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Analysis

## Not So Natural an Alliance? Degrowth and Environmental Justice Movements in the Global South



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### ABSTRACT

Both environmental justice (EJ) and degrowth movements warn against increasing the physical size of the economy. They both oppose extractivism and debt-fuelled economies, as well as the untrammelled profit motive which fails to incorporate full environmental and social costs. They both rely upon social movements that have led scholarship in its activities and achievements, in part through challenging power structures. Therefore, some argue the existence of an obvious alliance between degrowth and EJ movements in the Global South. Yet, direct observation unveils concerns from EJ activists in the Global South about the plausibility of alliances until some significant divergences have been examined and reconciled. Activists inspire, promote and disseminate transformations that overcome several forms of domination. Their perspectives on degrowth advance informed co-operation. Our aim is thus to systematically evaluate tensions and possible analogies between the scope of action of EJ organisations operating in the Global South and the main propositions of the Degrowth movement. The argument relies on methodical scrutiny of core themes in the degrowth debate by critical thinkers in the Global South. It incorporates insights from EJ struggles in Ecuador, Italy, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Uruguay, with important implications in Brazil, Mozambique, and Indonesia. The paper contributes to an exploration of the implications of the degrowth debate for the Global South, with the purpose of strengthening potential synergies, through an assertive recognition of the barriers to doing so.

### 1. Introduction

For more than a decade, the globalisation of the environmental justice (EJ) discourse has been presented either as a case of diffusion abroad from its formulation in the United States (Carruthers, 2008; Sze and London, 2008), or as the outcome of claims from diverse movements struggling against similar problems around the globe (Sikor and Newell, 2014). Today, the two-way nature of this globalisation of ideas is well established, and made apparent through the infusion of EJ notions from movements in the South, in the campaigns of their northern counterparts (Agyeman et al., 2016). The central roles of the climate debt concept and opposition to financialising emissions in climate justice campaigns are cases in point (Schlosberg and Collins, 2014;

Warlenius, 2017).

Grassroots organisations leading EJ movements in the South have thus contributed greatly to expanding a shared vocabulary which academic researchers have also refined in their studies (Martinez-Alier et al., 2014). Activists and environmental defenders in the South denounce and resist mechanisms of domination and dispossession in a variety of fields, from food to energy production (Giunta, 2014; Obi, 2010). They confront directly the industries and environmental criminals that operate such mechanisms (White, 2013), despite this threatening their own lives (The Guardian, Global Witness, 2018). EJ organisations in the South are not only pioneers in initiatives that could reshape international environmental agendas (Oilwatch, 2015), but they also put forward alternative visions and transformative pathways

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for society, from a radically democratic and egalitarian stance (Kothari, 2014).

Understandably, degrowth movements have looked towards these EJ organisations when searching for allies. Besides the trust built as a result of consistent counterhegemonic activism in their respective geographic domains (Hosseini et al., 2017; Loureiro and Layrargues, 2013), movements for EJ in the South and degrowth in the North share further matters of concern. One is the increase in the physical size of the economy – a long-held tenet of ecological economics – as well as issues of democracy and social justice (Pueyo, 2014; Sachs, 2002). Extractivism and debt-fuelled economies are their common enemies (Brand et al., 2017; Gerber, 2015; Hornborg and Martínez-Alier, 2016). Importantly, they both rely on social movements which have led an engaged scholarship in its activities and achievements (Demmer and Hummel, 2017; Martínez-Alier et al., 2014).

Some argue the existence of an obvious alliance between degrowth and EJ movements in the Global South (Martínez-Alier, 2012). Recent works based on the analysis of different empirical contexts in South Asia and Latin America confirm this perspective (Gerber and Raina, 2018; Otto, 2017). This development is also consistent with the turn of the degrowth movements – particularly after the 2014 International Degrowth Conference held in Leipzig, Germany – to explicitly search for alliances with other critical currents and initiatives around the globe (Burkhardt et al., 2016).

Along with the search for commonalities, there are definite tensions between degrowth and transition discourses such as postdevelopment (Escobar, 2015). In a similar vein, direct observation reveals concerns from EJ activists in the South about the plausibility for alliances, until some significant divergences are examined. These concerns were originally sparked in discussions within the collaborative project ‘Environmental Justice Organisations, Liabilities and Trade’ (EJOLT) (Martínez-Alier et al., 2011). EJOLT united activists and academics in coproducing a variety of EJ-related studies, such as collective reports on topics such as tree plantations (Overbeek et al., 2012), mining conflicts (Özkaynak et al., 2012), and land grabbing (GRAIN et al., 2014). The compilation of a global database of EJ conflicts also initiated at that time (Temper et al., 2015), enabled sound analyses about the civil society organisations involved in the conflicts (Aydin et al., 2017).

All in all, this space of collaboration served to reinforce the significance of movements with radical views which bring the dominant societal model into question. While doing this, the movements inspire, promote and disseminate transformative actions that tackle the roots causes of today’s socio-environmental problems. Arguably, gaining such movements’ critical perspectives on degrowth is crucial in promoting informed cooperation. Examining perceptions from the South also helps counterbalance the fact that most degrowth literature is generated from high-income countries (Weiss and Cattaneo, 2017). The likely clash of ethical assumptions regarding notions of justice and lifestyles (Muraca, 2013, 2012) provides another reason to incorporate a southern lens into the debate.

