins in various fields. In the article “Research on Degrowth” (2018), Kallis et al. present *degrowth* as an ancient movement finding roots in the work of physicist-economist Georgescu-Roegen. In the 1970s and 1980s, Georgescu-Roegen developed a thermodynamic theory of economic processes, concluding that in the long run economic activity would inevitably “decrease” to a level supportable by solar flows (Kallis et al., 2018). Georgescu-Roegen compared the economy to a metabolism, processing natural inputs, rejecting waste, and dissipating energy. *The Entropy Law and Economic Process*, published in 1971, places Georgescu-Roegen as a pioneer of *degrowth*, providing a theory that MIT researchers soon empirically picked up in *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972). This study explicitly stressed that a fast-growing society overshooting planetary limits is bound for degrowth sooner or later. These materialist approaches came hand in hand with social and philosophical struggles expressed by authors such as Illich, Dupuy, Gorz, and Castoriadis (Latouche, 2014). Through philosophical and social lenses, these authors expressed their concerns towards the mainstream way of organizing the economy and society. Latouche (2014) argued that these authors played a crucial role in cultivating *degrowth*, notably by providing core values to the movement before *degrowth* got a name. At that time, the ecological ground for *degrowth* was not as robust as it is in the 21st century, but the struggle with the idea of growth and the idea of development was already there.

Nevertheless, the movement did not come out of a vacuum and find multiple origins beyond written knowledge. Kallis et al. (2018) argued that “scholars theorising degrowth learn with, articulate, and apply critical perspectives already embodied by social movements, notably those engaged in environmental justice struggles” (p. 292). The multiple social movements throughout the 20th century provided a fertile ground for authors to feed their critics of dominating societal organisations. Parrique (2022) analysed that the hippie movement of the 1960s and the social protests of 1968 were early demonstrations of a clash between the dominant paradigm of development and the wishes of people, especially the younger generations. The growing contestation coming from the population in the global North combined with written materialist, social and philosophical knowledge provided the soil

needed to grow a new field of research, revealing the limitations of the growth-based paradigm: *degrowth*. This broadening helped to bring *degrowth* in the public arena, finding an echo in other disciplines and adding a tool to the post-development struggles.

Degrowth truly emerged in 2002 when *décroissance* (French for *degrowth*) was used for the first time as a slogan in a public protest in Lyon, France. At that time, the protest was against cars, consumerism, and advertisement (Kallis et al., 2018). Paradoxically, the term *décroissance* was created by former French advertisers who wanted an impactful slogan for the struggles of the early 2000s against the dominations of growth and consumerism. In 2002, *Le Monde*, one of the most-read French newspapers, published an article dedicated to *degrowth* referring to a broader article published in the media *Silence*. In the same media, another article soon exhibited the idea of economic *degrowth* paired with growth in relations and spirituality. From that time on, *degrowth* is not only less but also more. Later, *décroissance* was translated by Latouche into English *degrowth*⁴, paving the way for the field to which this thesis aims to contribute.

Doubts about the terminology

Degrowth signifies, first and foremost, a critique of growth (Kallis et al., 2014). Beyond the “literary” meaning of degrowing the GDP, *degrowth* alludes to the “symbolic” meaning of phasing out of the growth ideology that gained importance since the Great Depression (Latouche, 2019b). But as a potential limit to its popularisation, *degrowth* is a controversial term discussed among experts. Early on, Latouche or Ariès defined *décroissance* as a “mot obus” (translated from French to English into “missile word”) intentionally provocative but aesthetically limited. In his works, Latouche often reminded that *degrowth* is a slogan, not an aim. Latouche puts much importance on the philosophical meaning and origins of *degrowth*, rarely or never referring to the economic perspective of GDP. As Latouche (2019b) describes it, “it’s not an economic project from the outset, even if it’s *another* economy, but a *societal* project that involves breaking away from the economy as an imperialist reality and discourse” (p. 54). Far beyond the economic perspective, *degrowth* is a slogan depicting a societal struggle encompassing an entire renewal for rich civilisations. Latouche criticises the current use of *degrowth* stripped of its anthropologic roots. The philosophical origins of *degrowth* aim to give a better comprehension of the world we are living in, and *degrowth* is an anthropologic answer to the analysed struggles. Moreover, the term *degrowth* is relevant in Latin languages but does not have the same meaning in other languages. As it got translated from French into English, the term lost context and suffered criticism.

Therefore, Latouche argued that “a-growth” could be more adequate as an objection to growth. But Parrique (2022) distinguishes 3 layers of struggle with growth: the objections to growth, the post-growth and the *degrowth*. The *degrowth* is the most radical idea, not only claiming that growth is a problem but proposing *degrowth* as the alternative needed. *Degrowth* is not a mere idea of being *in degrowth* but *of degrowth*, giving the term a broader and plural meaning.

⁴ It is important to note here that it was not the first time that *degrowth* was used as a word, but it gave the tone for the international scientific literature that came after that.

4.1.2.2. Societal vision of degrowth

The following section aims to provide a better idea of the societal organisation of *degrowth*. Because *degrowth* remains an emerging field existing mainly in pockets of resistance, this section aims at making it more tangible and providing keys on what to aim for.

Economic perspective

Degrowth researchers stand for a redefinition and reorganisation of economic activities that considers the original meaning of the term: the art of household management (Cruz et al., 2009; see more in 4.1.1.1). The household management entails a wide range of practices and skills to satisfy the finite human needs. Kallis (2018) defined the economy as “the instituted process of interactions between humans and their environments, involving the use of material means for the satisfaction of human values” (p. 17).

The background of this thesis states that the connection between humans and nature, or more-than-humans, has weakened with economic development. Mainstream economics assumes that nature is part of the economy, therefore using weak sustainability to assume that nature can be absorbed into the economy through commodification (Ruggerio, 2021). On the other hand, Kallis (2018) called for the decommodification of activities to stop the absorption of all fields within the economy and reduce energy requirements (Hanačeka et al., 2020). Indeed, commodification carries the perception of inexhaustible natural and human reservoirs that can be assigned monetary values. But prices are subjective and cannot encompass an entire reality. Therefore, a society adopting *degrowth* would not be dominated by money (Latouche, 2014), and the *homo oeconomicus* would be obsolete. The all-encompassing market and money as a currency remove the mutual relation between the merchants, creating a fake veil of freedom and independence. Therefore, Nelson (2022) envisioned a society beyond money, less focused on the market, where capitalist values would shrink until being forgotten, as well as the obsession for growth (Latouche, 2014). With that expressed, decommodification and demonetisation would shrink the economy and lead to the natural degrowth of GDP. *Degrowth* aims to plan and anticipate this shrink. It is primordial to understand it: degrowing GDP is not an aim of *degrowth* but a consequence of radically different societal organisations.

The paradigm of *degrowth*, therefore, means going beyond economic policies. *Degrowth* “calls for the decolonisation of public debate from the idiom of economism” (Kallis et al., 2014, p. 31). *Degrowth* is plural, a matrix of alternatives rather than a unique solution to re-open human adventure to the plurality of destinies (Latouche, 2014). By reducing the size of the economy, the activities pushed away from the economy and outside of the GDP scope could prosper in a completely different way. The doughnut economic framework provides a well-recognised example of such an alternative economic organisation. In this framework, the economy is approached through humanity’s goals for the 21st century and then organised accordingly (Raworth, 2017). According to Changing compass from monetary accumulation to the satisfaction of life essentials within planetary boundaries.

Degrowth is not a recession

To cut short on a widespread assumption, *degrowth* is not a recession. Kallis et al. (2018) noted that “recession and depression are possible within capitalism; degrowth is probably not”

(p. 300). The planning of *degrowth* annihilates the comparison with an unplanned recession. Using Parrique's (2022) metaphor, putting *degrowth* and recession on the same level is like saying that a diet and an amputation both help someone lose weight. Northern civilisations are obese and need to lose weight in an organised and measured way, like a diet. Furthermore, a recession is a crisis situation, entailing a back-to-normal state. *Degrowth*, on the other hand, is temporary and aims to reach a new steady state, not the former state's outrun. Kallis et al. (2018) argued that "involuntary declines are not degrowth in themselves, and countries in recession or depression are not degrowth experiments" (p. 302). *Degrowth* is decided and discussed to reach positive outcomes.

Democratic decision making

In power organisations, *degrowth* is a profound democratic movement to solve social issues. Democratic *degrowth* encompasses the population in a representative and active way. Far from a totalitarian agenda, the democratic planning of *degrowth* is meant to be a collective project. As a result, democracy, and especially direct and representative democracy, is a core element of *degrowth* societies. Until now, democracies legitimised capitalism because economic growth helps maintain the pacification of class conflict (Kallis et al., 2018), but the situation changes with rising concerns about growth.

Parrique (2022) drew three steps to consider when deciding on projects: (1) sustainability (ecological footprint) to decide if a project is possible without degrading the environment more than it regenerates itself, e.g., The Planetary Boundaries. If so, (2) conviviality (well-being of stakeholders) has to be considered to evaluate the social interest and acceptance of the project. Finally, if the two first steps are positively met, the (3) productivity (efficiency) of the project is looked upon to assess the economic interest of the project. Parrique's approach mirrors current decision processes by putting the economic perspective at the very end of the decision process. According to him, deciding on each of these steps could be done in democratic ways by considering diverse opinions among stakeholders.

Normative Values

Achieving ecological sufficiency comes with a social transformation that *degrowth* argues to be convivial and fair (Parrique, 2022). Yet, in the current contexts of northern countries, growth increases societal inequalities (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011), creating tension (e.g., the yellow vests movement in France) and spoiling wellbeing. It seems clear that pacifying class conflicts could be achieved in another way, essentially through equity. Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) studied economic inequities among nations to find out that equity has a greater positive contribution to the wellbeing of the population than GDP in mature economies. Equity implies a shared but differentiated responsibility between and among nations, where wealth is better shared. Likewise, they showed that public service quality, allocation of revenues and democracy are directly correlated with happiness and have a stronger impact on wellbeing than economic variations.

Drilling into the core values of *degrowth*, Kallis in *Degrowth* (2018) identifies 9 principles for *degrowth*, among which are *strong relationships* – family, communities, education, and politics; and *care* – collective care for others, not just in the household. Parrique (2023a), on the other hand, sticks to the trio of autonomy, sufficiency, and care as pillars of sustainable societies.

The social aim of *degrowth* is to reach a stage where everybody has enough to meet their needs. Having enough requires comprehending personal needs, freed from consumerism and advertisement blinkers. Awareness and satisfaction of one's needs in a sufficient way leads to a shrinking of the production and consumption of the wealthiest people (Parrique, 2022) and a convergence to sustain the needs of the global South. By doing so, *degrowth* has potential to liberate people from social pressure and foster wellbeing.

As a result, values of autonomy, sufficiency, care, emancipation, sufficiency, conviviality and fairness seem to be inductive and deductive. Both the result of a paradigmatic change and the normative components for better futures, a wide range of values are to be designed and explored.

Less is more

Degrowth means reducing the production and consumption of an economy at a macro-scale, like a country. But within a country, some activities could and actually should grow, such as regenerative ways of growing food (Buch-Hansen & Nesterova, 2023). Whilst some scholars focus on the *different* rather than the *less* of *degrowth* (Kallis et al., 2014), others like Buch-Hansen and Nesterova (2023) put their emphasis on the *more* of *degrowth*. More social interactions, more happiness, more care, and growth in other fields help increase overall wellbeing—mainly the growth of non-economic activities that are currently in the background of the economy. Because *degrowth* would manifest in every corner of life, other sides, such as care and conviviality among humans and more-than-humans, could grow qualitatively and quantitatively. Overall, the different approaches hereby presented align on the necessity to focus on quality over quantity. This notion is further deepened in the results of the Interviews.

