

Degrowth Is About Global Justice

Article by Jason Hickel

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Campaigners for degrowth have thrown into question the dogma that holds that a growing economy is always a sign of progress. In *Less is More*, anthropologist Jason Hickel argues that only degrowth can steer the world away from its worsening ecological crisis. We sat down with him to discuss his new book and ask what degrowth would mean for relations between the Global North and South.

Green European Journal: One of the most compelling critiques of degrowth is that it is an idea for comfy Westerners with little relevance for the Global South. *Less is More* takes a different view, arguing that degrowth is about global justice and decolonisation. Could you explain?

Jason Hickel: Who's driving the ecological crisis? It is overwhelmingly the rich countries of the Global North: the United States, Canada, Europe, Israel, Australia, New Zealand and Japan. These countries are collectively responsible for 92 per cent of excess emissions. They have colonised the atmospheric commons for their own enrichment. Meanwhile the entirety of the Global South – all of Asia, Africa, Latin America – is responsible for only 8 per cent, and that's from just a small number of countries. Most countries in the Global South are still well within their fair share of the safe carbon budget and have therefore contributed nothing to the climate crisis.

The same can be said for resource consumption. Rich countries consume on average 28 tonnes of material stuff per person per year – which is about four times over the safe per capita boundary for the planet. Most Global South countries are well under that boundary. In fact, many low-income countries need to increase resource use to meet human needs. The ecological crisis is being driven overwhelmingly by rich countries using too many resources and too much energy.

We also have to keep in mind that resource use in the Global North is in large part net appropriated from the Global South, through what are effectively patterns of imperial power. Nearly half of all resources consumed in the Global North every year are net appropriated from the South. Resources that could be used to meet human needs – to build hospitals and produce food – are used instead to service growthism in the Global North.

Degrowth is therefore a demand targeted at the Global North. It is a demand for global justice, and it has been articulated from the South now for several decades. Social movements in the South recognise that growth in the North is colonising their ecosystems and appropriating their resources, driving catastrophe on a global scale. Degrowth is a call to liberate the South from imperial appropriation and decolonise the atmosphere. This language is clear in the 2010 People's Agreement of Cochabamba, a text that should be mandatory reading for climate activists in the North [In 2010, Global South movements gathered in Bolivia after the failed COP15 climate talks in Copenhagen]. Degrowth

principles are represented in this text as part of a broader set of anti-colonial demands.

Degrowth has roots in the anti-colonial movements, going back to key leaders and thinkers such as Gandhi, Franz Fanon, and Thomas Sankara. They recognised that the growth of the North depended on the plunder of Southern resources and labour, as it still does today. From as early as the 1930s, their position has always been to refuse to be exploited by the North. Degrowth is about demolishing the imperial arrangement.

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You mention Gandhi, Fanon, and Sankara. These very different figures of the anti-colonial struggle all saw decolonisation as an opportunity to live and develop differently. But it didn't really pan out. Today, the path towards development around the world is often just as resource intensive as in the Global North. What happened?

The anti-colonial movement was explicitly organised around achieving economic sovereignty, the idea that domestic resources and labour should be mobilised to meet domestic needs. You see it in the work of Sankara, Fanon, and Gandhi. And the newly independent nations did achieve that to varying degrees. But, in doing so, they caused a crisis of capital accumulation in the Global North.

You see, capitalist growth in the Global North depends on income suppression in the Global South. This keeps the supply price low and enables capital accumulation. As countries in the Global South increased wages, took control of resources, and increased their prices, they deprived the Global North of the access to cheap resources and labour that they had enjoyed under colonialism. This shift led to the 1970s' crisis of stagflation (low growth and high inflation) in the Global North.

Confronted with this situation, the Global North had two options: either abandon capital accumulation, or try by all means to maintain it. It chose the second route. They attacked the unions and cut the wages of the working class at home, while imposing structural adjustment programmes across the Global South. In the newly formed republics in the Global South, this backlash reversed progressive reforms, dismantled economic sovereignty, and restored Northern access to cheap Southern resources and labour.