Therefore, this paper aims to systematically evaluate both the main tensions and possible analogies between the actions of environmental justice organisations in the Global South and the propositions of the degrowth movement. Our purpose is to contribute to a strengthening of potential synergies, through an assertive recognition of the barriers to do so. In particular, we offer responses to the following questions:

- a) What are the main concerns or critiques from environmental justice organisations in the South about degrowth’s propositions?
- b) What are the analogies or equivalences between core themes in the degrowth debate and environmental justice movements, in the countries where specific environmental justice organisations operate?

This paper is intended for audiences that are familiar with the degrowth discourse and want to better understand how it is perceived in

different parts of the world. It introduces an activist perspective which the present authors deem still to be missing in the literature.

To this end, the following section presents the methods employed. Subsequently, results and discussion are organised in two sections. The first section develops a nuanced analysis of why the alliance between degrowth and EJ movements is not straightforward. The second section highlights an assortment of analogies, which provide reason to think that the start of a conversation between the two movements is possible. The final section concludes, offering some recommendations which might foster such conversation.

## 2. Methods

Our argument is based on scrutinising core themes in degrowth debates through semi-structured interviews. Interviewees are critical thinkers who worked in environmental justice organisations (EJOs) involved in the EJOLT project. These EJOs are the Acción Ecológica, A Sud, the Center for Civil Society, Nature Kenya, Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria and the World Rainforest Movement. While the claims in this article are informed by the work within these organisations, they do not necessarily reflect the views of specific individuals and organisations, which are as plural as the composition of the organisations themselves. The views of participants do not guarantee that all EJ perspectives are represented. Still, the discussion incorporates insights from EJ struggles in Ecuador, Italy, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Uruguay, with important implications in Brazil, Mozambique, and Indonesia. The interviewees are experienced activists, having worked consistently in their respective fields for periods ranging from ten years to over three decades. As such, they have a solid knowledge of EJ discussions around mining, industrial plantations, oil and gas extraction, mega-infrastructures, agrobiodiversity, nature conservation, climate change and water management.

It is worth mentioning that by ‘South’ we mean lower income countries otherwise referred to as ‘Third World’, ‘Periphery’, or ‘Developing countries’. Inequalities affect all countries. Therefore, by ‘Global South’ we mean territories both in the South and in the poorer regions of the North impacted by a “history of colonialism, neo-imperialism, and differential economic and social change” (Dados and Connell, 2012: 13).

Once the idea of producing this paper was agreed, the subsequent task was to formulate questions whose answers could be supportive of an informed rapprochement of degrowth and EJ in the South. In line with principles of collaborative research (Jull et al., 2017; Kishk Anaquod Health Research, 2008), interviewees are acknowledged as co-authors and as such were integrated into the research design. The resulting interview script is presented in Annex 1.

There is no unified set of proposals among degrowth movements, admittedly diverse in their transformative approaches (Eversberg and Shmelzer, 2018). Prior to the interviews, some participants have attended degrowth-related events (conferences or talks). For supplementary information, some core themes were identified using the topics presented as ‘dimensions of degrowth’ in the website of the organisation ‘Research and Degrowth’ (R&D). These topics were used to create working groups at the Second International Conference on Economic Degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity, in Barcelona. Members of R&D have supported the respective organising committees of the degrowth conferences since 2012. The themes in question are: time, resources availability, hard infrastructure, finances, institutions and socio-economic organisation, social comparison, material needs, and consumer imaginary (R&D, 2010).

After a round of individual responses (either through face-to-face interviews or email exchange), the verbatim transcriptions were coded. The codes were then structured around arguments against and for an alliance between EJ movements in the South and degrowth. The arguments were further elaborated by the authors after being discussed at several international *fora*. They are presented below in a discussion

with the relevant literature.

As a note for self-assessment, the authors are aware of the pervasive issue of power relations involved in translations, and in encounters between possible allies that are distant from each other and have different histories (Lohmann, 2015). This cannot be fully prevented. Where there is disagreement, the different views are reported. The exercise does not aim to produce consensus, or a comprehensive account, but rather to map notions which may be considered as central in the debate.

### 3. Not So Natural an Alliance! Really? But Why?

Mounting evidence shows increasing global inequalities, both in high-income and low-income countries. Among the 34 OECD members, the richest 10% of the population earn about 9 times the income of the poorest 10% (OECD, 2018). Countries that have exceeded expectations in their growth-oriented projects – such as China, with 2.4 m millionaires living in the country in 2013, projected to double in 2015 – observe widening inequalities in wealth and incomes (Hassan, 2016).

One might imagine that these striking realities could contribute to the development of synergies between movements seeking EJ in the Global South and the critics to growth. In fact, the idea of an ‘obvious’ alliance with degrowth movements bothers some people in EJ movements of the South. Table 1 compiles some of reasons why this might be, based on responses from the interviews. A further elaboration of these ideas follows in the remainder of the section.