However, *degrowth* aims to remember that infinite growth, even of a sector, is neither possible nor desirable. Satisfying human needs requires perpetual adjustments and reconsideration of parameters, therefore causing variations in different economic sectors (Parrique, 2023c). In this approach, societal needs are not linear. These fluctuations might unfold to adapt to external situations such as sudden needs raised by pandemics, climate changes, or capital losses. As an example, building railway infrastructures is capital-intensive, creating a surge in ballast, steel and copper industries, but a train line has an extensive lifespan, thus requiring only temporary and local boost in activity.

4.1.2.3. Current use and support

Degrowth was born from a mix of public protests and knowledge production by various authors. This summary already emphasises *degrowth's* two main supporting movements: (a) *activists* and (b) *intellectual* works. The (a) activism referred to is often post-development or even post-capitalism citizen-led movements. Grassroots movements propose alternatives to the mainstream way of apprehending reality. Such initiatives embodying *degrowth* exist around the world, from activism to blogs and media. Only recently did empirical evidence on the movements embodying *degrowth* come into existence. According to research from Brossmann and Islar (2020), living *degrowth* (at an individual and community level) reveals 5 dominant spheres: (1) rethinking society, (2) acting political, (3) creating alternatives, (4) fostering connections, and (5) unveiling the self.

The term (b) intellectual rather than scientific seems more appropriate because some non-peer-reviewed publications of books or articles also contribute to the *degrowth* movement.

Before becoming a field, *degrowth* was already presented in some articles or speeches, which helped shape a shared definition for this concept. Until 2022, more than 600 peer-reviewed articles have been published with *degrowth* as a subject, and even more in media, conferences, books, and essays. This number is still growing, and the present thesis is an example of how the movement became more accessible for thesis and PhD students. People writing about *degrowth* regularly meet at conferences around Europe. The European Union organized the Post-Growth Conference in 2018, followed by the Beyond Growth Conference in 2023. In 2022, the *Degrowth Journal* was officially created, giving room to publications exclusively dedicated to this movement, and a master's degree specializing in *degrowth* is proposed at the University of Barcelona.

Ultimately, the public sector also shows some use of the term *degrowth*. It was the hobby horse of Pierre Rabhi's attempt in the presidential elections in France in 2002. Two other candidates from the French Green Party used *degrowth* as a bow of their program in 2007 and 2022 without making their way through the primary elections. In Europe, the Irish president said in 2020 in a speech that *degrowth* is the only sustainable strategy for planet survival (Higgins, 2020). Lately, the economic impact of COVID-19 has forced many politicians to react to *degrowth*, but often backlash and mistaken with recession. The actual economic stagnation observed in some northern nations forged post-growth thinking, but totalitarian answers flourish in such contexts, hindering sustainability transformations. Overall, the main sector reluctant to *degrowth* remains the private sector and large-scale businesses (Buch-Hansen et al., 2024). Locked-in economic profit requirements and the satisfaction of the shareholders, companies struggle to put *degrowth* on their agenda.

Experiences of degrowth

Despite being primarily a theoretical ground, *degrowth* already unfolds in various forms. An interesting example comes from cities that suffered from industrial collapses. Leipzig in Germany and Detroit in the USA both suffered an economic decline and population loss after their main industry collapsed. Starting from economic ashes, these cities tried to create a revival by attracting the population for different reasons. Exit the economic attraction, they had to build on something else. Through community gardens, alternative pockets, or artistic renewal, they tried to place the wellbeing of citizens at the core of the new political projects, organised around communities at the district level (see or watch *Demain* for more insights on Detroit (Dion & Laurent, 2015)). After a long process of re-organizing, these cities are all the rage for young people who seek alternative cities to live in. These examples can be seen as examples of involuntary recession turned into a voluntary societal project of *degrowth* by planning non-economic thriving and giving room to initiatives.

As Kallis et al. (2018) noted, "Human history offers myriad examples of non-capitalist societies, and of community economies not based on capitalist relations, that have lived well without growth" (p. 310). Among others, Vaclav Smil (2018) showed that societies lived without growth before the Great Acceleration (2015) hit the global North in the 18th and 19th centuries. Societies that lived and still live without growth show an organisation based on the community (Kallis et al., 2018) (Smil, 2018). For example, Bogadóttir and Olsen (2017) argued that controversial whale hunts in the Faroe Islands express principles that may nourish *degrowth* pathways; in communal harvests of sizes that have remained consistent over centuries, meat and blubber are shared among community members for nourishment, and neither money nor profits are generated. Some societies still prosper without growth nowadays, they are counterhegemonic but show alternative ways. In his work, Woodburn (1982) found out that

current communities living without growth favour immediate consumption over surplus accumulation. It also seems that people in such communities spend less time working, only until the energy return from their effort to hunt or gather is enough to sustain their community (Smil, 2018). More experiences of *degrowth* emerged in the interviews, presented below.

Staying in the *degrowth* bubble might show increasing support for the movement, but as Kallis et al. (2018) note, “degrowth proposals are to a certain extent utopian—there is no “topos” (place) where they fully exist” (p. 308).

4.1.3. Buen Vivir

“Buen Vivir, or Vivir Bien, are the Spanish words used in Latin America to describe alternatives to development focused on the good life in a broad sense” (Gudynas, 2011, p. 441). Roughly translated in English as “good life” or “living well”, *Buen Vivir* is a pluralistic concept, namely “buenos convivires” – different ways of living well together (Acosta, 2020). In *Buen Vivir*'s research, occidental capitalism is rejected for its domination-based economy (Acosta, 2020), offering different perspectives about desirable futures coming from indigenous worldvisions. *Buen Vivir* is a philosophy focusing on the wellbeing of communities made of humans and more-than-humans. In a non-linear approach to life, the rejection of growth and development are intrinsic to *Buen Vivir*. To do so, decolonisation is essential to let communities of Latin America decide on their destiny.

4.1.3.1. Origins of Buen Vivir

The Spanish term *Buen Vivir* emerged in the 1990s in Peru. Finding roots in some Andean and Amazon Indigenous groups (Acosta, 2023), respectively, the indigenous philosophies of *Sumak Kawsay* (in Quechua) and *Suma Qamaña* (in Aymara). *Sumak Kawsay* was found in texts dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century as a first fight against illiteracy, poverty and discrimination (Inuca Lechón, 2017). Later on, it found an echo in Latin America and especially in Ecuador and Bolivia, where the philosophy received broad social, cultural and political support (Gudynas, 2011). *Sumak Kawsay* and *Suma Qamaña* demonstrate the indigenous roots of the pluricultural vision of *Buen Vivir* and share similar visions with many other Latin American communities. Nevertheless, *Buen Vivir* entails a vast range of realities and should not be boiled down to an Indigenous movement.

Buen Vivir is plural, encompassing different deepness of ideas that Gudynas (2014) classifies into three uses ranging from the more superficial to the all-encompassing: (1) a generic use to oppose the conventional form of development; (2) a restricted use criticising the contemporary capitalism framework and thinking about development in a post-capitalist context; (3) a substantive use criticising all forms of development. The substantive use sticks to the initial idea of *Buen Vivir*, whereas the two other uses come from more recent appropriation of the term. In the present analysis, *Buen Vivir*'s substantive approach is used. This approach is broader and questions current patterns to be able to design new paradigms.

4.1.3.2. Societal vision of Buen Vivir

Because *Buen Vivir* exists in Latin America, in different contexts, envisioning how it unfolds can be challenging. This section aims at providing explanations of the organisation of communities embodying *Buen Vivir*, but remains theoretical because of limited field research.

The extended community

A core element of *Buen Vivir* is the interconnection between humans and nature⁵. *Buen Vivir* has a biocentric approach (Gudynas, 2011), recognising the inherent value of biosphere and biodiversity. Figure 3

shows the scope of anthropocentric, biocentric, ecocentric and pluriversal worldviews. Ecocentrism recognises the inherent values of nature as a whole, functioning as a holistic ecosystem. Anthropocentrism is the current dominant philosophy, centred on the value of humans and the use of ecosystems to satisfy humans' needs. While anthropocentrism is dominant and at the core of the evolution models, it has not always been the case. In different communities around the world, biocentric approaches considering animals and living organisms have been observed by anthropologists (Henrich, 2020). On the other hand, the pluriverse emerged as a possibility for "a world where many worlds fit". The pluriverse might provide an even bigger perspective, recognising and including many perspectives within it.

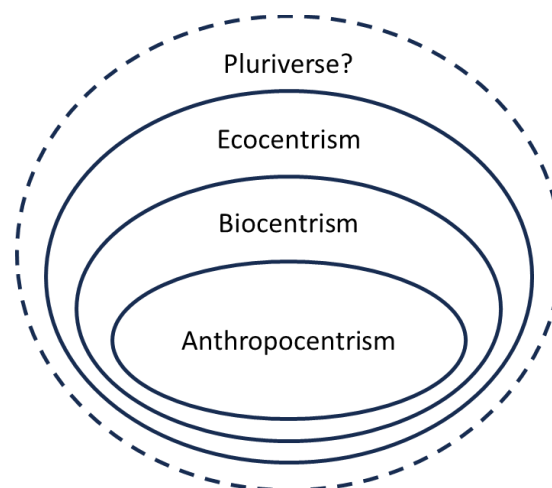


Figure 3: *Various visions of the world.*

The further away from the centre, the more values placed on nature.

Anthropocentrism, Ecocentrism, and Biocentrism are well documented, but the Pluriverse remains in its first faltering steps, with an unclear positioning. The pluriverse is sketched with a dotted line because boundaries are weak and unclear.

Buen Vivir is an example of a biocentric approach, with an extended community where the wellbeing of more than humans matters. In that vision, the community is made of humans and more-than-humans who live in a shared environment. More-than-humans entail nature and spiritual beings. It is a sort of Earth community. Therefore, when trying to satisfy the needs of the community to maximize wellbeing, more-than-humans are considered. For instance, the soil and its providence have values themselves, decoupled from the human use made of it.

⁵ Despite being present in the literature about *Buen Vivir*, the term 'nature' is very occidental as if nature was distinct from human culture. I would argue that 'more-than-humans' is a better representation of live beyond human beings, but the text keeps a share of both terms for the sake of simplicity.

This is opposed to the current economic system that considers nature as an accessible and free reservoir of resources, only made to maximise human wealth.

Wellbeing as a driving force

Communities embodying *Buen Vivir*, or *Sumak Kawsay*, aim to live well and, therefore, prioritize wellbeing. In the *Buen Vivir* paradigm, wellbeing is not only materialistic but seeks a deeper and more complex state that a community can foster. *Buen Vivir* promotes regional organisation, where communities thrive, and wellbeing is a complex notion that depends on local specifications; therefore, it does not follow universal rules.

Un-linear living

In Northern nations, growth and development are entrenched in society and unfold in every corner of life. At a personal level, there is a linear understanding of life, creating a lock-in with current unsustainable paradigms (Veland et al., 2022). *Buen Vivir* is antipodean, embracing the integrality of life (Gudynas, 2011). Life is approached holistically in a material, social, and spiritual way (Acosta, 2023). Materiality is not an end itself but rather is here just one side of life, a means for the bigger aim of wellbeing. The social bonds are maintained among the community described above, and spirituality helps bring value to the things that cannot be explained rationally. Variations and regression are permitted in a non-linear process.

