

9. Sustainable Consumption in the De-growth Transition The Case of Local Foods

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De-growth is strongly different from the usual mainstream economic theorizing. According to the thinkers of this line of economic thought growth is not necessarily desirable. Moreover, in many cases it is specifically harmful and the cause of our ecological and social problems. Hence, the proposal is to restructure the current growth-oriented economic system democratically and peacefully, and to think of new means and ends in order to move towards real sustainability from the aspect of society and environment too.

The theory of de-growth suggests to localize production and consumption as much as possible, so in this way these can be one of the keys to start the transition. My research questions are that what are the characteristics of sustainable de-growth consumption, and how can the different kind of local food movements serve the goals of de-growth from the aspect of consumers.

Keywords: de-growth, sustainability, re-localization, local food system

1. Introduction

The theory of de-growth is an alternative sustainability approach focusing on that constant economic growth is not solvable in this current capitalist system, moreover it is not desirable. Hence it focuses on how to manage a transformation towards real sustainability. In this paper I introduce briefly the theory of de-growth, then as a part of it I explain the importance of re-localization, a principle which is essential for organizing and achieving sustainability in consumption and production. After, I describe what sustainable consumption is in this framework – which cannot be interpreted without sustainable production –, how individuals and communities should act in order to achieve the de-growth goals. Finally as local food systems are relevant means of de-growth I make an attempt to create a possible evaluation framework for them from the aspect of consumers, then I shortly introduce two case studies.

2. About de-growth

The idea of de-growth appeared as an alternative reflective direction to find solutions for the problems and challenges caused by continuous economic growth like widening territorial and

income differences, well-being problems, global environmental problems (eg. damaged ozone layer, climate change, and the overuse of other global common pool resources like rainforests and oceans) (Latouche 2011, Layard 2007, Málovics – Bajmócy 2009, Meadows et al. 1972, Stiglitz 1997). Thus the aim of de-growth is to help democratically and peacefully the transition into a more equitable society and livable environment without extending the size of economy (Latouche 2011, Martinez-Alier et al. 2010).

The essence of de-growth is not supporting de-growth in the current system – as growth-oriented economies based on the institutions of capitalism are not capable of not growing because without economic growth they collapse and new problems emerge beside the aforementioned ones – but restructuring completely into a system where increased well-being can be achieved without the constant growth of production and consumption while their negative environmental impacts significantly reduce (Gould et al. 2004, Kallis et al. 2012, Latouche 2011, Tokic 2012)¹. Thus de-growth is actually a kind of transformational sustainability theory which is very sensitive to social and environmental problems also (Hoopwood et al 2005).

The meaning of the expression of de-growth can be defined from three different aspects – slogan, social movement, scientific theory – but they cannot be sharply separated, since they constantly interact with each other. De-growth is a good example for “*activist-led science*” where the knowledge generated by the movements clarifies and strengthens in the academic literature (Demaria et al. p 204). The activist knowledge is generated by community groups through experience and covers different concepts like ecological debt and environmental justice. From time to time these concepts are taken and redefined by science. The opposite of this can also happen, that civil activism can start to use academic concepts. The steps for the implementation of de-growth can be grouped into four main categories, depending on which level of the society is affected: individual, community, national, supranational (Liegey et al. 2013). This is the point where scientific theories and movements continuously interact with each other, so there is no strict boundary between the two aspects.

¹ Although there is a debate whether de-growth can be achieved within the frame of capitalism or not (Boillat et al. 2012, Bonaiuti 2012, Deriu 2012, Griethuysen 2012, Lawn 2011, Trainer 2012).

3. Re-localization

The base of the theory of de-growth in the 21st century belongs to Serge Latouche who lists 8 principles for de-growth – as he calls “the angel circuit of the 8Rs”: re-evaluate, re-conceptualize, restructure, re-localize, reduce, recycle and reuse (Latouche 2011). Among these 8 principles the principle of re-localization is one of the most important and also it is strongly related to the topic of local foods so now I highlight only this one.

Re-localization means local decision-making, highlights the local needs, which are satisfied from local production and for which local money is paid. Local culture and local political life should be strengthened, and the participation in the decision-making should be enabled as much as possible. So this re-localization principle, the belief in the community is one of the most powerful, can affect significantly the further researches. The whole movement could facilitate the formation of a kind of identity for each area.