#### 3.1. Degrowth is Not an Appealing Term in the Global South

In parts of Africa, Latin America and many other regions of the Global South, including poor and marginalised communities in Northern countries, the term degrowth is not appealing, and does not match people’s demands. In fact, there are debates about the provocative term ‘degrowth’ within the degrowth discourse itself (Asara et al., 2015; Drews and Antal, 2016). The cultural and historical differences between Northern and Southern countries and their societies, and the different struggles people and movements have gone through should also be considered in this debate.

On the one hand, ideas like ‘frugal living’ (Manno, 2011; Videira et al., 2009) or creating ‘beautifully poor’ spaces (Leblanc, 2017) may not be received sympathetically when one has grown up in a slum or a favela with unambiguous deficiencies of sanitation or public education. For many people in the South – especially social movements – ‘degrowth’ will not make sense because of their own history and experiences, having often suffered from situations of poverty and scarcity of the most basic needs. Some ‘growth’ to reach more security in terms of survival is regarded logical. Therefore, focusing the struggle on

degrowth is not only perceived as ‘missing the point’, but is also in some ways a ‘luxury’ debate.

Those who might be willing to discuss this in Southern countries are often more middle-class, urban, academic or NGO workers, who do not know poverty from their own experience. In the view of the interviewees, pushing for a debate on degrowth in Africa or India, or even less advantaged European communities, would not get very far. In these places, the overall discourse of ‘degrowth’ might seem farfetched and a concern of elites. The understanding of the idea requires a context of overall welfare and over-consumption from which to degrow. This is a major issue. As revolutionary socialists have put it, how can we explain ‘uneven and combined development’ (Davidson, 2017; Justin Rosenberg, 1996) in world historical terms, so that the main burden of world degrowth falls upon those who have accumulated most already, and the opportunities for meeting social needs and enjoying the benefits of modernisation (electricity, water systems, the internet, etc.) can be transferred to the world’s poorest?

On the other hand, the use of the term ‘degrowth’ is in itself negative and goes against the mindset and basic principles of living and working hard. Degrowth scholars have responded to this issue of framing (Asara et al., 2015) by stressing the need to decolonise the social imaginary from the never-ending pursuit of accumulation, changing our language to produce, from today, a subversive tomorrow (Kallis and March, 2015). However, positive meanings of the term ‘growth’ are also fundamental to the imaginaries and agendas of EJ movements in the South: healthy children grow, staple crops grow, ideas grow, creativity grows, autonomy and sovereignty grow... so why should the South support the idea of not growing? Should EJ movements not grow? Should resistance and alternatives to ecologically damaging projects not grow? Family and child care systems, should they not grow? What about small-scale organic agriculture, both in the South and in the North?

This position brings us back to analogous debates among some ecological economists in the North contesting the term Degrowth. They ask ‘degrowth of what?’, claiming that degrowth gives excessive importance to changing standard macroeconomic indicators, leaving aside the real need to recognise the material boundaries of the economic system (Naredo, 2011). In line with some concerns expressed in the current project, these economists also argue that the term degrowth does not effectively communicate alternatives, which highlights the need to think carefully about the labels given to transformative movements (Drews and Antal, 2016).

On the top of the reasons above, the economic crisis and austerity policies play a role in people’s reluctance. Voluntary degrowth is directed at elites in the North, and its supporters emphasize that it does not equate to recession (Asara et al., 2015). Yet more and more people living in precarious conditions both in the North and the South draw

**Table 1**  
Reasons against an obvious alliance between degrowth and environmental justice in the South.

Key points	Associated ideas
Degrowth is not an appealing term in the South	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Different history/experience of poverty and scarcity</li> <li>• ‘Voluntary’ degrowth, only through crises and urban elites</li> <li>• Against the people’s basic principles of living and working hard</li> <li>• Growing (e.g., healthy crops, creativity) is part of EJ agendas</li> <li>• Austerity is a “degrowth strategy for poor people”</li> </ul>
Beyond detached terms, detached ideas & approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multiple meanings of ideas in multi-cultural, pluri-national countries</li> <li>• Degrowth is too anthropocentric</li> <li>• Issues framed differently from how Southern groups organize and discuss problems</li> </ul>
Communication (& dissemination) issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Still scant mention of Degrowth among activist groups in the South</li> <li>• Semantic controversies: denying the opponent actually legitimises it</li> <li>• Other language is suggested: redistribution; appropriate use of welfare...</li> </ul>
Eurocentric thinking (again!)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Western/high-income countries centred approach → individualistic</li> <li>• Aversion to standardising principles that undermine the flourishing of local initiatives</li> </ul>
Not radical enough	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Degrowth proposals seem to accommodate stances within the boundaries of the system (not shared perspective!): is degrowth anti-capitalist?</li> <li>• Why not move the discourse towards other terms such as eco-socialism, re-commoning, Nature-centred perspective?</li> </ul>

this equivalence between degrowth and austerity measures. For them, austerity is an unwelcomed degrowth strategy for the poor.