Finally, *Buen Vivir* is a decolonialist and depatriarchalist approach (Acosta, 2020). In the current “imperialist” structures established by northern nations, domination from one to another prevails, from men to non-men, from humans to more-than-humans, from the global North to the global South. *Buen Vivir* stands for the removal of these visible and invisible patterns to free (non-)humans from oppression.

4.1.3.3. Current use and support

The philosophy of *Buen Vivir* appears in Ecuador’s constitution since 2008 as *Buen Vivir*, or *Sumak Kawsay* (Kichwa), and in Bolivia’s constitution since 2009 as *Vivir Bien*, or *Suma Qamaña* (Aymara) and *Sumak Kawsay* (Quechua). Ecuador’s adoption of *Buen Vivir* in the constitution is robust and all-encompassing, whilst Bolivia puts it as a consequence and not a condition. In the former, recognising the rights of nature and the fundamental right to water provides the soil for *Buen Vivir* as a paradigm. In the preamble of Ecuador’s constitution is written the aim of building a “new form of public coexistence, in diversity and in harmony with nature, to achieve a good way of living, the *sumak kawsay*” (Acosta, 2020, p. 4). In Bolivia, on the other hand, *Buen Vivir* is part of a set of principles such as dignity, social and gender equity, and social justice, placing them alongside the classic third-generation human rights whilst development and GDP growth are kept as core objectives (Kothari et al., 2014). The societal and political appropriation of *Buen Vivir* in these countries distorted the original messages that *Buen Vivir* carried. Used in a “restrictive” or “generic” way, as Gudynas (2014) would name it, the term has been bowdlerised and incorporated into the frameworks that it aimed to reject. Acosta (2020), a scholar and former minister in Ecuador, warned people recognising *Buen Vivir* from falling into the trap of Ecuador and Bolivia’s governments, who use *Buen Vivir* and *Vivir Bien* as propaganda while modernising capitalism. Substantive

embodiment of *Buen Vivir* seems to take place at local scales, among indigenous communities where oral knowledge prevails, leaving European observers in doubt.

Nevertheless, in Ecuador, a recent case came to exemplify the rights of nature. In August 2023, Ecuador's population voted and decided to keep the oil in Amazonia's earth. Under the Yasuní-ITT Initiative, led by a coalition of Indigenous peoples, youth, and activists from across the country, they fought for decades to halt new and roll back existing fossil fuel operations. The defenders of the Yasuní-ITT Initiative invoked *Buen Vivir* in their struggle, demonstrating that extracting oil is against this philosophy and, so to say, anti-constitutional. This decision is a world premiere of deciding to keep oil in the soil.

Overall, *Buen Vivir* has a more mature and diverse support than *degrowth*. Adopted by countries and institutions such as UNEP, *Buen Vivir* is present in the public and political arena when *degrowth* does not receive political support yet.

4.1.4. Similarities and differences of a meaningful duet

Sometimes falling in the same category of “alternatives” to current unsustainable practices, there seems to be an evident bond between *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* as “positive” alternatives to mainstream capitalist development. Acosta (2023) noted some elements of convergence between both paradigms, mostly named “perspectives for the great transformation towards societies characterised by equity and justice, freedom, and equality, and living in harmony with Nature” (p. 305). But besides this naturally allied vision between the two concepts, some scholars became more prudent on the supposedly evident bond between *degrowth* and alternative movements coming from the global South, such as *Buen Vivir*. As Kothari et al. (2014) note about *Buen Vivir*, *degrowth*, and Ecological Swaraj, an Indian ecological philosophy of self-determination and collective decision-making, “[they] are internally diverse, and there has been no global attempt at trying to consolidate them into a single coherent vision or framework (if this was even possible or desirable)” (p. 370). Hanaček et al. (2020) warned from putting all the eggs in the same basket when discussing post-development philosophies and keeping in mind the plurality of the global South.

Buen Vivir and *degrowth* concepts have been relatively well compared in the literature, but synergies analyses are lacking. For this reason, a framework to initiate a discussion between both paradigms is provided in Table 3, where similarities as well as differences between both concepts are summarised. The common ground appears in the middle column and reflects the notion where both movements align. The columns of *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* present the characteristics specific to the paradigm. Because they recognise each other, differences do not mean that one rejects the characteristics of the other.

Degrowth and *Buen Vivir* reject capitalist development as a desirable societal organisation, mainly due to its socioecological adverse effects for the former and due to its imperialist consideration of the world for the latter. As a common vision of the world, both *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* see humanity entrenched within nature, while capitalist models state the opposite (Acosta, 2020; Kothari et al., 2014). *Buen Vivir* is a clear biocentric philosophy when *degrowth* swims between anthropocentrism and a strong recognition of nature: “degrowth can be said to remain more anthropocentric than post-development (e.g., *Buen Vivir*)” (Escobar, 2015, p. 456). Both philosophies align on the recognition of plural realities where different realms coexist. Despite singular natures, *Buen Vivir* and *degrowth* put the wellbeing of its communities at the forefront. Such communities are organised in democratic ways, following the argument that democracy requires specific circumstances (Castoriadis, 1987) that are not

offered by modern forms of neoliberal capitalism (Merkel, 2018). These similarities acknowledge the different contexts where *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* happen. While *Buen Vivir* is specific to Latin America and the native people, *degrowth* is a European concept relevant to northern nations. Albeit both supported by different sides of society; non-academic support is more prominent for *Buen Vivir* when *degrowth* remains mainly discussed in the scientific literature (Escobar, 2015). Finally, degrowing economies for rich societies is a necessity but also an intermittent phase towards post-growth economies. On the other hand, *Buen Vivir* extols a balanced way of living to thrive in the long run.

	Buen Vivir	Common ground	Degrowth
Cosmology	Emerged in the global South Indigenous origins	Opposed to the capitalist development Recognising pluriversal realities Cosmology of sharing	Emerged in Europe Scholar origins
Temporality and Spatiality	Permanent state Happening in Latin America	Community level Peculiar to a region	Temporary state Happening in northern nations
Axiology	Biocentric Integrality of life	Human systems within nature Non-linearity Sufficiency Non-materialistic	Anthropocentric to Biocentric
Social Vision	Community Balance and Harmony	Wellbeing at core Redistribution of power and wealth Equity	Representative and active democracy
Supporting movements	Ecuador and Bolivia's constitutions Grassroots movements	Philosophers	Academic

Table 3: Summary of similarities and differences between *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir*.
References can be found in the theoretical analysis and the literature review.

Aiming at bridging *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* into a discussion, the descriptions made so far clearly highlight that both philosophies aim to draw sustainable and desirable futures. *Degrowth* is a reaction to northern imperialism, whilst *Buen Vivir* is a decolonial call for alternative ways of living, but both share common values and embrace similar core elements. In *Sortir de la société de consommation* (2014) (roughly translated from French into "Walking out of the consumption society"), Latouche relates an encounter he had in Bilbao with an Ecuadorian indigenous leader: "What you call degrowth, he told me, is exactly what we Amerindians call *Buen Vivir*" (p. 143), showing here that instead of relying on the peculiar differences of both movements, attention can be put on the commonalities to build a differentiated but common world. The common rejections of capitalist development and the

common aim of living all together, humans and more-than-humans, in harmony with the world, provide a base for beautiful and desirable futures.

As a result, the emphasis is to be put on the similarities more than the differences. Despite evident variations, both philosophies unfold in a pluriversal world where differences are acknowledged and embraced to focus on oneness and coexistence. Furthermore, the literature focuses on these differences and remains analytical, whereas the present thesis aims to unite and put both paradigms in a pluralist context.

The following addresses these aspects and explores the possibility of both paradigms to coexist and learn from each other.

4.1.4.1. Focused on the wellbeing of communities

Buen Vivir details that wellbeing happens at a community level, whilst *degrowth* claims that wellbeing is reachable in a degrowing economy, as long as equality is achieved. Generating solidarity between humans and between humans and more-than-humans is a key task for changing how life is approached and treated on Earth. In the current dominant economic paradigm, where materialist consumption is predominant and bolstered by private businesses seeking growth, the wellbeing of population is often transformed into a culture of wellhaving. Both *Buen Vivir* and *degrowth* tackle that by placing wellbeing as an objective and a presupposition for a thriving society. Nonetheless, “the concept and metrics of wellbeing, largely a UN and World Bank construct, presupposes a Western view of development and has little room for considering alternatives, indigenous cosmovisions or other diverse ways of living well” (Hanačeka et al., 2020, p. 10). Yet, there is a remaining question on the size of the community addressed. Human-wise, Harari (2014) argued that human societies manage to organise themselves and keep community connections up to 150 people. Nevertheless, the communities envisioned in *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* are local (Escobar, 2015) beyond humans, leaving a grey zone on what type and size of community can be built.

4.1.4.2. Temporality

In *Steady-State Economics* (1977), the American economist Herman Daly lays the foundations of *stationary economics*, a term that has been used in economic discussions until now. Daly theorises that growth is a temporary phase that must be considered as a step towards maturity and sufficiency. A modern interpretation is provided by Parrique, who reminds us that, just like growth, *degrowth* is a temporary-state. As Kallis et al. (2018) note “slowing down the economy is not an end but a likely outcome in a transition toward equitable wellbeing and environmental sustainability” (p. 297). Figure 4 illustrates this situation, with growth, *degrowth*, and steady-state put together on a timeline. In this approach, growth and *degrowth* can be pursued for a short period of time in order to reach a steady-state.

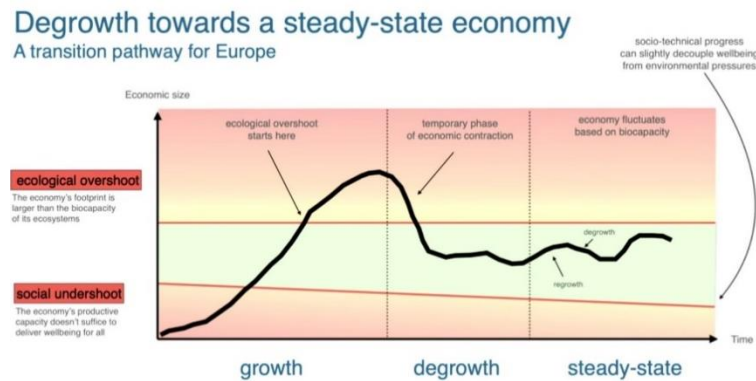


Figure 4: Parrique's vision of the temporality of economies (2023c)

Buen Vivir, on the other hand, is a permanent state of balanced life. Connected to natural cycles, the temporality of *Buen Vivir* is not properly defined in the literature but implies a steady-state. There is a permanent work on maintaining the balance between humans and more-than-humans, between material and spiritual life, between knowledge and wisdom, between cultures, and between different identities and realities (Salón, 2015)

Therefore, both *Buen Vivir* and post-growth entail an economic equilibrium state. *Buen Vivir* can provide a compass for post-growth's steady-state, furthering *degrowth's* horizons (Acosta, 2020). Gudynas (2011) conceptualised *degrowth* as a consequence of *Buen Vivir*. He also argued that *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* operate at different conceptual levels, enabling them to cooperate in a pluriversal world. Indeed, *Buen Vivir* is often told through philosophical lenses, and, as Acosta (2023) warned us, *Buen Vivir* can lack embodiment and effectiveness. *Degrowth* in the global North can be this operational tool helping to draw on different indicators of a nation's wealth, and *Buen Vivir* can motivate *degrowth* with a positive approach that people could easily relate to. Ultimately, humans probably all want to live well, or in other words, to have a *Buen Vivir*.