In this way according to Latouche (2011) the result would be *inter alia* the protection of environment, increasing well-being, less stress, more transparent production chains, decreasing dependence from multinational companies, increasing safety in all sense, strengthening democratic attitude. The realization could be started first in the field of food supply, and later it could be extended to a broader economic and financial self-sustainability too.

Developing stronger local and bioregional economies could also be the part of the solution for the global energy problems (Newman – Jennings 2008). If a city and its bioregion can produce more local goods and services then local needs can be met with much less travel. Living communities which offer varied local economic, social and cultural possibilities will enable the inhabitants to live with less need for energy transport.

From another point of view social relationships are also very important elements of de-growth strategies to increase well-being (Andreoni – Galmarini 2014). Thus de-growth suggests to strengthen reciprocity in the economy and partially complement market economy with it where the production and exchanges of goods and services aim to improve cooperation, conviviality and social relationships. Reciprocity can be explained as a combination of subsidiary production principle and the concept of conviviality. Subsidiary production aims to satisfy consumption needs nearest to the production place. So it is important to change from long distance trade to local distribution chains, decrease environmental impact generated by human activities, increase

human health, make the product origin and quality traceable and improve trust between producer and consumer. Conviviality is defined as a kind of system of social relationships based on community support, social unpaid work, voluntary work, mutual aid, favour and community exchange, household and informal care work which aims to improve cooperation and social relationships. So reciprocity work is defined “*as time devoted to society in the form of self-production, voluntary work or mutual exchange of goods and services*” (Andreoni – Galmarini 2014, p 79).

According to Andreoni and Galmarini’s (2014) model the combination of reciprocity and market work is able to increase the level of well-being and quality of life, have bigger effect on social capital generation and decrease the impact on natural capital depletion. The increase of social capital can be achieved by strengthening participation and democratic, collective control, and then a smaller size of economy can be controlled with it (Andreoni – Galmarini 2013). This re-democratization process will be able to improve communication between science, society and governance and increase cooperation.

4. Sustainable consumption

Sustainable consumption cannot be interpreted without sustainable production as consumers obviously buy what producers create, so an integrated approach is needed (Newman – Jennings 2008). Consumption and production processes should be brought together, they should be closer, as they are not separated in the ecosystem; and feedback loops should be restored between the city and its bioregion through regionalization and localization of economies. In order to move towards sustainability wealthy citizens of the world should reduce their resource consumption and the basic needs of the poor should be in focus. That is why we should reduce consumption and simultaneously change how we produce consumable products which is not only about technological changes according to strong sustainability theory (Málovics – Bajmócy 2009, Bajmócy – Málovics 2011). These processes would bring the power back to regional communities, so it would strengthen cooperation, equity, participation in the decision-making, responsibility for the health of ecosystems (Newman – Jennings 2008). With this end in view meeting genuine needs should be in focus, so social and ecological limits should be appreciated. Sufficiency is not synonymous with lack or with doing without but living life fully while taking

care of Earth and people who truly do not have enough. Hence it is very important to educate consumers, so they can be aware of their consumption's effects, so in this way their demand can be managed.

4.1. The means of de-growth

The changes following the principles of de-growth has already been started but sometimes independently from the de-growth model. Several attempts, means can be experienced which are certainly waiting to be improved, but a process has begun (Amate et al. 2013, Cattaneo et al. 2010). The steps for the implementation of the ideas of the movements can be grouped into four main categories, depending on which level of the society is affected: individual, community, national and supranational level. This is the point where scientific theories and movements continuously interact with each other, so there is no strict boundary between the two aspects. According to sustainable consumption mainly the individual and the community levels are important, so I introduce means on these levels but we should always keep in mind to deal with the production processes at the same time.

On the individual level the program can be described as a lifestyle, a form of life where the participant voluntarily takes on simplicity and a sustainable mode of life which does not mean asceticism, nor that from now he/she cannot have low-energy tools, cannot go for calm and relaxing holidays or cannot eat delicious foods (Kallis et al. 2012). The program does not mean the reinstatement of an earlier era of the history, but the realization of the principle "better from less" (Matthey 2010). As according to de-growth the residents of the global North (Europe, USA, Australia, etc.) over-consume in ecological sense (Princen 2005), those who live in the property-focused, western civilization need to take responsibility urgently for the environmental weight of their consumption and need to decrease in quantity and improve its quality. Reducing resource use does not mean reducing quality of life; moreover as a consequence it is about having more spare time, fun and joy.