### 3.2. Beyond Detached Terms, Detached Ideas?

Together with the barriers of understanding regarding the use of the term ‘degrowth’, the interviewees express concerns on the concepts and ideas behind it. Take, for instance, the degrowth proposals on time allocation. The Western idea of ‘time’ clashes with that of the ‘pueblos’ (communities, people), the aboriginal or indigenous temporalities (like the Andean ‘Pacha’), and the times of nature. What does ‘reduction of the working time’ as studied by degrowth researchers (see, e.g., Shao and Rodríguez-Labajos, 2016) mean then?

Questions are raised as to what extent degrowth movements recognise and understand the multiple meanings of time(s) in the South, particularly in those countries characterised by plurinationalism, multiculturalism and pluriversality. Conceptions of time allocation involved in these debates are categorically diverse and preclude homogeneity and comparability. Following this example, the interviewees argue that each of the core topics in the degrowth debates (e.g., limits, resource availability, and consumer imaginary) may generate a similar reaction. Ultimately, many ideas present in the degrowth approach are perceived as very anthropocentric, and far too influenced by economic theory. This is in part attributed to degrowth’s “insufficiently developed critique of modernity” (Escobar, 2015:456). At this point, the EJ organisations invite degrowth to learn about non-anthropocentric thinking and practices from people in Latin America when conceiving of radical transitions.

Clarification is demanded on the concrete meaning of degrowth measures. For instance, in Nigeria, and more generally in Africa, energy production is increasing yet there is more inequality and energy poverty. This seems an analogous problem to that which degrowth presents. But what would degrowth mean in this context? Freezing production, increasing equity, increasing assets? Widening access to people who do not have access to energy? Is this just another word for energy transition? A certain level of contradiction is likely in the answers to these questions.

As argued below, degrowth generates sympathy among the social movements in the South. However, some degrowth ideas still sound too pragmatic for many groups in the Global South. In the realities which EJOs have been working in (for instance, in Brazil), social movements are concerned with political strategies, and tactics that can contribute to them, to transform the dominant model. In this respect, the problem with the degrowth debate is that it frames the issues very differently from how the diverse Southern groups and movements organize and discuss problems. This creates barriers in communication.

Related to this, what would probably call for the most attention is that the way degrowth ‘strategies’ are approached and disseminated. In Southern social movements –which work in terms of what often is called ‘political strategy’– it would be surprising for a movement to publish its strategy openly on a website. The set of degrowth proposals are seen as a confusing mix of strategies and tactics, a point also made by Cosme et al. (2017). This point is not trivial, because EJOs –as experienced political actors– are aware of the ways effective alliances and networks between groups and movements are built (Aydin et al., 2017). For instance, another EJO points out the convenience of creating alliances with consumer organisations at the tactical (specific-goal oriented) rather than strategic (generic) level. Building of ongoing joint initiatives between organisations in the South and in the North is seen favourably as a learning base for constructing strategic alliances. Therefore, shared approaches to both political and organisational developments are essential.

### 3.3. Communication and Dissemination Issues

While formally educated people may not find problems accessing

the messages of the degrowth debate, the situation is different for people involved in EJ struggles, both in the North and the South. In the Global South, the concept of degrowth is relatively new (especially in Africa) and the interviewees reported a very limited presence of the debates within their communities.

The most common pathway to learn about degrowth seems to be participating in conferences or learning about the international degrowth conferences held in the past. This convinced at least one of the interviewees of the robustness of degrowth as an intellectual and political current. The internet is another source of information, for instance, through mailing lists or online *fora* (e.g., on biological conservation or consumption). Direct interaction with degrowthers via other civil society groups, or through common projects (e.g., EJOLT) was also mentioned. In one case, interaction with degrowth came while collaborating in the preparation of a documentary series (*Story of Stuff*).

Both during the EJOs’ local work with communities and social movements, and with international networks, the interviewees noticed few or no mention of degrowth among Southern groups. To compare this with evidence of public attention to degrowth vis-à-vis EJ, we used Google Trends.<sup>1</sup> This resource does not unveil patterns for activists only, who might in fact be reluctant to use corporate web browsers, however it helps to get an idea of the general interest on topics over time and in different countries. Two key findings emerge from this.

Firstly, environmental justice – an older set of movements – generated twice as much curiosity as degrowth at the beginning of the period of recorded data (2004). However, this situation reversed as interest in degrowth increased globally and reached its peak in 2009. At this time, the gap in relation to the less searched-for EJ terms was around 30%. Presently, both debates generate similar levels of curiosity. Unsurprisingly, the number of total queries has vastly increased over the years, but the comparisons presented here are in relative terms. As a reference point, the term ‘financial crisis’ generated 4.4 times more search interest than ‘degrowth’ over the same period (and ‘terrorism’, 34 times more).

Secondly, focussing on the location of the queries, interest in EJ dominates over degrowth in the countries of some of the interviewees, including South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, and Brazil. In contrast, general curiosity in degrowth is superior to EJ in Ecuador, Uruguay and Italy. This points to a diversity of contexts in the countries typically described as the Global South, which should be kept in mind when studying links between (northern) degrowth movements and EJOs in the global South. At the same time, it is important to reflect on the possible reasons why degrowth does not interest those involved in struggles for environmental and social justice in some areas of the world.