4.1.4.3. Inextricable question of colonisation

Because affluent nations, namely nations of the global North, would need to reduce their energetic and economic throughput in order to come back within the Planetary Boundaries (4.1.2), nations in the global South would be affected by this downscaling. Material and energetic demand coming from the global North would be reduced in extractive countries of the global South. Therefore, nations embodying *Buen Vivir* would reduce their export dependence from extractive countries and allow a liberating post-extractivist movement. Parrique (2022) stated that *degrowth* in the global North is a *sine qua non* condition for prosperity in the global South. Pursuing *degrowth* in the global North should “liberate conceptual space for countries there [in the South] to find their own trajectories to what they define as the good life” (Kallis et al., 2014, p. 33). Arora and Stirling (2021) said that *degrowth* is not all-encompassing and should not encroach on other meaningful visions. Therefore, decolonising the South is vital to let alternative spaces grow. Because *degrowth* proposes a radical way out of imperialist practices, it could facilitate the active liberation of the South. Nevertheless, this should be done without imposing universal new standards. The *degrowth* movement should not be a colonialist movement pursuing a “one-world world” (Law, 2015). Latouche (2014) makes an even clearer statement by saying, “building autonomous societies in the South cannot be done under the banner of *degrowth* (or, for that matter, *growth*), but

must be done under the banner of emancipation from economic, political and, above all, cultural imperialism” (p. 113). Therefore, *degrowth* in the North would help *Buen Vivir* in the South, and vice-versa.

Albeit Latouche defines *degrowth* as a “decolonization of imaginaries and growth”, Arora and Stirling (2023) warned northern nations from falling into the trap of recognising reality, such as *Buen Vivir*, only because it is an ally to the *degrowth* movement. They alerted *degrowth* from being colonial in two main pathways: *topological universalism* and *bordered reflexivity* (Arora & Stirling, 2021). Topological universalism refers to the universalist view of *degrowth*, sometimes ignoring pluriversal realities and focusing on the materialistic side of the story; the bordered reflexivity is the idea that *degrowth* finds allies, such as *Buen Vivir*, only if they match the *degrowth* agenda, restraining the horizons of the pluriverse. “A decolonial theory of degrowth must acknowledge that many post-growth ideas have non-Western roots, and voices of academics and activists from the global South are as crucial as those critical streams of thought in the North” (Hanačeka et al., 2020, p. 7), reminding *degrowth* to observe and learn from other realities happening in different places. *Degrowth* must be a decolonisation movement in order to thrive, and *Buen Vivir* is part of the post-development pluriverse.

4.2. Interviews

Following the theoretical definition of *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir*, interviews were conducted with experts to draw on the possibilities for *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* to enable positive futures. The seven interviewees conducted were people from the global North, WEIRD (Wealthy, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic), mostly focusing on *degrowth*. As a result, we engaged in discussions on *degrowth* and its implication for the present and the future, whilst *Buen Vivir* was brought into the discussion among pluriversal alternatives to capitalist development. Indeed, the interviews revealed that *Buen Vivir* was not the field of expertise of the interviewees, therefore, over-comparing it with *degrowth* would have been of limited relevance. Thus, the following results focus on *degrowth* in the global North, and the *Buen Vivir* study takes less room than it took in the theoretical analysis. Results

The results of the research that was achieved are presented in this chapter. The theoretical analysis provides a comprehension of the literature and theories addressing the research questions. Later, the interviews conducted with experts help deepen the understanding and open up the struggles and potentiality for *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* to draw on sustainable futures.

Both opposed to capitalistic development, *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* share numerous similarities in the rejection of the imperialist way of living, the recognition of more-than-humans, and the democratic role of communities to satisfy the needs and foster wellbeing. Yet, differences exist in the spatiality and temporality of these philosophies. They show a different maturity and could, therefore, learn from each other experiences. *Degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* require a pluriversal vision of the world to unfold without hurdles. Indeed, decolonisation from northern nations is required to facilitate the emancipation of constrained nations and give them room to decide their own destiny. If doing so, positive, sustainable futures can be drawn. Such futures will require much effort and innovative ways to deal with upcoming challenges. Yet, the interviews revealed humanistic hope for the future, calling for creativity and embodiment in sustainable discussions.

Theoretical analysis As this chapter will show, both *Buen Vivir* and *degrowth* are fundamentally democratic, placing hope in humanity to make meaningful decisions. *Buen Vivir* shows a local anarchist organisation when *degrowth* shows uncertainty about power organisation. Both philosophies fall into pluriversal post-development societies, that can be aesthetic and poetic. Such societies already exist, taking place at micro-scales for *degrowth*, whilst happening in local communities of Latin America for *Buen Vivir*. Yet, these ways of living need to be facilitated and given importance because the current imperial way of living restrains them. *Degrowth* can help pursue the emancipation of individuals and communities in the global North but also facilitate it in the global South. The collective ethos of *degrowth* helps consider and integrate communities in alternative societal organisations.

4.2.1. Degrowth

4.2.1.1. Degrowth as a motto?

Degrowth is a simplistic term. It goes far beyond economic organisation and has to do with life on Earth. Using the term *degrowth* might narrow the debate to just the material side of the movement. Although most of the interviewees had materialistic lenses in their work, there was no consensus on whether materiality is a strength or a flaw for *degrowth*. Olk said, “I think the basis for politics, especially in climate and environmental questions, needs to be a kind of material redistribution” (personal communication, November 17, 2023) when Nesterova carries humanist values that strengthen Latouche’s call for considering the philosophical and social roots of the *degrowth* movement: “to build, to really give roots and depth to the degrowth project, we need to include this anthropological dimension” (S. Latouche, personal communication, November 24, 2023). As a result, it seemed during the interviews that nobody likes the term *degrowth*. While one interviewee clearly believed in a unique uniformised message that would help bring *degrowth* to the forefront of the public arena, others embraced the plurality and fuzzy definition of *degrowth* drawn in the theoretical analysis. As expressed in the theoretical analysis, *degrowth* is a slogan that makes sense in French and Latin languages, but it is just a word to represent a set of values, principles and worldviews peculiar to different realities.

4.2.1.2. What would degrowth look like?

Because the theoretical analysis provided the theoretical ground for understanding *degrowth*, the interviews focused more on the possibility for *degrowth* to unfold. I asked the interviewees to provide hints on the shape a degrowing society could have. While some sides of the interviews showed consensus (e.g., the economic and democratic side), or at least clear opinions, envisioning a degrowing society seemed challenging for most of the interviews. A wide range of different answers were collected in envisioning *degrowth*, which is valuable research-wise but also shows the confusion around the form of a degrowing society. Envisioning *degrowth* did not seem neglected; it was less explored and more personal.

Economy and Work

Garnier believes that a degrowing society is similar to a post-development society but tougher. Because post-development societies sometimes try to live differently, *degrowth* might add another layer of complexity because it is about doing things differently with fewer materialistic means. Yet, the result of the discussions confirmed that degrowing the GDP is not the aim of *degrowth*: “degrowth has nothing to do with degrowing GDP [...] degrowth is the idea that we can do what we always wanted to do, but we were always told that we couldn't do it because it would degrow GDP” (C. Olk, personal communication, November 17, 2023). This citation enhances the liberating side of *degrowth*, where people's decisions should not be framed by economic restrictions but rather driven by the satisfaction of needs.

Nevertheless, doing so might come with more labour and human energy to balance out the loss of fossil fuels' energy input. However, this work should happen outside of the wage labour. As Fitzpatrick and Latouche mentioned, one of the core objectives of *degrowth* is to abolish wage labour. By reducing the size of the economy and the size of the market, transactions could be done without money. This is already the case for care work in current social organisations in Europe. Therefore, there is a consensus that care work would take more importance, but also fixing the “shit we've done”, as Olk said. This will require some skills to emerge or to re-emerge because they have been forgotten with machines overtaking human labour.

Democratic

Degrowth, according to Olk, is “democratically setting priorities within democratically setting limits” (personal communication, November 17, 2023), what Latouche would name an *eco-anthropocentrism*. It is a radical and deliberate trust in humans to be individuals able to make the right decisions when not blinded by deficient economic and political systems because “capitalism and colonialism are the reason why people everywhere may want to extract stuff and drive big cars” (C. Olk, personal communication, November 17, 2023). When unveiling these hurdles, there is a deep trust in humanity because when discussing, “people do realise that so much of what we produce is basically either useless shit or benefits only a small minority” (C. Olk, personal communication, November 17, 2023) and democracy helps to “regain a sense of why we do what we do” (F. Garnier, personal communication, December 8, 2023). With that assumed, democratic decisions can inevitably drive societies towards positive futures. Olk argued that democratic decisions could help the economy to be more efficient by “shortcutting the process of satisfying our needs” because, at the moment, northern societies take “an extremely bizarre detour through producing a lot of shit that is consumed by very few people and only helps capital accumulation by a few people, rather than simply organising production directly in a way that satisfies human needs” (C. Olk, personal communication, November 17, 2023). Furthermore, an efficient system directly satisfying human needs would require less throughput, enabling reduced labour and lower adverse ecological impacts.

The democracy called for is a “direct democracy” in “deliberate ways”, according to Nelson, enabling “direct representation” of the people, according to Olk. This democracy is mostly local but can work at different levels of an organisation. It is a way to involve and make people aware of their roles and responsibilities. Enabling individuals to “voluntarily come to the conclusion” (N. Fitzpatrick, personal communication, November 20, 2023) helps make tough decisions more bearable and easier to accept for the ones that will suffer from them: “The aim of radical democracy is also to ensure that the people who are going to have a hard time of it can play a part in deciding how their lives are going to change” (F. Garnier, personal

communication, December 8, 2023). Placing democracy at its core, *degrowth* is “a period of crazy democratic experimentation”, according to Garnier (personal communication, December 8, 2023). But he warns us that democracy is like a sport; it needs training and practice to be good at it.

Finally, Latouche commented on democracies, reminding us that “democracy as we understand it” (personal communication, November 24, 2023) is an occidental invention. He suggests keeping in mind that solutions benefiting countries in a region, the global North for democracy, do not necessarily apply in other contexts. The democracy portrayed by *degrowth* is specific to the *degrowth* movement, and India’s caste system would have a different perception of power, as an example used by Latouche.

Transforming towards degrowth societies

Because “we’ve been deeply unhappy people” (H. Buch-Hansen, personal communication, November 15, 2023) in the current political and economic system, societal transformation is urgent. Latouche and Olk analysed two main strands in the *degrowth* movement: the Latin strand is probably more revolutionary and believes in radical shifts, whilst the Anglo-Saxon/northern European strand shows more reformist approaches driven by individual efforts and trust in the government. The Latin strand is also keener on anarchist structures, meaning that centralised power (i.e., the state) is a hurdle on the way to freedom and emancipation. Escobar (2015) also noted that there is in *degrowth* “a certain predilection for anarchism as political imaginary” (p. 457). Using Wright’s (2012) terms, the Latin strand is ruptural and interstitial, while the northern European strand operates symbiotically. Following Chertkovskaya’s recommendations (2020), the three approaches are needed for *degrowth* to be effective. During the interviews, the three approaches were embodied, showing the versatility of the *degrowth* movement as a strength. Garnier summarised these differentiated visions in a reflected way: “We need strong states to enable the transition to degrowth”, but “a very strong state is also incompatible with a good quality democratic system” (personal communication, December 8, 2023).

On the other hand, Nesterova and Buch-Hansen use Bhaskar’s four planar theory (i.e., material transactions in nature, social relations, social structures and inner-being) to imagine transformation. In their approach, the inner-being could play a central role because “if we want societies in which people can thrive, and more-than-humans can thrive, then we absolutely need to change our inner-being” (H. Buch-Hansen, personal communication, November 15, 2023). Driven by gentleness and care, it might be possible that people start reflecting on themselves and questioning “how can we come to see our way of being in the world differently” (H. Buch-Hansen, personal communication, November 15, 2023) to find their own path.