Lorek and Fuchs (2013) call this as strong sustainability consumption approach which is opposed to eco-efficiency-focused weak sustainability consumption approach which is inadequate according to de-growth. We purchase goods and services not only for their functionality but also for their symbolic content; in fact, the motivation of the majority of our

consumption is the latter (Ropke 1999). Symbolic consumption helps in defining our social role, in self-determination, in forming self-image and it creates group-consciousness (Prónay – Málovics 2008). These three needs can be met in a sustainable way by consumer community consciousness and local community where the self-expression of the participants is based on the protection of the environment. At this point the expectations of consumers become relevant, where marketing has the most important role, as most of our needs are generated (Matthey 2010). It is important to strengthen our needs in a direction that less consumption could be enough and acceptable. Of course, this is not easy as beside the undeniable impact of advertisements other social-psychological, historical and social-technical factors influences the increase in our consumption – such as human envy, the hierarchical structure of the societies, customs, rituals, holidays, dreams, the strengthening individualization, certain tools (cars, mobile phones, television, etc.) have become almost compulsory for consumers, planned obsolescence of products and the consumption credit system (Ropke 1999). However, all of these do not change the fact: over-consumption in ecological sense threatens the ecosystem's carrying capacity, so it should be reduced.

On the community level mainly on local level members of smaller groups – like neighborhood communities or quarters, towns – should work on new cohabitation forms which can be production and consumption models for other communities or state organizations (Liegey et al. 2013). Thinkers of de-growth strongly believe in bottom-up initiatives. It is important to rethink the redistribution and the recycling of goods organized from the bottom (Schneider 2008) and to work on innovative models of local lifestyle which accept de-growth values, rejecting the current capitalist culture (Kallis et al. 2012). Developing a new monetary system could be critical to move the current economic system towards sustainability (Seyfang – Longhurst 2013). The launch of local, community (complementary) money could reduce the problems caused by the global financial crisis. In addition local currency hopefully helps to create new sense of local exchange system (Liegey et al. 2013) – others (Dittmer (2013) are sceptic about that local money could be efficient mean de-growth in practice. In order to re-localize production and consumption local supply systems should be encouraged (Liegey et al. 2013). Self-sufficient organizations, small-scale sustainable agricultural production, new forms of coexistence, community gardens, and every kind of attempt for new models of production, consumption and allocation which would serve the aims of de-growth should be supported. On community level, the model of

cohousing is promising where the goal is to make urban environment greener and more social so less estranged (Lietaer 2010).

Means are needed on national level also as bottom up strategies cannot be efficient without top-down actions (van den Bergh 2011). Consumption could also be reduced by re-structuring the taxation system. Advertisement tax – as media has a huge role – and other kind of taxes should be launched which serve the protection of environment and help the employment of human work force (Liegey et al. 2013). On supranational level appropriate community policy and multilateral agreements and their observance are needed regarding the reduction of pollutants and the appropriate resource use (van den Bergh 2011, Schwartzmann 2012). Our global environmental problems, the associated pollution, resource use and the use of common-pool resources have supranational scale, so one country cannot fix them on its own.

Summarizing, in order to organize sustainable consumption we should deal with the production processes at the same time in every level. Local food movements can be effective means on community level as they integrate both side of sustainability (Newman – Jennings 2008). In the rest of my paper I define shortly local food and local food systems. Then I make an attempt to create a possible evaluation framework for them from the aspect of consumers, and then I shortly introduce two case studies.

5. Local food movements

Local food movements help to create thriving bioregional and local economies, and to bring the processes of consumption and production together (Newman – Jennings 2008). They enable cities to consume more locally produced food, provide better, fresher food and can reduce transportation energy requirements. For example nowadays an average US plate of food has taken around from 2400 to 4000 km of transport energy to get on the table. After defining the notion of local food and local food systems, I make an attempt to create a possible evaluation framework for them from the aspect of consumers.

The notion of local is quite complex. According to Knight (2013) the definition of local food has five main dimensions:

- Geographical: local food arrives within a certain distance which can be from 1 to 150 km.