Again, regarding communication issues, there are semantic controversies that come with naming a movement as the inverse of a ‘false solution’. For example, the term ‘non-white’ is fiercely contested by black leadership as well as grassroots justice organisations in South Africa, in light of historical exclusionary policies based on race (and the semantics of the oppressor). Here, a concern emerges about the legitimacy of the discourses employed in the debate. Branding a movement as the denial of that which is being challenged, could contribute to legitimising that existing structure and disempowering the movement (by downplaying that which is liberatory about its politics).

Therefore, the language with which degrowth ideas are articulated and communicated is critical. When dealing with poor and marginalised groups, concepts of redistribution and appropriate use of welfare and resources – in line with principles of EJ – are more suitable.

<sup>1</sup> The comparison includes the terms Degrowth (political ideology); and ‘Environmental Justice’ (topic), supplemented with ‘Justicia Ambiental’ and ‘Justiça Ambiental’ (search terms) in Google Trends (<https://trends.google.com>) for the period 1/1/2004–10/5/2018. Data of relative search interest was obtained by period and by location.

### 3.4. Eurocentric Thinking (Again!)

A pervasive criticism of degrowth is that its European roots have percolated the type of proposals it makes. Once again, an idea is launched to the world with an undeniable Eurocentric (or Northern) origin. This alone generates logical resistances from groups that employ decolonial theoretical perspectives (Alimonda, 2011; Grosfoguel, 2011; Mignolo and Escobar, 2010), and support political projects promoted by indigenous movements, landless workers, and those fighting environmental racism in impoverished settings. This is mirrored in the class struggles and claims of unequal access to welfare of EJ organisations operating in peripheral areas of the North.

To be fair, similar critiques were raised against the language and political implications of EJ when applied outside its North American origins, yet this discourse has become global (Carruthers, 2008). Degrowth, on the other hand, is seen as the epitome of a developed-countries centred approach. It applies to contexts of substantial welfare in rich, high-consumption societies. This is not the case in vast areas of the global South, which makes the overall framework less relatable. Alongside this comes the critique of degrowth's approach being too individualistic, like the Western societies themselves.

There is an awareness that organisations in the North which have created solidarity networks with EJOs in the South, support degrowth movements. For instance, the network *Ecologistas en Acción*, well-known by one of the interviewees, has endorsed the campaign '*Menos para vivir mejor*' (Less to live better) for several years. This is seen positively, but does not mitigate the risk that the degrowth proposals become uniformalising principles operating against the diversity that EJOs defend. This is not only seen as dangerous for the movements in the South, but possibly also for initiatives in Europe which cannot flourish because they are influenced by degrowth too early in their own development.

### 3.5. Not Radical Enough

Although the dominance of the paradigm of economic growth needs to be criticized, to propose 'degrowth' as the way forward is felt by some interviewees to miss the point. Some economic studies postulate a growth imperative in capitalist economies (Vergara-Camus, 2017). Historically, non-capitalist processes also suffered (and continue to suffer) from an obsession for growth (Kallis, 2017), but this is not the reality that the EJ organisations in many parts of the world face.

Drawing on a perspective from Brazil, two different processes are observed. On the one hand, capitalists are interested in profit, and not necessarily in growth per se. On the other hand, the main problem with the dominant economic growth-based model is the power of a restricted group of (capitalist) actors, that benefit from maintaining the present model of extraction (of 'raw materials'), production, commercialization, and consumption. Therefore, EJ groups do not pay so much attention to 'economic growth' (and therefore may not see 'degrowth' as the solution) as the main issue with how capitalism operates in their countries.

Scholars respected by some interviewed EJ activists emphasize that current ecological and economic crises are both part of the same fundamental crisis of Western capitalist civilisation, deeply rooted in modern industrialisation (Löwy, 2005). Although national and global debt bubbles have arisen during the crisis, there are already strong indicators of 'deglobalisation' since 2007. These include dramatic declines in trade/GDP ratios (and the crash of the Baltic Dry Index measuring shipping), foreign direct investment/GDP ratios (and rates of return on such investment), cross-border financial flows, and non-refugee labour migration (Bond, 2018). All these indicators suggest that instead of working against the grain of 'growth', the degrowth movement should be preparing for the case that the devalorisation is even more redirected towards the most anti-ecological, anti-social investments. This includes fossil fuel capital but also over-exposed financial capital in the form of banks' excessive credit-based power over ordinary

borrowers.

In this respect, some interviewees do not perceive a deep, radical criticism of capitalism in degrowth. This is not unanimous, but for several EJ activists, degrowth proposals seem to accommodate stances within the boundaries of the prevailing system. Then, the question becomes: is degrowth an anti-capitalist position? Radical proposals strongly supported by the EJOS, such as the scheme 'leave the oil in the soil' are not only held because they protect vulnerable communities and ecosystems, but also because they are concrete steps to start 'killing capitalism' and building a radical and idealistic critique of oil-based civilisation. In contrast to the perception that EJ movements are post-political (Swyngedouw, 2009), this demonstrates that global EJ movements actually encourage radical changes, and actively demand a debate around alternatives to the dominant capitalist development model.

