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Decoupling Our Future from Our Past: Reflections on Sustainable Development

Erika Johanna Scheibe

When Sustainable Development is discussed, several issues concerning the term “sustainable growth” come to the fore across scales. First, the term “decoupling” is problematic when used in reference to GDP growth and resource use/carbon emissions (Parrique et al., 2019). Second, historical and global inequalities remain embedded in Eurocentric epistemologies such as the Modernization Theory, Progressivism and others (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021; Santos, 2012). Finally, diverse, inclusive, and plural worldviews are sometimes excluded in policies for the sustainable transition.

One definition of Sustainable Development is “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland, 1987). At first, the term was a “compromise between the notions of development and conservation” (Pisani, 2006) whereas they were previously regarded as opposing ideas. Conservation was the protection of resources, and development their exploitation. The compromising term relates to Green Growth Theory, which posits a hypothetical path of economic growth that is environmentally sustainable (Hickel & Kallis, 2020). According to Sustainable Development Goal 8.1, the Sustainable Development Goals assume that Green Growth is possible. Goal 8.1 specifically aims to “Sustain per capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances and, in particular, at least 7 per cent gross domestic product growth per annum in the least developed countries”. The indicator for Goal 8.1 is annual growth rate of real GDP per capita (U.N., 2018).

Striving for Goal 8.1, which assumes decoupling GDP and resource use, carbon emissions, etc., will have many implications for the other 17 goals, Earth, and humanity to meet their needs. These Goals, which are interlinked, assume that both economic growth and environmental sustainability are possible (U.N., 2018). The word “decoupling”

refers to two variables where one is driven by the other. When in reference to sustainability, it means that “environmental pressures decline without a corresponding drop in economic activities, or vice versa, economic activities rise without an increase in environmental pressures” (Parrique et al., 2019). However, several recent studies suggest that it is not possible to decouple GDP growth and resource use/carbon emissions (Hickel & Kallis, 2020; Keyßer & Lenzen, 2021; Menton et al., 2020; Parrique et al., 2019). In a 2020 analysis by Hickel and Kallis, for example, Green Growth Theory was examined as it is modeled in the literature. They focused on feasibility and whether it could be implemented quickly enough to prevent ecological breakdown. In their meta-analysis, they found that according to every study included, under no scenario can growth in GDP be sustained indefinitely while staying within what Rockström et al. (2009) describes as the “safe operating space”. Their conclusion: if policymakers continue to operate under Green Growth Theory assumptions, climate crises are unlikely to be avoided. In their discussion, Hickel and Kallis (2020) argue that due to empirical evidence and facts pointing away from the feasibility of green growth, the ecological emergency plans created by the World Bank and OECD are not sufficient. They end their discussion by saying:

“But it might well be the case that, as Wackernagel and Rees (1998) put it, ‘the politically acceptable is ecologically disastrous while the ecologically necessary is politically impossible.’ As scientists we should not let political expediency shape our view of facts. We should assess the facts and then draw conclusions, rather than start with palatable conclusions and ignore inconvenient facts.”

Furthermore, in analyses that analyzed each country’s “safe operating space” (Rockström et al., 2009), those that are closest to meeting the SDGs such as Norway and the UK

are some of the furthest from environmental sustainability (Hickel & Kallis, 2020; Fanning et al., 2022). These findings suggest the importance of decoupling human well-being and other indicators of standards of living from growth.

How can human well-being, which includes environmental, social, emotional, physical, intellectual, and other aspects, be protected alongside a simultaneous decrease in GDP growth? What is human well-being, and how can it be measured? The article “Providing decent living with minimum energy: A global scenario” by Millward-Hopkins et al. (2020) takes a critical look at how human well-being is currently analyzed:

“Current socio-political organization, economic provisioning systems, and the highly unequal wealth and income distributions that exist, all influence the efficiency with which energy- and resource-use supports human well-being; inefficiencies in the system tend to become embedded within the conclusions of top-down modeling studies. Only rarely do studies look into reducing social inefficiencies that stem from consumption that doesn’t satisfy human needs, or even inhibits need satisfaction... Most studies, however, look at top-down approaches... far from cultivating well-being, consumption is often driven by factors such as private profit; intensive and locked-in social practices; employment-related stress and poor mental health; conspicuous- or luxury-consumption; or simply over-consumption in numerous forms.”

This quote touches on the complexity of analyzing human well-being within current systems. Later in their discussion, Millward-Hopkins et al. (2020) argue that sufficiency of human well-being (which includes different measures and indicators) and economic equality are incompatible with current economic norms, and current systematic requirements include unemployment and vast inequalities. Waste is considered economically efficient, and permanent economic growth is required for political stability. Furthermore, when sufficiency-levels of consumption do exist, they are overwhelmingly middle-class and white (such as “transition towns” and “minimalism”). While in the Global South, the wealthy have left behind millions in poverty (Millward-Hopkins et al., 2020). Several alternative indicators of human well-being are being debated. These debated indicators may better encompass values, solidarity, and diversity than GDP growth, while acknowledging the historical roots of development and colonialism.

Indigenous delegates at the fifth World Park Congress in Durban, South Africa, 2003, stated: “First we were dispossessed in the name of kings and emperors, later in the name of state development, and now in the name of con-

servation,” (in Dowie 2009). Should the Global South try to emulate the Global North? In an article by Pisani (2006), the historical roots of the term “Sustainable Development” are discussed. Development in the Global North and South is broadly encompassed through the lens of Modernization Theory and Dependency Theory, which have many schools of thought today. Modernization Theory, simplified, is the idea that the Global South should take on Western values like progress and economic growth, and allow the market to automatically spread affluence and solve global inequalities. Dependency Theory argues that the Global South should follow a non-capitalist form of development based on their own values (Pisani, 2006). However, both of these theories were produced in the Global North and may not fully account for the dispossession described by the indigenous delegates at the 2003 World Park Congress.

Along the lines of the Dependency Theory in Pisani (2006), an article by Santos (2012) investigates how to incorporate different worldviews. Outside of Eurocentrism and colonial thought (including Dependency Theory), the Global South might find its own path forward:

“At this point, to account for such diversity involves the recognition that the theories produced in the global North are best equipped to account for the social, political and cultural realities of the global North and that in order adequately to account for the realities of the global South other theories must be developed and anchored in other epistemologies — the epistemologies of the South.” (Santos, 2012)

Including diverse views and histories of the world, according to Santos (2012), may facilitate social transformation more in-line with diverse political needs in ending the inequality between the Global North and Global South. The “Global South” can be seen as a metaphor for human suffering (most of the Global South does live in the southern hemisphere, but the Global South also exists in the Global North, as seen in oppressed, silenced peoples such as undocumented immigrants, unemployed, excluded people on the basis of race, sexual orientation, ability, and many others) (Santos, 2012). Including other epistemologies may be more inclusive, because “the diversity of the world is infinite... [it] encompasses very distinct modes of being, thinking, and feeling...” (Santos, 2012), thus minorities’ counternarratives could serve as a catalyst for change.

Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals has become the modus operandi for tackling the climate crisis. It is important, therefore, to critically engage with the histories and assumptions surrounding Sustainable Development, and whether proposed actions will be enough to avert climate crises. When the aspirations of minorities are translated, words such as dignity,

self-governance, community, respect, care, and the good life, or *amor fati*, become ubiquitous, as opposed to the language of development and progress (Santos, 2012; Shiva, 1993). Therefore, it is important to co-produce knowledge and social learning that leads to flexible, resilient, and adaptive climate action (Clark et al., 2016).

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