- Political: local food arrives within a community, region, state or province, or country, so manufactured in a local government unit and sold in that same local government unit or adjacent government units only
- Benefits and/or attributes: local food is convenient, healthy and sustainable, can provide a status, and preserve open space.
- Oppose to industrial or corporate agriculture: locals organize alternative social movements.
- Strengthen social relationships: generally between consumers and producers, but among consumers and among producers also.

There are many types of local food systems. In this paper I concentrate on local food systems around urban cities which can mean solutions for the main contemporary urban conflicts like social inequality and sustainability (Sevilla-Buitrago 2013). In order to achieve the goals of de-growth greater cooperation in the local level, deliberative decision-making and interdisciplinary conversation are needed (Bajmócy – Gébert 2014, Sevilla-Buitrago 2013). These kinds of initiatives serve sustainability, food security, health and well-being, protect the ecosystem and cultures, and aim to decrease social inequalities, poverty and malnutrition (Kuhlein et al. 2009, Kuhnlein et al. 2013). They aim to re-localize food production and consumption, and are committed to social, economic and environmental justice principles, although there can be some conceptual differences among the various kind of definitions (Feagan 2007).

- Alternative food networks “*seek ways to reconnect food producers with consumers while articulating new forms of political association and market governance*” (Hayden – Buck 2012, p. 43).
- Local food movements are “*based on social and cultural interests, which includes support for local foods, farmers, economies and the environment through the production, processing, distribution and consumption of local foods*” (Farmer 2012, p. 490). The supporters of these movements are not only interested in food but in changing “*our social fabric by strengthening rural and urban economies, revitalizing downtowns by increased patronage to the area, enhancing community and sense of place, as well as increasing food security and benefiting the environment through the production of agricultural products in*

a sustainable manner on lands that currently support a monoculture of commodity crops” (Farmer 2012. pp. 491).

- The Oklahoma Food Policy Council (2003, p. 3) defines local food system as *“a system where there are adequate opportunities and infrastructure for food producers to sell their goods to local people and institutions”*.
- Feenstra (2002, p. 100) defines community food system as *“a collaborative effort to build more locally based, self-reliant food economies – one in which sustainable food production, processing, distribution and consumption is integrated to enhance the economic, environmental and social health of a particular place”*.
- Rights-based food systems „are democratic participation in food system choices affecting more than one sector; fair, transparent access by producers to all necessary resources for food production and marketing; multiple independent buyers; absence of human exploitation; absence of resource exploitation; and no impingement on the ability of people in other locales to meet this set of criteria” which can be achieved by *“facilitating food democracy and reducing environmental exploitation, primarily by lowering environmental costs due to long-distance transportation”* (Anderson 2008, p. 593).
- These alternative food initiatives, movements can have various forms: alternative agro-food networks and systems, community food security, civic and democratic agriculture, postproductivism, alternative or shortened food chains, community gardens, Slow Food movements, the ‘quality turn’ and the variety of other permutations (Feagan 2007).

5.1. Evaluating local food systems based on the basis of de-growth

First of all in order, to evaluate local food systems on the basis of de-growth it is important to make difference between those systems which would like to grow, scale up and export local foods out of the given location, region or would like to attract tourists, and those ones which would like to serve the locals only. The second one is that type which can serve the values of de-growth. There are five main aspects of a possible evaluation framework of local food systems:

- the consumers’ side,
- the community’s/society’s side,
- the producers’/farmers’ side,

- the environment's side,
- the transformative power of the system.

Now I concentrate mainly on the consumers' side but – as mentioned before – it should not be forgotten to handle the production side also at the same time. Moreover the environment's side should also be kept in mind that these initiatives have lower use of pesticide, lower greenhouse gas emission and energy consumption than multinational distributional systems or not, but according to the last two the results are not univocal (Coley et al. 2009, Mundler – Rumpus 2012).

On the consumers' side it is important if they are aware of that specific local food system which operates nearest to their cities, and if they have enough motivation to buy local foods (Knight 2013). Awareness, knowledge and understanding about local foods can be increased by effective campaigns, events and logo too. It is also important to recognize the barriers why consumers do not buy local foods such as availability, price or location. Willingness to pay for local foods usually is increasing as the travelled distance is decreasing – but it depends on how perishable the product is –, and as perceptions of freshness, taste, food safety and the support of local economy and environmental impacts are increasing (Grebitus et al. 2013). For consumers it is also determining that dealing with local foods can be a form of leisure time through an adopted food-style, recipe-sharing, shopping local foods, cooking, and eating them, and this kind of behaviour as a recreational experience (Farmer 2012). Another indicator can be if people eat healthier, more securely and thanks to it they have a better quality of life. As a productive consumer the purchase practice of restaurants and school's canteens should be examined also (Oklahoma Food Policy Council 2003, Sharma et al. 2014).