Then why not move the discourse towards other models of economic organisation? Some EJ organisations proclaim alternative models based on socialism. Aware of semantic issues as raised above, and the bad memories that this term calls upon, eco-socialism and labour de-alienation are proposed instead (Brownhill et al., 2012). The recuperation or creation of gendered commons are also a part of EJ claims, as a way of producing and consuming goods that do not become commodified. In this respect, the 'decommodification' of basic needs and degrowth strategies will overlap. A consideration of the ecological debt between the North and the South from a degrowth perspective, with a similar level of refinement to the analyses of debt within northern countries (Kallis et al., 2012), would be a necessary step forward. A radical missing topic is the non-anthropocentric/Nature's perspective that leads to an absolute transformation of the relationship between humans and their environments.

## 4. But Still, We Want to Cooperate. From Analogies to Homologies

The combination of factors mentioned above means that currently the degrowth debate is not a priority for many EJ movements in the South. Yet the interviewees saw that several points defended by the 'degrowth' movement could lead to interesting discussions with Southern groups. Evidence from the European semi-periphery indicates that, while limited, there is potential there for degrowth to theoretical frame the EJ movements (Domazet and Ančić, n.d.). Recent attempts to present degrowth hand-in-hand with other transformative alternatives help to illustrate the benefits of this exercise in developing research and activist agendas (Demaria and Kothari, 2017; Escobar, 2015).

Moreover, some economies in Southern countries have embraced imaginaries of economic growth and are deploying them at a fast pace. Such is clearly the case in Brazil, now the seventh largest economy in the world and still maintaining a steady growth rate. Social movements there could take up the degrowth discourse to articulate their own demands. Looking at degrowth proposals may provide a way to link local struggles with the larger-scale drivers that trigger them.

The basic premise for promoting alliances, the interviewees argue, is that the different proposals do not exclude each other but learn and benefit from each other. A way to approach this can be to identify analogies. An analogy supports the necessary exercise of cross-cultural encounter and the identification of similar origins, or homologies. It sustains the fundamental idea of unity in diversity, which is a powerful concept that prevails across cultural contexts and even disciplinary fields. To this end, the present section presents a summary of responses to the question 'What are the analogies or equivalences between the core themes in the degrowth debate and environmental justice in the context of the country(-ies) where your organization operates?' (also presented in Table 2).

### 4.1. Time(s)

In response to the question of how to spend or share time, there is a

**Table 2**  
Identified analogies between degrowth and environmental justice in the South.

Core themes in degrowth	Analogies with environmental justice struggles	Concrete examples in the participant organisation
Time	Sumak Kawsay Grassroots and political time through political engagement Time needed to socialise, to rediscover the own lost soul	Rediscovering citizen's role in society through popular epidemiology (EPiCentro experiment and Veritas Project)
Resource availability	Campaigns against land grabbing or damaging extractive projects Fair distribution of environmental burdens (reduction) and benefits Critique of Africa's multiple Resource Curses	Leave the oil in the soil, leave the coal in the hole, leave the tar sands in the land ... plus 'climate debt' approach Paralysed biodiesel ( <i>Jatropha</i> ) projects in the Tana Delta (Kenya) for Europe's fuel needs Biocidio coalition, No Triv coalition
Hard Infrastructure	Struggles against mega-projects & useless infrastructures (dams, high-speed train) Demand for extension of basic needs infrastructure (International) solidarity work (e.g. <i>ALBA</i> ) vs large infrastructures	Analyses of ways the Resource Curse (including climate change) Struggle against high speed trains or highways Opposition to mega-projects in South Africa and Nigeria
Finances	Role of finance in strengthening environmental injustice Need to impose capital controls, lowering the ratio of finance to real economic activity, nationalizing financial assets Need to diversify sources of currency against fiscal imperialism	Arguments to impose capital controls, to lower the ratio of finance to real economic activity and to nationalize financial assets
Institutions and socio-economic organisation	Communities that conquer back territories invaded by tree plantations Community energy committees in Nigeria (demonstrative stage) Rationalisation of production processes on the basis of real, local needs and local available materials	Promotion of small, local and environmentally friendly production Critiques of the power structures in all global, continental, national and municipal scales (governmental/corporate)
Commons	Forests collectively controlled and used by communities Protection of communal lands, used for communal purposes only	National movement for water (and energy) in Italy 'From rights to commons'
Social comparison	Fostering equalities in terms of access to basic resources and distribution of environmental burdens Desire to end Africa's artificially drawn borders (of Berlin in 1885)	'Stop Biocidio' coalition and support to sacrificed communities Anti-xenophobia research and programming Nigeria's National Basic Income Scheme (NaBIS)
Material needs	Food and energy sovereignty	Growth for basic needs projects (e.g. South Africa's failed Reconstruction and Development Programme of 1994)
Consumer imaginary	Need to rebuild peoples' imaginaries into appropriate consumption Critique of hedonistic consumption norms (when applicable)	Story of Stuff project (2009) (including on cap-and-trade critique)

call for using time to socialise, to re-discover the own lost soul, but also to expand the active societal role of the self. In the powerful analogy of 'living well', as expressed through the Andean notion of Sumak Kawsay, the use of plural forms of time in community work helps to strengthen social cohesion. There is therefore an invitation to recognise the time lived through political engagement as a valuable dimension of time. Specific examples are provided in relation to existing popular epidemiology initiatives in Italy, such as allowing citizens to rediscover themselves through interaction with others (the EPiCentro Civitavecchia experiment), or the teamwork between people with cancer, activists, and researchers in areas heavily exposed to environmental pollutants (Veritas project).