Latouche praises an even darker vision when saying, “it’s when the system really collapses because there’s no more oil, no more stuff, everything’s out of whack, we’ll really be at rock bottom, we’ll really be in deep shit, and then we’ll have no choice” (personal communication, November 24, 2023) to actively degrow. However, as Polanyi (2015) said, a democratic *degrowth* shift might be utopist, but far less than the utopia of a market-based solution to the looming catastrophes.

Supporting movements

Extending the list of supporting movements of *degrowth* noted in the theoretical analysis, the climate resistance camps, ZAD (“Zone à Défendre” in French, translated in “Zone to Defend” into English), ecovillages, shared gardens, and other struggle organisations have been expressed as *degrowth* examples during the interviewees. These pockets of resistance are democratically organised in anarchist ways, being interstitial and even ruptural for the ZAD. These micro-scale examples reveal ways to organise differently, with common objectives and shared values. These realities provide examples and help to envision the society that we’ve been depicting so far. However, it remains limited as these places exist at a micro-scale and struggle to gain importance within capitalist structures.

But how can *degrowth* and post-development promoters in the global North tackle capitalism and its unsustainable structures? Where to start? “The degrowth idea really is: you take the strongest argument that the proponents of capitalism have [which is capitalism claims that it is efficient and that it makes everyone’s lives better], and you attack that” (C. Olk, personal communication, November 17, 2023). Olk continues explaining that most of the leftist movements of the 20th century tried to pick on the things that are weak about capitalism, whereas *degrowth* is actually saying that even growth, a supposed strength of capitalism, is a flaw. Yet, Nesterova is more optimistic, not seeing capitalism as a blanket covering the entire society. She sees *degrowth* as “something that, I guess, is already existing at the margins of the kind of economic system we have now” (personal communication, November 17, 2023) because she observes that there are a lot of beautiful things under the capitalist umbrella and “our question should be how to grow those spaces” (I. Nesterova, personal communication, November 15, 2023). But these interstitial movements “are blocked and restrained” (C. Olk, personal communication, November 17, 2023) because “such attempts are always constrained by competition with other organisations that have a huge advantage because they correspond to the logic of capitalism and they are favoured by the institutions of capitalism” (C. Olk, personal communication, November 17, 2023). So, *degrowth* already exists, even within capitalism, it mainly needs to be facilitated and enabled to grow.

I do think that there are a lot of things that are happening right now, within capitalist societies, that are degrowth [...] like friendships, like families and community and building, and also yourself [referring to me, the interviewer]! You. You’re writing your master’s thesis on something that is not necessarily capitalist. (I. Nesterova, personal communication, November 15, 2023)

4.2.2. Buen Vivir

Despite the small room that *Buen Vivir* took in the interviews, some novelties that were not presented in the theoretical analysis emerged. Overall, the interviewees’ understanding of *Buen Vivir* was not expert, and the theoretical analysis provided more details about *Buen Vivir* than the interviewees could have. Furthermore, “talking about Buen Vivir is a simplification” (S. Latouche, personal communication, November 24, 2023) and requires humbleness. Yet, most of the interviews recognised that *Buen Vivir* is part of the pluriversal realities of positive futures. It has been expressed as well by Nelson, who sees *Buen Vivir* and Eco Swaraj in relation to *degrowth*: “I think that they need to be seen as separate as well as connected” (personal communication, November 22, 2023).

As Garnier reminded, the critics of development in Latin America were not built on the same motivations as in Europe. In the 1970s, when *Buen Vivir* and other critics gained importance

in Latin America, the environmental predicaments were not predominant and local social struggles were not the same as the ones currently faced in Europe or Latin America. *Buen Vivir* is probably more of an ideological rejection of imperialist development, whilst *degrowth* is based on contemporary social and ecological inconsistencies. Garnier draws this chronologic relation when saying, “the developments in Latin America of *Buen Vivir* have led to the emergence of *degrowth* in the countries of France, for instance”, but “it’s not because there are possibly mutual inspirations or things that go from South America to France that *degrowth* is a Western *Buen Vivir*” (personal communication, December 8, 2023)—hereby recognising the similar inspirations but different ways to unfold. Bolstering the interdependent relationship between North and South, or *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir*, the inspiration that *degrowth* took from *Buen Vivir* rarely appears in *degrowth* literature. Acknowledging the knowledge and practices outside of the Eurocentric scope is central to creating a peaceful pluriversal world, and the northern approach “should rather come with humbleness and ask about their [southern] views on harmonious coexistence” (I. Nesterova, personal communication, November 15, 2023) instead of absorbing *Buen Vivir* into the *degrowth* movement.

4.2.3. Pluriversal realities

Both *Buen Vivir* and *degrowth* are plural philosophies. Peculiar to certain regions, they unfold in a pluriversal world. This harmonious approach to a shared but common world is an innovative way for both philosophies to be put together. Because both philosophies struggle with the imperialist ideology of capitalist development, they can coexist in futures freed from capitalism. These futures aim to be sustainable for both *Buen Vivir* and *degrowth* but still need efforts from both sides to avoid being encroached upon by a new form of imperialism. While the theoretical analysis recognised the dependency between *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir*, the interviews showed their interdependency. This vocabulary change carries a mutual consideration where the relation is not a one-way street from the North to the South, furthering the discussion on the “post-dualist theory” and “practice of interbeing” carried out by the pluriverse (Escobar, 2011). In order to have a just relationship, *degrowth* must be decolonial, and *Buen Vivir* must actively fight for emancipation.

4.2.3.1. Pluriverse

When talking about alternative projects to the current capitalist development around the world, “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” seems to apply. Because the struggles with mainstream development are universal, some discoursed might focus on a universal response. But as Latouche said, “I reject the idea of an international of *degrowth*, but I don’t reject the idea of an international of plural world-building and dialogue” for “rebuilding another world, other worlds” because “the rejection of the growth society, that’s really the universal aspect, the project is plural” (personal communication, November 24, 2023). *Buen Vivir*. Garnier summarised, “the most convincing answer [to socio-ecological struggles] I’ve come up with is this concept of pluriverse” (personal communication, December 8, 2023), where the pluriverse is “a backdrop that should serve as a theoretical framework, a reference and a means of alliance for different movements around the world” (F. Garnier, personal communication, December 8, 2023). Answers to the socio-ecological struggles take place in a pluriversal world where “everyone recognises that it’s not working [current political and economic system], so we’re going to equip ourselves with tools to create a pluriverse where we recognise and

respect each other” (F. Garnier, personal communication, December 8, 2023). As identified in the theoretical analysis, the pluriversality of realities around the world looms as an answer to create a “world where many worlds fit”. All these worlds “need to form some sort of constellation together with degrowth and that would bring about a harmonious society” (I. Nesterova, personal communication, November 15, 2023). This constellation is harmonious, like a solar system. *Degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* are planets of this system, seeing each other and respecting similar rotation rules but with their own specification and rhythms.

4.2.3.2. Decolonising and liberating

Degrowth and *Buen Vivir* are endemic philosophies. To not reproduce errors from the past, they should not colonise each other, especially *degrowth*. As Nesterova expressed: “If you take degrowth, this European concept, and you bring it to some space, for example, some tribe in Latin America and then you say, “you must adopt degrowth”, it's colonial, it's colonisation” (personal communication, November 15, 2023). *Degrowth* cannot impose a universal vision of the world. *Degrowth* must be decolonial because “there is a cultural depth in every corner of the world” (S. Latouche, personal communication, November 24, 2023), and problems cannot be solved in an imperialist way.

When most of the interviewees recognise that wealthy countries need to degrow to enable the emancipation of the global South, Olk goes even further by saying: “I also don't think that however hard we struggle in the North, that we will achieve a degrowth transition if there is not also an element of force or resistance from countries of the South” (personal communication, November 17, 2023). This resistance can take many forms, and *Buen Vivir* is one. He pursues “degrowth is necessary for post-development, but active decolonisation from the South is also necessary for degrowth” (C. Olk, personal communication, November 17, 2023), recognising the North-South interdependence and the active role played by both sides. Therefore, the call for autorecognition and communication from *degrowth* and other movements because “for this concept [degrowth] to speak to other concepts, there needs to be this dialogue, there needs to be an acknowledgement and a sense of humbleness” (I. Nesterova, personal communication, November 15, 2023). Because *degrowth* is a post-development decolonial project (4.1.1.2), having a dialogue with *Buen Vivir* can be seemed as helpful in order to achieve the emancipation of dominated groups in the South.

4.2.3.3. Eco-anthropocentric communities for positive futures?

Building on the theoretical analysis, *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* function with strong communities. These communities offer “much more of a collective ethos than an individualistic ethos” (personal communication, November 22, 2023). Even though “the collective can be anything can be a nation-state can be a small community” (C. Olk, personal communication, November 17, 2023), the needs of people would mostly be sustained at a local level and rely less on the meta-system. The local aspect of communities fosters more humanity and reciprocity in the organisation of the economy and enables people to be aware.

Nevertheless, questions remain on the nature and composition of the communities. Because “we act as if we could change nature like we want to, but we cannot change society whereas in reality, of course, it's the other way around” (C. Olk, personal communication, November 17, 2023). The theoretical analysis clearly underlined that *Buen Vivir's* communities are made of humans and more-than-humans when Latouche names *degrowth* an eco-anthropocentric

society of “the insertion of man in the chain of living beings to rediscover this sense of solidarity” (personal communication, November 24, 2023). The eco-anthropocentric community offers a possibility for humans to maintain their needs as a priority while recognising the ecological reality and framing reality. In this approach, there might be the assumption that human beings are able to make decisions for more-than-humans. Because human-driven democracies are “all about listening to people” (A. Nelson, personal communication, November 22, 2023), it constrains more-than-humans to be voiceless. The condition of more-than-humans remains a consequence of humans' decisions.

[Degrowth is] a philosophy of meta-reality which recognises oneness or acknowledges that we're all interconnected, that we're all part of the same thing, and it's kind of lack of separation between ourselves and other beings, human and non-human beings and ourselves and the cosmos (I. Nesterova, personal communication, November 15, 2023).

Yet, this humanist vision offered by Nesterova opens a possible window to escape a human-centred project. By uniting life and recognising the resonance of one with another, oneness takes over anthropocentrism. There is no such thing as favouring one type of life over another, instead, it is acknowledging the interconnectedness between all forms of life.

4.2.3.4. Poetic societies

The values that emerged in the discussions at the core of *degrowth* are reciprocity, relationality, care, gentleness, sufficiency, and conviviality, among others. These often hopeful and humanist values carry the image of positive and beautiful societies. A society where life is sustained gently, and everybody can find him or herself meaningful. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the people interviewed who experienced *degrowth* alternatives in pockets of resistance showed lucidity in the *degrowth* process. Straightforwardly, Olk acknowledged that radical transformation towards ecosocial societies “would also be a lot of hard work to tidy shit we've done” (personal communication, November 17, 2023) when Garnier endorsed “a degrowth society will very probably be one in which it will be less comfortable to live from day to day” (personal communication, December 8, 2023). Latouche pursued, “don't get your hopes up too much either; it won't be a perfect, heavenly society – there's no such thing” (personal communication, November 24, 2023). These three people have probably been some of the closest interviewees to radical democratic movements through militancy or similar actions and probably realised that the fundamental hope for the future entails a dirty and tough aspect that needs to be confronted.