The last, comprehensive evaluation aspect concerns on the transformative power of local food systems, so which parts of the society are affected. Are local food systems able to address all kind of groups of society – from people with the lowest income to people with the highest income – in order to bring real transformation, or is it only a small elite who enjoys the benefits?

5.2. Case studies

Finally for illustration I introduce shortly two case studies: an Australian and an Italian. The Australian is about the potential environmental and population health impacts of local urban

food systems (Hall et al. 2014). The case study works with two methods: life cycle approach (with three indicators in it: global warming potential, land use and water use) and interviews, focus groups (which explore views from producers and consumers regarding social and cultural factors relating to environmental sustainability and food provisioning). There are two kind of products in the research: chicken and lettuce.

As this paper concentrates mainly on the consumers, now I introduce only results belonging to that part of this case study. With very few exceptions, participants purchased their chickens from large supermarkets, although some participants mentioned going to the butcher, one mentioned going directly to a chicken producer (factory outlet) (Hall et al. 2014). When discussing their chicken purchases and eating habits almost none of the participants mentioned the environment as important, although when asked about their waste methods, there was a trend among some consumers to minimize waste by using leftovers in new meals and the bones for creating stock or feeding to pets.

Lettuce consumers' answers to issues of environmental sustainability were more diverse (Hall et al. 2014). However, a minority of participants expressed environmental concerns, particularly concerning fruit and vegetable products. Some of these consumers expressed distrust towards food traveling long distances impacting on the quality of the product, such as its freshness. For this reason some consumers chose to purchase lettuce and other vegetables from the market and independent grocers, or grow their own. However, people who grew their own lettuce or used markets and independent growers were just to do it for reasons such as supporting the local grocers or a hobby for the kids, but not for environmental motivations.

The Italian research investigates the importance of the local attribute of food in three Italian farmers' markets, relating shopper and vendor data at the same time (Vecchio 2010). The study's methods are observational inspections of the markets, focus groups of shoppers, and semi structured interviews with vendors. As in the previous case study, I only concentrate on the results related to the consumers here too.

The main motivation for shopping at farmers' market is price but there are broad differences between the average annual incomes of the three markets' customers (Vecchio 2010). They also rated the local factor as their main incentive, and quality and freshness of the food products. The general interest in buying local foods is developing the community where they live and is supporting local farms. People approached local foods for the greater quantity of

information available about the production system and farm location. By contrast, consumers at the Potenza farmers' market showed extremely little concern for local foods. The role of food market as a source for local foods are high quality, traditional, regional products and dissatisfaction with modern distribution outlet policies.

Environmental concerns were not a strong factor motivating most producers' and consumers' behavioral patterns in either case study (Hall et al. 2014, Vecchio 2010). However, some motivating factors, such as efficient use of resources and desire for freshness, may have an unintended bonus of being beneficial for environmental sustainability in the Australian case (Hall et al. 2014).

So my consequence is that these kinds of initiatives can be good de-growth means but they need to be improved. As I have mentioned earlier we should handle sustainable consumption and production at the same time in order to move toward real sustainability. It needs very complex research to answer questions like whether people eat healthier or not, their food is more secure or not, and all together they could have reached an increased level of well-being or not. Also we do not know the transformational power of these initiatives, if they are able to decrease social inequalities, poverty, malnutrition and environmental problems. Certainly these two case studies are not enough to take the right conclusions, so there are many questions left to be answered and much to do as activists, but keeping in mind the de-growth values local food movements could help the transition.

6. Summary

In this paper I introduced the underlying thought of the theory of de-growth, and one of its main value: re-localization. Re-localization led to how to interpret sustainable consumption in this framework, and as a conclusion the production system cannot be handled separately from it. I illustrated sustainable consumption and production through local food initiatives. I made an attempt to create a possible evaluation framework for them from the aspect of consumers – but not forgetting the aspects of the producers – and introduced shortly two case studies. As a consequence we can say that local food movements can help to move towards real sustainability but there are still so many unanswered questions according to the topic.

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