#### 4.2. Resource Availability

Reducing natural resource extraction and consumption is very much a core interest of several interviewees. Interesting analogies emerge from the evidence of Africa's multiple resource curses, and from the analyses of ways these curses are revealed, including climate change aspects.

Several cases of land grabs in Kenya help to exemplify the local impacts of economic growth in other parts of the world. For instance, in the Tana Delta, the company G4 Industries wanted 28,000 ha for bio-fuel production for the UK; Bedford Biofuels wanted 160,000 ha of *Jatropha* for biodiesel for Europe, and Kenya *Jatropha* Energy Limited wanted 50,000 ha, some of it indigenous forest. All these schemes aimed at satisfying energy needs for Europe, in response to EU renewable energy policies which clearly cannot be met by Europe's agriculture. As a result, involuntary 'degrowth' occurs in Kenya, and global disparities increase. Therefore, campaigns against land grabbing are identified as a source of analogies with degrowth propositions on resource availability.

More and more extraction is clearly not the solution, especially given its increasingly violent side ([The Guardian and Global Witness, 2018](#)). Therefore, the interviewees argue that a great deal of unnecessary natural resource extraction should be halted, especially when the natural resource wealth shrinkage far exceeds profits retained and capital reinvested ([Bond, 2018](#)). Stopping the flow of materials and labour from the South to the North –a selective 'delinking', as [Samir Amin \(1990\)](#) put it– is seen as a prerequisite for degrowth in the North.

In relation to underground materials, the approach is characterised by claims of 'leave it in the ground' and 'climate debt'. The campaign for Yasuní is perhaps the most illustrative case ([Yasunidos, 2018](#)). There is also an urge to coordinate actions for the defence of sacrificed zones affected by contamination, and to stop the expansion of the extraction frontier, as in the case of the 'Stop Biocidio' and 'No Triv' coalitions, against oil drilling in Italy. Numerous joint initiatives already exist on projects aimed at halting extractivism. Through them organisations in the North offer concrete solidarity against corporations which are targets of EJ movements in the South (such as Italian organisations against ENI oil drilling in Nigeria and South Africa).

Defended principles here are the fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens (or their absolute reduction), fair access to natural resources, and the halting of excessive consumption. Not only bans but also environmental education and communication work are emphasized. Another source of potential alliances relies on the link between the claims for EJ in the South and the North, such as mining conflicts in the extraction frontier in Canada, Sweden, Spain or Greece, or oil and gas conflicts in Italy. In any case, there is a need to consider what a 'resource' is, what 'availability' is, and how both are conceptualised within the degrowth debate.

### 4.3. Hard Infrastructure

The critique of mega-projects is an important part of the EJ movements' agenda, and a rich source of analogies with degrowth. In Nigeria, issues arise as a result of the pressure that subsidy-dependent mega-infrastructure imposes on public financing. In Italy, where struggles against unwanted infrastructures –starting with the high-speed train—are well known, conflicts entailed a review of the purpose of transportation and its relation to time, because fast is often unnecessary. This example also teaches how to connect different resistances, as the local struggles related to the construction of a high-speed line cooperated with the 'Stop Biocidio' coalition mentioned above, which was particularly active in denouncing impacts of environmental contamination on people lives.

Opposition to large-infrastructure comes together with a demand for the extension of appropriate infrastructures for basic needs, and the creation of networks of solidarity work. For instance, the '*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*' (MST) is a social movement of landless peasants that has huge experience in solidarity work and missions in other countries. Also in Latin America, it is worth looking at the ALBA initiative, a cooperation not based on strengthening infrastructure to facilitate exports (like the IIRSA plan for infrastructure among South-American countries), but cooperation between countries based on the social and human dimensions, e.g. through the exchange of doctors for improving medical assistance, fellowships in universities, experiences with certain types of agriculture and other activities, scientific cooperation, and solidarity missions.

### 4.4. Finance

EJ movements emphasize the role of finance in exacerbating environmental injustices. The search for economic profit is seen as the root of environmental and social destruction, commodification of nature, and climate change. In the case of Nigeria, an interviewee indicates that the concept of gross domestic product (GDP) does not represent the economic development ethos of the country or the people. Comparing Nigeria with other countries based on their GDP then becomes another method of financial and fiscal imperialism. Therefore, there are strong arguments to impose capital controls, lower the ratio of finance to real economic activity, nationalize financial assets, and diversify the sources of currency.

Alternative forms of wealth accounting are also important. Measuring the rapid decline in Nigeria's non-renewable resources – i.e. the subtraction of natural wealth that is responsible for rising 'income' when oil is extracted and sold – through, e.g., the Genuine Progress Indicator would provide Nigerians a sense of the ecological cost of growth. This strategy should deter an economic policy based on extractivism and export-led 'growth'. In most countries of the South engaged in primary product exploitation, accounting for natural resource depletion is far superior to GDP (*Gaborone Declaration, 2012*). In Africa such measurements (even by the World Bank) already suggest a USD150 billion/annum net loss from extractivist activities (*Bond, 2018*).