But on the other hand, this lucidity should not be the hurdle to the positive endeavour of *degrowth*. Nesterova expressed that “there is enough said about this, and there is enough knowledge” about the ecosocial policies to implement for *degrowth* (personal communication, November 15, 2023). But for *degrowth* to happen, “there needs to be huge amounts of growth within our souls and within our hearts, and I think this growth is what we need to pay attention to” (I. Nesterova, personal communication, November 15, 2023). These individual growths would eventually make people “happier”, according to Garnier, and be the stage of a “cultural blooming” and flourishing of people in a very artistic way, according to Olk and Nelson. Creativity would thrive in a world dealing with scarce resources. During the interviews, the most humanist and hopeful discourses came from persons who experienced militancy or anarchism. These persons who might have already experienced resistance and physically fought for it in their everyday lives are the most radical, democratic, and hopeful for a poetic society.

5. Discussion

As this research raised multiple inquiries, the following chapter positions the results in light of the theories introduced and considers personal subjectivity. The plausibility, feasibility, and desirability of sustainability transformations are questioned, opening up on the possible emancipation of individuals and communities. As this thesis stresses, *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* are possible futures for sustainability, but they unfold in a pluriversal world where numerous other philosophies exist with their own peculiarities. Finally, a reflection is proposed on the necessity to go beyond formal structures and envision the desired futures boundlessly in order to make them a reality.

5.1. Limitations of this thesis

5.1.1. Limitations of the research

The Grounded Theory used to conduct the research has proven to be an effective way to collect and analyse data and draw meaningful conclusions (Allan, 2003). Yet, some limitations arise from this methodology. Even though the Grounded Theory assumes a researcher with “no preconceived ideas”, research is political, serves a personal agenda and cannot be completely detached from it (Allan, 2003). Thus, the positionality, motivation and background of this thesis have influenced the emergence of theories from the theoretical analysis. Furthermore, the literature discussed in the theoretical analysis has been picked among leading authors, leaving numerous works on the side. Another limitation comes from the analysis of the interviews, where the amount of used data is substantial. The coding steps of the Grounded Theory are extensive and analytical, creating large amounts of data to analyse and, therefore, potentially leading to confusion and a feeling of being lost in the individual works. Allan (2003) experienced similar challenges when conducting Grounded Theory research, recognising the deepness of analysis enabled by this methodology at the cost of extensive data treatment.

Also, this thesis was initially designed to include half of the research on *Buen Vivir* but had to change at a later stage. Interviews with experts on *Buen Vivir* have not been conducted despite attempts to reach out. Therefore, when conducting the interviews with *degrowth* experts, it emerged pertinent to keep the research within the range of reality known by the interviewees and the interviewer. Considering positionality and knowledge, it seemed more relevant to bring a contribution to *degrowth* in discussion with *Buen Vivir* rather than an inadequate absorption of *Buen Vivir* in the WEIRD (Wealthy, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic) paradigm of the interviewer and the interviewee. As a result, the thesis could have benefited from interviews with people experts in *Buen Vivir*, or from more diverse origins and knowledge. This would be an intriguing future research idea.

Finally, this thesis highlighted two philosophies from two different regions of the world. Albeit *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* respectively belong to the global North and the global South, the pluriversality called for is nondualistic. Opposing North/South “will tend to dissolve as pluriversal perspectives assert themselves” (Escobar, 2015, p. 460). As Henrich (2020) highlighted, two different philosophies are not binarily opposed but rather spread on two-, or three-dimensional ranges. Therefore, further investigation could have been done in appropriate vocabulary or tone for distinguishing different regions and realities of the world.

5.1.2. Written research

The conducted research about *Buen Vivir* remains based on the written literature. Since *Buen Vivir* finds roots in native populations, where written culture does not prevail, some knowledge remains hardly accessible. Papers on *Buen Vivir* are mostly written in Spanish, and, despite my understanding of the language, it made it more difficult to fully grasp the complex social structures and underlying implications.

Learning from that, it can be noted that logical and neutral research still prevails in the academic field since designed by the Enlightenment and reasoning à la Descartes. Using mainly logical approaches can hinder the context understanding and the interactions with other realities. Academic writing style shapes discourses in a way that reflects the writer's opinions and systemic understanding to a limited extent (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1993). These limitations have been experienced in the present thesis when confronting the written work of the interviewees with the interviews. Whilst the published articles did not explicitly address the humble side of *degrowth* and its emotional side, the interviews revealed a different perspective where aesthetics and personal subjectivity play an important role in *degrowth*. This perspective raises doubts about the capacity for written knowledge to be adequate and sufficient for sustainability. Because required transformations are mindful and all-encompassing, doing without emotionality, oral or alternative knowledge approaches seems finite. Learning from *Buen Vivir's* oral and non-English knowledge should teach us to re-examine knowledge production in sustainability struggles.

5.2. Plausibility, feasibility, and desirability of sustainability transformations

As painted on the cover of this thesis, the world is facing multiple crises and futures are threatened. Another world is possible, where many worlds fit, as expressed by the Zapatista liberation movement of Chiapas in southern Mexico. *Degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* in their unique way, but using Zapatism as an example, alternative organisations adapted to local specificities can be implemented and freed from imperialist oppression. Therefore, struggles striving for sustainable futures can help and learn from each other. This section addresses the plausibility, feasibility, and desirability of sustainability transformations that emerged from this thesis.

On the plausibility of sustainability transformations, section 2.3 stressed the boundness of *degrowth* of throughput in affluent regions. Thus, the question is more on the *how* than the probability of systemic transformations. Organising positive and desirable sustainability transformations in the context of materialistic *degrowth* raises new concerns. Indeed, over the last 150 years, societies have become used to solving occurring problems with increasing means (Jancovici, 2018; Steffen et al., 2015). Yet, in the context of throughput shrinking, resolving increasing socio-ecological issues will require innovative and unexplored approaches. Therefore, the plausibility of systemic transformations seems very high, but the feasibility of positive and sustainability transformations requires unprecedented efforts. Because the current mainstream way of organising societies is unsustainable, and societies might experience structural collapses (Servigne & Stevens, 2020), reasonable doubts can be expressed about the feasibility of sustainability transformations. Chertkovskaya (2020) used Wright's (2012) work to argue that ruptural, interstitial, and symbiotic approaches are all

required to unfold sustainability transformations. Addressing different sides of society, therefore, requires the participation and empowerment of different people in different contexts.

Without the voluntary work to conceive and embody alternative ideas, explanations, practices, and institutions today, an involuntary end to growth may well lead to a state of continual economic depression in which islands of wealth are sustained in seas of deprivation, without pretence of democracy and social justice. (Kallis et al., 2018, p. 309)

Using the example of *degrowth*, Kallis et al. (2018) reminded us that transformations need to be voluntary and not passively waited for. The feasibility of sustainability transformations seems to be in our hands. As this thesis stresses, there are existing philosophies and efforts to build sustainable societies. The frameworks hindering them are human-made, not irrevocable, and could be unbuilt with audacious resolutions. As Latouche (2014) said, the necessary transformations are cultural revolutions and, therefore, far more difficult than any political revolution. Here, it can be noted that Latouche believes in a ruptural approach to overthrowing the development paradigm, which is not the case for every *degrowth* scholar (see 4.2.1.2). According to him, starting by looking at what is unnecessary in our lives can be one step towards *degrowth* and emancipation. This message strengthens the call for emancipation and the importance of inner-changes, as expressed by Nesterova and Buch-Hansen in the interviews. During the interviews, these calls for emancipation revealed hope for the feasibility of sustainability transformation. *Degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* provide hints of possible solutions, yet these philosophies need room to unfold. The required decolonisation discussed throughout this thesis is a way to create this free space for constrained regions when *degrowth* requires a “decolonisation of the imaginary”, as Latouche puts it. Mindful, as well as territorial and structural decolonisation arose as a pertinent way to create space for post-development alternatives to grow, bolstering the feasibility of sustainability transformations.

Chertkovskaya (2020) provided other hints about how to make sustainability transformations happen, reminding that interstitial movements exist, but symbiotic strategies are also needed (i.e., reformative approaches aiming at changing the operating structures in order to steer systems towards a better version of themselves, see 2.1.3). Dismantling capitalism is necessary for *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* to unfold properly. As Olk stated during the interviews, it would be “absurd” to imagine that *degrowth* can happen in the current economic and political system. Therefore, all existing strategies should be used, including slipping inside the belly of the beast (Kothari et al., 2014) and acting as a facilitator for interstitial and ruptural movements to dismantle current capitalistic frameworks. As discussed in 4.1.2.1, “*décroissance*” is a slogan that got kick-boosted from advertisers who deserted the capitalist system to give this movement a name and an echo.

Finally, the desirability of sustainability transformations has been depicted between the lines of this thesis. Despite limited practical examples, *degrowth* appears as a positive endeavour aiming at better satisfying population needs, increasing social welfare and reducing ecological pressures. *Degrowth* in Europe is a means to empower people suffering from inequities and lacking the possibility to choose their contribution to society. Because *degrowth* is a way for people to shortcut the satisfaction of needs, it would enable populations to engage in jobs relevant to their own needs or needs that they value. Furthermore, *degrowth* would enable sustainable societies, therefore reducing the threat to life conditions. Organised in democratic ways, *degrowth* appears as a way to “do what we always wanted to do, but we were always told that we couldn’t do it because it would degrow GDP” (C. Olk, personal communication, November 17, 2023).

On the other side of the Atlantic, *Buen Vivir* is a call for particular populations in Latin America to live well in harmony with other humans and more-than-humans. Emerged in indigenous communities, this philosophy is a way for people to take control of their destiny and recognise and embrace their cultural specifications. With wellbeing at its core, *Buen Vivir* is desirable and claimed by local populations. Whilst *degrowth* still presents the challenge to be proposed to populations, because it is mainly an academic field, *Buen Vivir* is born from practice and already showed its desirability when unfolding substantively at a local level.

Therefore, taken individually in their regions, both philosophies are desirable for most people. Even though a fringe of the population might suffer from these radical changes, especially people taking advantage of the flaws of current frameworks, *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* are humanist endeavours striving for positive futures. This common aim of creating spaces for positive futures has been emphasised during the interviews. Beyond peculiar differences, the interviewees showed that sustainability should focus on the similarities of manifold realities rather than the differences. Differences exist everywhere, but with the aim of building positive, sustainable futures, the compass is shared.

5.3. Other philosophies for a pluriverse

At this point of the thesis, *degrowth*, *Buen Vivir*, and critics of capitalist development have been extensively discussed. However, *degrowth* is a European concept, and *Buen Vivir* unfolds in Latin America. When integrating them in a pluriversal world, it becomes evident that a myriad of realities exists and still is to be built. The present study focuses on *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* because of the mentioned research gap and profound personal interest, but still other somewhat comparable concepts are relevant and will be briefly presented here.

Among others, eco *Swaraj* in India promotes self-reliance and self-governance, the *Ubuntu* philosophy in Austral Africa emphasises human mutuality: “I am because you are” (Kothari et al., 2014), or more recent and local philosophies such as “Buena Onda” in Chile or “Pura Vida” in Costa Rica show an alternative vision of life. In Europe, other terms emerged as alternatives and critiques to the mainstream development or growth paradigm. “Lagom” in Sweden and “Sobriété” in France share criticisms of capitalism just as the *Buen Vivir* philosophy, but they find roots in the rejection of modernism rather than tradition. Overall, the cosmology of pluriversal philosophies is different. Some are revivals of ancient worldviews, whilst some emerged from local social and or ecological struggles. Even though the prognosis (what and how shall be done) of different philosophies varies, the diagnosis (what is the problem and who is responsible for it) is shared, as well as some worldviews and core values (Kothari et al., 2014). The rejection of the hegemonic development as a starting point opens the room for much more local, gentle, and humanist ways to organise societies.