Note also that the re-imposition of the imperial arrangement was also often violently organised through coups against key progressive leaders like Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, Salvador Allende in Chile, Sukarno in Indonesia, and Mohammed Mosaddeq in Iran. These figures and many others were deposed and replaced with neoliberal regimes that were more amenable to Western economic interests. The anti-colonial movement was more or less destroyed, except in a few places in Latin America. That's the reality of the world we live in today.

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Readings of the West's economic crisis of the 1970s usually overlook the role of the anti-colonial struggle. Even the oil crisis of 1973 is not often discussed in terms of decolonisation.

The oil embargo of 1973 was an anti-colonial act. Global South countries banded together to make sure their resources could no longer be appropriated so cheaply. It wasn't just oil – they did this for several other key raw materials and commodities. In the West, this made capital accumulation impossible and spelt the collapse of corporations and profits. Capital's response to this was to impose neoliberalism at home and structural adjustment abroad.

Mainstream progressive economists like Paul Krugman have a difficult time explaining neoliberalism. They see it as a sort of “mistake”, and they fantasise about returning to the less violent version of capitalism that prevailed in the post-war era. But neoliberalism was not some kind of mistake. It was necessary, in the face of the anti-colonial movement, to force prices back down and maintain the conditions for capital accumulation. The problem is not neoliberalism as such; it is just a symptom. The problem is capitalism.

One conclusion of your argument is that progressive moments in the Global North should prioritise aligning with movements in the Global South. What are some of the most important potential allies in the Global South?

The sad thing is that the progressive governments of the 1960s and the 1970s have mostly been dismantled so we cannot really look to governments anymore – although again there are a few exceptions. Instead, we need to look to the social movements. And there are thousands of them. We need to build alliances with the movements and organisations that backed the Cochabamba agreement, and which advance its spirit today, such as the Vía Campesina food sovereignty movement and indigenous movements such as the people behind the [Red Deal](#). A similar analysis can be found in other Global South documents such as the [Managua Declaration](#) and the [Anchorage Declaration](#). Virtually every major declaration that has come from Global South movements has the same message: the world economy is imperialist in nature and the ecological crisis is its consequence. Green politics in the Global North need to grapple with this analysis and align with the demands of Southern movements.

You talk about Global Green New Deal. How is it different from the usual Green New Deal framework?

There are several key differences. The first is that global climate justice requires richer nations to de-carbonise much more quickly than poorer ones. We know that we need to cut emissions to zero by 2050 in order to stay under 1.5 degrees. But this is a global average target. Rich countries need to de-carbonise much more quickly than this, given their disproportionate contributions to the problem. So, a Global Green New Deal would centre this basic principle of climate justice.

The second difference is that a Global Green New Deal recognises that the ecological crisis is about more than just climate. Resource use – both where it is sourced and how much is consumed – is also a problem. A Global Green New Deal must address excess resource consumption in the North. We can reduce resource use in rich nations quite dramatically while still meeting human needs at a high standard by scaling down forms of economic activity that are socially less crucial. SUVs, fast fashion, private jets, advertising, planned obsolescence, the military industrial complex... there are huge chunks of production that are organised primarily around corporate power and elite consumption and are actually irrelevant to human needs.

The third thing to understand is that renewable energy doesn't come out of thin air. Solar panels, wind turbines, and lithium batteries all have a material basis, most of which are extracted from the Global South in ways that are both ecologically and socially harmful. So, we need to pursue the energy transition, yes. But if we continue to pursue growth at the same time we have a problem, because more growth means more energy demand, and that means more pressure on Global South resources, which will increasingly harm communities that are already being affected by extractivism. By contrast, if rich nations abandon growth as an objective and reduce energy demand, the transition will be less destructive. If we want the energy transition to be ecologically coherent and socially just, we need degrowth.

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In Europe, the EU institutions are taking climate and ecological issues much more seriously and are putting in place some promising policies. At the same time, we're not talking about moving towards a degrowth economy or anything like that. How do you read the mainstreaming of green issues?

It is increasingly clear that we will probably not be able to keep global heating to less than 1.5 degrees without degrowth in the Global North. And yet right now this is not part of the policy discussion, and it seems unlikely that existing institutions will voluntarily take the steps that are required. For that, we are going to need major political mobilisation.

