

## **The Degrowth Movement: Radical Utopia or Urgent Necessity?**

**by Max Farrington and Abby Klein — Updated Edition 2025–2026**

Welcome to a new edition of EconoMag. Today we revisit a movement that, since our first episodes, has gained significant visibility and legitimacy in the global economic debate: degrowth. A concept that was once marginalized but is now increasingly discussed in parliaments, universities, and international institutions.

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### What Is Degrowth?

Supporters of degrowth can be found among anti-productivist, anti-consumerist, and ecological movements. They challenge the idea of infinite economic development. According to them, production and consumption cannot continue to expand indefinitely — or even be sustainably maintained.

Traditional economic indicators such as GDP reflect, in their view, the destruction of “natural capital,” which is ultimately finite.

Degrowth advocates promote “voluntary simplicity” at the individual level, encouraging people to consume less and adopt simpler lifestyles. At the global level, they advocate the relocalization of economic activities in order to reduce ecological footprints and energy consumption.

The French economist Serge Latouche summarized the main principles of this movement through what he called the “8 Rs”:

- Re-evaluate
- Reconceptualize
- Restructure
- Redistribute
- Relocalize
- Reduce
- Reuse
- Recycle

The degrowth movement differs from sustainable development. While sustainable development emerged from ecological thinking, it still assumes that economic growth can continue, which inevitably leads to environmental, economic, and social impacts.

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### Historical Roots and a Renewed Sense of Urgency

The intellectual origins of degrowth date back to 1972, when Sicco Mansholt, Vice-President of the European Commission, published a letter arguing that *“the society of the future cannot be based on growth, at least not in material terms.”*

His argument relied on the early results of the MIT research team led by Dennis Meadows, whose report *The Limits to Growth* warned that the planet’s resources could not sustain unlimited economic expansion.

Fifty years later, this warning resonates more strongly than ever.

Degrowth advocates argue that our civilization has become addicted to economic growth. Unlimited growth in a finite world is neither possible nor desirable. They also warn that a growth-based society without growth leads to social tensions, exclusion, frustration, inequality, and political instability.

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## A Debate Entering Institutions

One of the most significant developments since our original episode is the growing institutional recognition of the debate.

In 2023, the European Parliament hosted a major conference titled “Beyond Growth,” bringing together economists, researchers, and policymakers to explore post-growth economic models.

In France, the Economic, Social and Environmental Council (CESE) published a major study in November 2024 entitled *“Ecological Transition: Growth vs. Degrowth.”*

According to the CESE, the debate should not be reduced to a simplistic opposition. The issue is neither binary nor ideological. Instead, societies must move beyond the contradictions of an economic model based on finite resources but infinite expectations.

The CESE calls for:

- the creation of new narratives of a desirable society,
- the development of long-term visions beyond short-term political cycles,
- and stronger international cooperation.

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## Renewable Energy: Solution or New Paradox?

Energy remains at the heart of the debate.

Global investments in renewable energy have surged in recent years, exceeding 600 billion dollars annually in 2024 — more than double the 280 billion euros mentioned in our original episode.

However, the paradox highlighted by philosopher Fabrice Flipo remains relevant: building and operating wind turbines or photovoltaic panels requires large quantities of raw materials such as lithium, cobalt, and rare earth elements, whose extraction has significant environmental impacts.

The continued increase in resource consumption and environmental degradation suggests, for some critics, that technological solutions alone may represent a dangerous form of “technosolutionism.”

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## The Global Food Industry Under Pressure

The global food system also illustrates these contradictions.

Today, global food production is more than sufficient to feed the entire planet. Yet hunger and food waste coexist on a massive scale.

Multinational companies such as Nestlé, Unilever, and Danone continue to dominate the global food system. Nestlé alone employs more than 270,000 people in 186 countries and generates annual revenues of around 90 billion Swiss francs.

Industrial meat production, which requires enormous amounts of water and generates large greenhouse gas emissions, is increasingly criticized — and increasingly studied in economics and environmental policy programs.

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## Criticism: Political and Practical Limits

Degrowth has also attracted serious criticism, which has intensified in recent years.

According to economist Alessio Terzi, the political obstacles facing the movement are nearly insurmountable. Degrowth often assumes that “the system” — capitalism itself — is responsible for the climate crisis, implying that it must be fundamentally transformed or abolished.

In that framework, incremental reforms — such as reducing working hours or banning certain polluting activities — are not seen as progress but rather as attempts to preserve the existing system.

In other words, reform is viewed as anti-revolutionary.

Another common criticism is that wealthy populations in developed countries may be advocating degrowth while effectively preventing developing nations from following the same path of economic development that Western countries once pursued.

For billions of people still living in poverty, the idea of abandoning economic growth can therefore appear unrealistic or even unjust.

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## An Essential Debate for the Coming Decade

Despite these criticisms, the degrowth movement has succeeded in broadening the economic debate far beyond its original activist circles.

Many economists and policymakers now agree that new narratives of a desirable society must be developed — narratives based on long-term thinking, global cooperation, and respect for planetary boundaries.

What is still missing are robust economic models that fully integrate environmental limits and that governments could use to redesign their economic strategies.

The question is no longer whether infinite economic growth is sustainable — the overwhelming scientific consensus says it is not.

The real question is what should replace it, and how.

And that is precisely the debate that the degrowth movement — with all its contradictions — continues to fuel.

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Join us for the next episode of EconoMag.

Vocabulary :

**Degrowth** – Décroissance

**Economic growth** – Croissance économique

**Anti-consumerism** – Anti-consumérisme

**Anti-productivism** – Anti-productivisme

**Ecological movements** – Mouvements écologiques

**Natural capital** – Capital naturel

**Sustainability** – Durabilité

**Voluntary simplicity** – Simplicité volontaire

**Relocalization** – Relocalisation

**Energy consumption** – Consommation énergétique

**Re-evaluate** – Réévaluer

**Restructure** – Restructurer

**Redistribute** – Redistribuer

**Reduce** – Réduire

**Reuse** – Réutiliser

**Recycle** – Recycler

**Limits to growth** – Limites à la croissance

**Resource scarcity** – Rareté des ressources

**Environmental impact** – Impact environnemental

**Renewable energy** – Énergies renouvelables

**Technosolutionism** – Technosolutionnisme

**Food system** – Système alimentaire

**Food waste** – Gaspillage alimentaire

**Industrial meat production** – Production industrielle de viande

**Greenhouse gas emissions** – Émissions de gaz à effet de serre

**Climate crisis** – Crise climatique

**Political obstacles** – Obstacles politiques

**Developed countries** – Pays développés

**Developing countries** – Pays en développement

**Planetary boundaries** – Limites planétaires