These alternatives striving for alternative organisations freed from imperialism seem to arise from ruptural communities, able to draw consistent and radically different paradigms to the dominant ones (Acosta, 2020; Kothari et al., 2014). Once unfolding in a pocket of resistance, alternative movements can eventually use symbiotic and interstitial strategies to gain room. As the results showed, alternative movements benefit from not being clustered in only theories or practices. But to not reproduce a hegemonic scheme, “these alternative approaches cannot be reduced to any single one and therefore do not aspire to be adopted as a common goal by the United Nations, the OECD or the African Union” (Kothari et al., 2014, p. 366).

Therefore, extending the answers already drawn to the RQ 1.2, *Buen Vivir* and *degrowth* can be put together in a pluriversal world if and only if they can coexist with other worlds. This thesis showed that decolonial efforts are necessary in order for *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* to thrive in their regional context, we can extend the need for this gentle approach towards other philosophies. Yet, some challenges might arise from the coexistence with philosophies that are less known and potentially unsustainable. Considering that one philosophy should not encroach on others, what attitude can be expected towards ways of living that serve a perilous agenda? The democratic answer expressed by Olk during the interview might be to let regions decide on their own destiny as long as it does not infringe on others' destinies. But here, a tension ratio can appear as ecological adverse effects such as climate change are global, meaning that the consequences are shared globally regardless of the region and the emitter of the population. As expressed in 4.2.3.4, the humanist visions of interviewees Fitzpatrick, Nesterova, and Olk show optimism in the ability of humans to make the right decisions. Therefore, efforts are required in order to avoid invasive multilateralism from one philosophy to another, but optimism is permitted. To use Escobar's (2015) terms, philosophies for a pluriverse are relational and nondualistic.

The idea of degrowth is that it's more like puzzle pieces that fit into each other and degrowth relates to the north or high-income countries. And then concepts, like *Buen Vivir* or other political philosophies sort of are the complement on the other side of the puzzle in the South. (C. Olk, personal communication, November 17, 2023)

5.4. Envisioning alternative desirable and sustainable societies

Finally, as the interviews suggest, there is a loophole in envisioning *degrowth* and, more broadly, sustainable futures. In the interviews, the answers on the possible shape of *degrowth* and sustainable futures are scarce and sometimes even uncomfortable for the interviewee. It appeared difficult to picture a world freed from the growth and capitalist development paradigm, except for people who have actively engaged with pockets of resistance and who show a more precise imagination for sustainable futures. Since imagination is porous and built on past experiences (Dijkstra & Fleming, 2021), experiencing and living in sustainable organisations seems important to better imagine and prefigure the desired futures. Despite poor empirical evidence, prefigurative politics is a relevant example of a participatory, values-driven strategy to create new societies "in the shell of the old" (Leach, 2013). Furthering the concerns expressed in 4.1.2.3 on the prevalence of theoretical research over practical experiences of *degrowth*, Escobar (2015) noted that *degrowth* is a movement suffering from limited non-academic experiences, whilst post-development philosophies such as *Buen Vivir* mainly exist outside of the academic field. Therefore, *degrowth* can learn from *Buen Vivir* and other mature philosophies to create spaces where the philosophy unfolds. As expressed in 4.1.2.1, being *of degrowth* is more meaningful than being *in degrowth*, underlining the importance of carrying out *degrowth* values instead of focusing on economic *degrowth*.

Lockton and Candy (2019) claimed that some prophecies are self-fulfilling, emphasising the need to make these prophecies desirable. In other words, shifting towards sustainable futures requires to imagine and believe in sustainable futures. "When virtual or imagined signals are strong enough, they become indistinguishable from reality" (Dijkstra & Fleming, 2021, p. 1), thus, the lack of creativity and subjectivity in current knowledge frameworks appears to be a

hurdle to initiating sustainable futures. Indeed, imagination is part of someone's knowledge. Imagination has a key role to play in unfolding sustainable futures.

We must give way to transitions from existing alternative practices worldwide, guided by utopian horizons advocating a life in harmony among human beings and between us and the rest of nature. (Kothari et al., 2014, p. 372)

Developing on that and reinforcing the call for creativity, envisioning, and embodiment, I argue that transcending echo-chambers and reaching new publics through various forms of knowledge is an important step towards sustainable futures. This argument has been strengthened by Brossmann and Islar (2020), who called for living and experiencing different forms of *degrowth*. To do so, researchers have an active role to play as observers of theories and practices. Linking up with second-order science, researchers acknowledging their positionality have an active role to play in sustainability transformations.

5.5. Outlook for the future(s)

This thesis has provided results answering the research questions and opened on many other topics initially out of the scope. By spotting and emphasising the common points between *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir*, synergies have been found to coexist in a pluriversal world. Despite differences, these two philosophies share the rejection of capitalist development and the aim to help all forms of life to thrive on Earth. These commonalities are important and at the core of positive and desirable narratives for sustainable futures. Furthermore, both philosophies can be liberating for their population, opening bright perspectives for the future.

5.5.1. Emancipating on the horizon

During the interviews, Olk raised the concern that *degrowth* might lack a clear subject position. Whilst taking the view that “for socialism or communism, the worker is a subject position; or for nationalism, the national citizen is a subject position; or for feminism, women, or maybe other genders for queer feminism, are a subject position” (C. Olk, personal communication, November 17, 2023). In other words, “what is the subject of degrowth?” asked Olk, what is this philosophy fighting for? Whereas *Buen Vivir* claims emancipation from the imperialist way of living, *degrowth* seems to remain a movement that has hardly been fully identified in public debate. A first possible answer encountered in between the lines of the theoretical analysis is as simple as life. Because “it's all about trying not to destroy the preconditions for our lives” (personal communication, November 15, 2023), sustainability struggles seem to be fighting for life on Earth to thrive. But life is plastic. Life is a fragile and beautiful equilibrium, enabling people to be part of a large reality. Yet, life is not a subject of a struggle. Albeit laudable, using life as a slogan might dilute the ideas in a variety of possibilities and, therefore, lack effectiveness for active transformations to happen. For that matter, the hypothesis of life as a subject was rejected by Olk during the interview.

To this same dilemma, Latouche (personal communication, November 24, 2023) believes in humans longing for the *emancipation* promoted by the Enlightenment and later developed in Castoriadis' work on autonomy (Caumières, 2011). As Kothari et al. (2014) noted similarly, “long search for and practice of alternative ways of living forged in the furnace of humanity's struggle for emancipation and enlightenment” (p. 366). Nevertheless, the emancipation called

for by the Enlightenment was mostly achieved through knowledge, reason and science. This approach has shown deflection, focusing on brain activity and neglecting emotions and other possible perceptions (Roeser, 2012). Furthermore, reason and science have played a crucial role in the separation of nature-culture, pushing more-than-humans into the background of the consideration. On the contrary, *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* seek emancipation and autonomy (Latouche, 2014) of communities made of humans and more-than-humans. In Latin America, *Buen Vivir* already shows ways to emancipate, by recognising local identities differing from the dominating ones.

As a humble attempt, this thesis tries to spotlight the limitations of current realities and possible alternatives. By doing so, it is attempted to make readers (and myself) more aware of ourselves and our surroundings in order to emancipate from societal determinism. Human-built paradigms led by capitalism, progress, development, and growth are human-constructed and up to modification. Phasing out thermo-industrialized civilizations is possible, requiring emancipation from unsustainable structures.

5.5.2. Further actions and research

The previous section opened up on the possible emancipation enabled by *degrowth*, *Buen Vivir* and other post-development struggles. Because they are at the core of the philosophical roots of *degrowth* (see 4.1.2.1), emancipation and autonomy are avenues to explore for further research. By doing so, *degrowth* could benefit from an extended echo in the public arena, giving it a clear subject position. Furthermore, emancipation could create a bridge between the emancipation of individuals in degrowing European regions and the emancipation of colonised regions such as Latin America. In the region of Chiapas, Mexico, the Zapatista movement emerged in 1994 as social struggle to defend the autonomy of indigenous people and take control over their destiny. Despite impediments in dealing with poverty, relation with the Mexican government and international recognition, the Zapatista endeavour to build an alternative society modelled to local people and land has proven feasibility and interest for dominated populations. Comparing such modern emancipatory post-development movements with the emancipation promoted by the Enlightenment or Castoriadis' work on autonomy could be innovative to create alternative destinies.

Overall, the present research elaborates more on *degrowth* than *Buen Vivir*. To create a peaceful coexistence within a pluriversal world, further research is needed on how to study and co-design *Buen Vivir* together with other post-development philosophies. The theoretical analysis demonstrated that the pluriverse appears to be a relevant way to articulate different realities, but further investigation is needed in the actual unfolding of the pluriverse. The initial research gap identified on bringing *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* in a discussion of coexistence has been partly filled with the present thesis. Yet, these two philosophies are interacting with a myriad of realities around the world. Studying these interactions would be relevant for future peaceful coexistence in a pluriversal world, freed from colonisation and imperialist ways of living. Furthermore, decolonialism requires different ways to study realities that are out of one's scope and, therefore, calls for research frameworks that do not serve the imperialist way of living as a prerequisite. Relating to Hanaček et al. (2020), investigating the deconstruction of ecological and economic concepts that reproduce Western paradigms would help give consistency to pluriversal approaches.

Finally, I deduced from the interviews the importance of envisioning *degrowth* and sustainable futures. Following D. Meadows' (1993) poetic approach, imagining sustainable societies would help to turn them into reality. Blueprinting desirable projects that do not necessarily need to be

exact could serve as a guiding lighthouse for sustainability (Holmberg & Larsson, 2018). Therefore, I argue that creativity and aesthetics have a primordial role to play when scheming desirable futures. Going beyond written knowledge, numerous forms of expression are to be considered in this endeavour. Post-development and post-capitalist futures can be scary. Imagining and co-designing them is fundamental to making them positive and desirable.

6. Conclusion

Because current societies are facing a context of polycrisis threatening life on Earth, radical changes are to be made from the current imperialist ways of living in order to achieve a sustainable and desired future for all. The present research aimed at investigating how *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* can be a meaningful coalition to draw on sustainable futures. I asked (1) what are the similarities and differences between *Buen Vivir* and *degrowth* as viable alternatives to capitalist development? (2) to what extent can *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* be put together? And (3) what desirable futures can *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir* help draw? The background of this thesis stressed the need to go beyond capitalism, development and economic growth in order to enable sustainable futures and Grounded Theory has been used to conduct the research for its ability to critique and transform dominant social structures.

Despite evident differences, such as the temporality, spatiality, or origins of the philosophies, the results of the theoretical analysis stressed the numerous commonalities between *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir*. Both philosophies reject hegemonic development as an ideal way to organise societies. On the contrary, they strive for local, emancipated communities satisfying the needs of local populations with wellbeing at the core. Social interactions and care shall take more importance and prevail over the market-based organisation of the economy. Entrenched in nature, human-built organisations democratically operate together with more-than-humans in a gentle way.