That being said, there are clearly some circles within these institutions that are interested in radical ideas and do their best to get them into policy. The European Parliament passed a motion this year calling for the use of critical resources to be brought down to sustainable levels. It is a very radical demand. Whether or not that gets put into policy by the European Commission remains to be seen. But this indicates that there are possibilities within these institutions. We need a dual front approach: work with those forces within the institutions as much as possible, but, at the same time, organise strong mobilisations to push the agenda from the outside and take power where necessary and where possible.

What should transnational solidarity look like in practice for parties and movements?

A key step is to recognise that in order to maintain the conditions for capital accumulation and growth in the Global North, any concessions made to working class demands in the Global North are offset by compressing income and consumption in the Global South as much as possible. Solidarity with the Global South means recognising this fact and pushing for a post-growth, post-capitalist economy here in the Global North, to remove this brutal pressure. There's no way around it and yet unfortunately it is not part of our discourse right now.

Our current discourse sees the ecological crisis as a problem of technology. This is a very shallow analysis of the problem. By contrast, Global South social movements are clear that the crisis is being driven by capitalism and imperialism. The first step is to read their documents, listen to their demands, then back their demands in our public discourse. The second step is to draw attention to their movements and align with their demands in international negotiations, like COP. Solidarity is about platforming their ideas and aligning with their demands. That's it!

Many green and left-wing parties might share your analysis but avoid explicit anti-capitalist or anti-imperialist rhetoric. For one thing, they are worried about being too radical but also they are not convinced that these words speak to people. How would you deal with these considerations?

I understand where they come from and I share their concerns. But we don't have time to fudge. We need an accurate analysis. We know what that analysis is, and we should just start a conversation around it. What is a political party for if not to introduce new ideas and point us in a new direction?

We need more courage from parties on this front. But we also need social movements to be there at their flank, opening the Overton window and making it possible for these conversations to take place. I've had politicians say to me, "I believe in these demands, but I can't say them because there is no popular constituency for it. Build a popular constituency and I'll be there." Our social movements are not there yet, so we need to expand them. This is classic movement-building; politicians pushing things from one side and social movements making things thinkable on the streets. They enable each other. That's the double act we need.

When it comes to what politicians can and cannot say, I do not think they absolutely must use the word "degrowth". I think degrowth is a useful word because it is honest and not co-optable. But for those who choose not to use it for whatever reason, that's fine. What matters is that the principles are reflected in policies. Then you can call it whatever you want.

Degrowth is an academic term but the policies are very concrete: quality, well-insulated public housing for example. Maybe the programme would speak to people more than the idea?

Yes, absolutely. Most people in the Global North would benefit from a transition to an eco-

social economy. We call for reducing unnecessary production and shortening the working week. We call for a radically fairer distribution of income. We call for a climate job guarantee and a basic income. We call for universal public services, and the decommodification of housing. This is the story we need to tell to get ordinary people on board. Remember, there is real poverty in rich countries. Many people live in sub-standard housing and can barely afford rent. In the US people cannot afford healthcare and education. The programme that the degrowth movement calls for answers these concerns about insecurity under capitalism. We need to help people envision what the alternative looks like.

Green parties sometimes think that the battle is to get the working class on board. This illustrates a real problem: the working class is not on board because green policies don't speak to them! So change your policies, change your narrative. Talk about how we are going to decommodify the core social economy, make housing a public good, ensure universal access to livelihoods and necessary resources, take the question of employment off the table. Then we can talk about scaling down unnecessary production. The only people that are against these ideas are the capitalist class. The obstacle is not ordinary people. The obstacle is capital. That's the terrain we need to be fighting on.



Jason Hickel is an economic anthropologist whose work focuses on global inequality and political ecology. He was born and raised in Swaziland (now Eswatini) where his parents were doctors at the height of the AIDS crisis. He is known for his books *The Divide: A Brief Guide to Global Inequality and its Solutions* (2017) and *Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World* (2020). He is a Professor at the Institute for Environmental Science and Technology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, a Visiting Senior Fellow at the International Inequalities Institute at the London School of Economics, and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. As of 2020 he serves on the Harvard-*Lancet* Commission on Reparations and Redistributive Justice, on the Statistical Advisory Panel for the UN Human Development Report, and on the advisory board for the Green New Deal for Europe.

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