Enabling a better understanding of *degrowth* and the interweaving with other post-development philosophies like *Buen Vivir*, the expert interviews showed that the focus should be put on the similarities between *degrowth* and *Buen Vivir*. Despite different maturities, these two philosophies can learn from each other in order to pave sustainable futures, recognising the world's pluriversality. The interviews stressed the need for oneness and unity to build meaningful and good societies respecting the ecological boundaries of our planet. Imagination, creativity and aesthetics are primordial to foster the required cultural revolutions in a pluriversal world. On the contrary to cultural homogenisation endorsed by capitalism, the pluriverse promotes a world recognising and acknowledging differences between realities—a world where living beings, human or not, can flourish freely. A world where values and life aims are not driven by destructive paradigms but by self-introspection and awareness. Oneness over uniformization. Gentleness over competition. Care over individualism. Convivial societies where decisions are democratic, in harmony with local specifications, including humans and more-than-humans. Other worlds are possible, they partly already exist and await to be seriously considered and actively implemented. All around the globe, extraordinary initiatives exist as recipes to give hope for building sustainable futures.

According to this thesis, to meaningfully pave the way to sustainability, active decolonisation from the imperialist way of living, as well as resistance from oppressed communities, are needed. These endeavours have the potential to free populations from determinism and emancipate individuals. Because we have been enslaved to constraints that we thought were means for freedom, according to Latouche, it should be time to seize our individual and collective destinies to radically shift away from looming catastrophes. As this thesis stressed, post-development societies would surely be imperfect and likely to be tough to fix the damages made to life on Earth, at least for some parts of society, but it is surely desirable for most people and the long term. The social needs and ecological limits are well recognised, it is now time to envision what humanity is capable of creating within these requirements. Let's be poetic and "reenchant the world".

The only way forward in the future is for us to be holding hands and understanding differences. (I. Nesterova, personal communication, November 15, 2023)

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Appendix

The interviews were semi-structured; therefore, the following guidelines were used but not strictly followed.

6.1. Kaya's identity

The second approach to demonstrate the inevitable degrowth of GDP comes from the highly discussed Kaya identity.

$$CO_2 = \frac{CO_2}{Energy} * \frac{Energy}{GDP} * \frac{GDP}{Population} * Population \quad (1)$$

Where:

- CO_2 are the global CO_2 emissions per year
- Energy is the global energy use
- GDP is the Gross Domestic Product
- Population is the world's population

For the sake of simplicity, a simplistic version of the identity (1) is used as follows. This equation keeps the terms useful for the present analysis:

$$CO_2 = \frac{CO_2}{GDP} * \frac{GDP}{Population} * Population \quad (2)$$

$$\Leftrightarrow CO_2 = CO_2 \text{ intensity of the economy} * GDP \text{ per capita} * Population \quad (3)$$

Table 4 displays the numbers of the terms of the identity. The orange Here are more details:

- Emissions: To limit global warming to 2°C (confidence >67%), global CO_2 emissions have to drop by 73% between 2019 and 2050, meaning a multiplication of 0.27 (IPCC, 2023). This number serves as the basis for the calculation. If the left side of identity (2) is multiplied by 0.27, the right side has to follow to keep the identity equal.
- The CO_2 intensity of the economy has reduced by 1.43%/year over the last 30 years and 2.05%/year over the last 10 years. This evolution is due to the improvements in the efficiency of technologies and the energy transition towards low-carbon energies. The previous chapter underpinned the non-substitutability of energy sources, and the technologies are getting more efficient at a constant rate of about 1%-2% over the last decades, without significant break or improvement (IEA, 2022). It can be assumed that the CO_2 intensity of the economy will improve in the future. However, given the inertia of technology penetration in the economy, a radical diminution of this factor in the next three decades is very unlikely. Therefore, this term is assumed to remain pretty consistent, and expanding the trend of the last 10 years (2.05%/year) will make the CO_2 intensity of the economy multiplied by 0.537 by 2050. USD stands for United-States Dollars.
- The GDP per capita is the unknown. The term has to vary to keep the identity balanced. 2019 value comes from the World Bank's data (World Bank, 2023).
- Population: 7.7 billion in 2019 (8 billion in November 2022), will likely multiply by 1.26 to reach 9.7 billion by 2050 (United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs, 2019).

Term	Explanation	2019 level	2050 level	Change factor between 2019 and 2050	Yearly variation over the last 10 years	Yearly variation over the last 30 years
CO_2	World emissions	36.1 GtCO ₂		*0.27		
$\frac{CO_2}{GDP}$	CO_2 intensity of the economy	0.26 tCO ₂ per USD 1000		*0.537	-2.05%	-1.43%
$\frac{GDP}{Population}$	GDP per capita	11,330 USD/capita (current USD)		? *0,399	+1.72%	+3.27%
$Population$	World population	7.8 billion	9.7 billion	*1.26	+1.05%	+1.27%

Table 4: Kaya identity data on the trend for 2050.

Assuming the change factors between 2019 and 2050, to keep Identity 2 balanced, GDP per capita would need to multiply by 0.399, or a diminution of 60% over the next three decades. Cutting the world economy by 60% per capita is not a homogenous evolution; the global South will have to grow the GDP per capita to meet the population's needs, while the global North will have to cut down its GDP even more.

6.2. Beyond GDP

As tackled by *degrowth* and the rejection of the all-encompassing economy of *Buen Vivir*, GDP is an indicator of limited interest. Let us take an example to demonstrate that. Imagine that you decide to track the number of yoghurts in your fridge. You like to have it twice a day, in the morning and the evening. But on Saturday you do not have time to buy it because you work all day, then it is Sunday when shops are closed and then comes Monday when you can only shop in the evening. So the ideal number is 6 yoghurts in your fridge to sustain Friday evening to Monday evening. Now, let us imagine that you open your fridge at a random moment in the week, regardless of what day it is. You might have more or less 6 yoghurts during the weekdays, and everything is fine. Now, you look at it on Monday, and surprisingly, you have 0 yoghurts left. Suppose now that a statistician helps you to interpret these numbers. She does not know that you are working Saturdays and that no shop is open near your place on Sundays. This person might say that the situation when there are 0 yoghurts is pretty alarming. She might panic and adopt correcting measures, like ordering yoghurts online, to rectify the situation. While she is panicking, you are calm because you know that it is Monday and you are going to go to the store by the end of the day, you do that every week. Tracking the number of yoghurts in your fridge needs context. Now assume that you told the statistician the situation. She continues to monitor the number of yoghurts, but she is aware of the weekly variations. But one Tuesday, she calls you because there are still 0 yoghurts in your fridge. It is not a holiday, you are at your place, so there is no reason for this anomaly. When she calls you, you tell her you are very sick, cannot get out of bed, and do not even feel like eating yoghurt. Once more, without context (and now the changing factor was on you, not on external factors like Sunday's closed shops), the indicator showed a scattered reality. Hence, monitoring an indicator without knowing the context seems irrelevant.

Now, see your number of yoghurts as GDP in society, and the statistician who helped you could be an economist. Monday is actually January when economic activities calm down after Christmas, and your Tuesday sickness is a social protest against something that happened in the public arena. The economist cannot take radical artificial actions to boost GDP, like liberalising the market, just because the GDP sometimes slows down. Yet, this is what is done. Governments and companies seek GDP growth every quarter regardless of the context. And yet, even if GDP is doing well, it is a limited vision of the wealth of an organisation. You might have 8 yoghurts in the fridge, but they are the ones with apricot pieces, and you do not like them. The GDP is the same; it is a quantitative indicator, not a translation of quality of any sort. For instance, having a car accident leads to economic activity for the insurance company, the garage, and temporary car rentals, therefore boosting GDP. Same goes with expenditures for prisons, natural disasters, epidemics, and oil spills inflating GDP. GDP thrives, but does that make society better off? Do you prefer 4 of your favourite yoghurts in the fridge or 8 with apricot pieces? There are tremendous critics to make on the use of GDP, but this thesis showed that understanding an economy, the satisfaction of the needs, requires context (i.e., locality, temporality, information on members of the community) and quality over quantity (i.e., reduction of throughput in rich nations, wellbeing over wellhaving). “A rich person is one who knows they have enough” (Latouche, 2014).

Thus, the sin is not on indicators' intrinsic utility but on their usage and interpretation. By being aware of these limitations, indicators must be used adequately to avoid oversimplification or sophism. An interesting example comes from New Zealand, where the government uses a set of more than 100 indicators to monitor wellbeing. The Living Standards Framework Dashboard (LSF) is a flexible framework that was first designed in 2018 and has been revised ever since. Figure 5: New Zealand Living Standard Framework presents the categories of indicators used in the LSF, where Individual and Collective Wellbeing is part of the three main categories, as well as the Institutions and Governance of the state and the Wealth of the Aotearoa New Zealand. The latest captures how wealthy New-Zealand is in aggregate as a country; Institutions and Governance captures the role New-Zealander institutions play in safeguarding and building wealth; and the Individual and Collective Wellbeing captures the resources and aspects of Neo-Zealanders lives that have been identified by research or public engagement as important for wellbeing as individuals, families, whānau and communities.

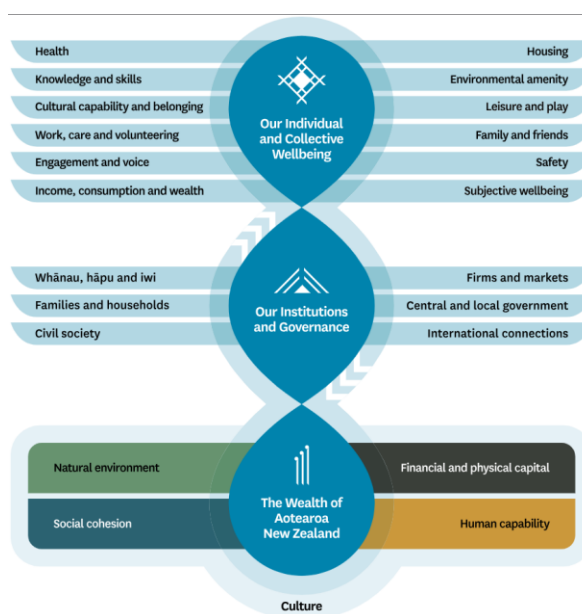


Figure 5: New Zealand Living Standard Framework

6.3. Interview guidelines

Preamble

Presenting myself

Presenting the context (master thesis) and the content of my thesis (without giving the aim of my research not to bias the discussion).

I am interested in his/her opinion. There is no right or wrong. I am happy about long answers, please be as detailed as you want.

Asking if it is possible to record the discussion – Anonymisation? –results can be shared with the interviewee.

For French interviews, explain the translation process (DeepL + personal corrections).

Reminding that they can skip questions or leave the discussion if feeling uncomfortable.

Related questions

First, I would ask you to/ Can you/ present yourself and the topics you are concerned with? (After introducing the question) Through what lenses do you look at reality? Can you explain them?

Could you describe your understanding of degrowth?

For you, what is degrowth beyond the economic perspective of degrowing GDP/ PIB?

In your perspective, what are the core values of degrowth?

if not addressed in the previous answer

Do you think degrowth can happen in the current economic and political system? If so, how? If not, what constrained it?

How can this perspective vary in different parts of the globe?

What do you think, in what way would it affect different parts of society?

if the answer shows no clear differentiation between North/South countries

Considering pluriversal (alternative) approaches, do you see other possible approaches to the socio-ecological crisis?

Is there a tension ratio between degrowth and xxx?

What could a degrowing society look like for you?

How can degrowth meaningfully include and be co-created by the whole society?

As I'm as well concerned with other paradigms such as Buen Vivir (quick definition of Buen Vivir), do you think that degrowth should coexist with other paradigms? Why and how?

Would you like to add something that we didn't talk about yet or just briefly?

Do you have any question for me, regarding my work or not?

Additional questions if time is remaining

How can degrowth help restrengthening the relationship between North and South?

Why do you think is degrowth taking more room in discussions now?

Why is it important now?

In your understanding, on what conceptual level operates degrowth?