### 4.5. Institutions, Socio-economic Organisation, and Commons

Power structures at scales of global, continental, national and municipal governments and corporations are strongly critiqued by EJ movements. In the global call for system change, new institutions are critically required. Their task is organising the rationalisation of the production process on the basis of real local needs and locally available materials, while respecting environmental reproduction times. Several examples can be found. In Brazil, communities take back their territories that were dispossessed for tree plantations. Areas of tropical rainforest collectively controlled and used by communities keep production at small scales and promote community participation while

providing materials for local and regional needs. This in contrast to the export-oriented and developmentalist idea of increasing exports to increase economic growth. In Italy, new groups promote small, locally based and environmentally friendly production, in areas ranging from food to architecture. Cooperatives for managing water systems and energy systems are proposed worldwide. For instance, in Nigeria, community energy committees are piloting forms of local renewable energy production.

Based on high-profile campaigns and discussions, e.g., on the 'right to water' in South Africa and Italy, it was clear for some organisations that the human rights approach –based on liberal constitutionalism– was too individualistic. It provides a false hope for justice given prevailing power relations in the courts. After losing a Constitutional Court battle for water in 2009, Soweto activists resumed sharing of municipal water through illegal reconnection as a form of commoning (*Bond, 2013*). Where possible, this seems to be the most appropriate response against injustices. As another striking example in South Africa is the activist-driven commoning of Intellectual Property so as to supply generic AIDS medicines in the late 1990s. This was followed by substantial decrease in HIV/AIDS treatment costs in the country and a subsequent life expectancy increase.

Commons are important realities in the day-to-day life of many communities engaged in EJ struggles. Commons do not 'passively' exist, but rely on their permanent (re)production in the territory. They are rooted in a democratic- and community-based vision that addresses the issue of fair resource distribution according to sufficiency and 'natural' availability. Traditional commons exist in Nigeria, where land tenure is basically communal and exclusively used for community purposes through, customary structures. As with many countries in Africa, this system is not exempt from disputes in relation to tenure arrangements over land, typically herder-farmer conflicts. Yet importantly, interviewees emphasize the requirement that communal lands are protected from private uses.

Commons also provide a framework to develop innovative schemes of 'compensation' in face of climate injustices. The idea is commoning the climate debt through payments from people in the North to people already impacted by climate change in the South. The experience of the Basic Income Grant pilot in Otjivero, Namibia, funded by the German Namibian Evangelical Lutheran church, showed immediate benefits in terms of poverty alleviation and independently earned income (*Carnegie Council, 2010*). This could be considered as a social pillar for the recognition and restitution of the ecological and climate debts, complementary to another pillar reliant on the Yasunisation-Ogonisation strategy.

However, two important warnings emerged from the interviews. Firstly, from the Italian experience of political work on water and energy, in practice there is no strong and concrete relation between the movements for the commons –very strong between 2011 and 2013 due to the national referendum on water– and degrowth. Secondly, there is concern that commons –now a popular topic in research– could become a passing intellectual trend.

### 4.6. Social Comparison, Material Needs and Consumer Imaginary

Environmental injustice is clearly related to social and economic inequalities: the poorest and the more marginalised are more at risk of exposure to environmental damage. Impoverished people also lack access to basic needs and essential services. Initiatives aspiring to social equality and redistribution include a campaign launched in Nigeria demanding a National Basic Income Scheme (NaBIS); a stipend of around USD 100 for all unemployed Nigerians. The NaBIS proposal seeks to redistribute wealth and reduce inequality in Nigerian society. Interestingly, an analogy emerging at this stage was related to the desire to end Africa's artificially drawn borders (in Berlin in 1885) and their effects, and promote anti-xenophobia research and action.

Trying to push for a more locally sustained economy that respects

nature is a notion that resonates well with Southern groups in struggles for social and environmental justice. Several of the local ‘alternatives’ that communities are trying to implement in the global South would defend these principles, as in the case (mentioned above) of communities taking back territories that were dispossessed for tree plantations.

In the same line of thinking, food sovereignty is a very much a defended principle by *La Via Campesina* and the peasant organisations that are members. Therefore, it could become an important source of analogies with degrowth. This is a critically important issue that requires making connections with struggles in the North, as it is apparent when looking through the products and ingredients on the shelves in most European supermarkets that most of them come from Southern countries. Here the notion of commodity chains can help to connect materially and symbolically the struggles.

However, there are also social movements in the South whose main concern revolves around wealth redistribution, rather than a locally sustained economy and respect for nature. A case in point would be the movement ‘*O petróleo é nosso*’ (the oil is ours) led by trade unions, especially the oil extraction workers one, and other social movements in Brazil that seek redistribution of oil revenues. Here the pro-growth spirit percolates the aspirations for social and environmental justice. In such cases, the key is respecting sufficiency in the satisfaction of basic needs. This is exemplified by the ‘Growth for basic needs’ strategy within South Africa’s (failed) Reconstruction and Development Programme of 1994.

This eventually leads to the question of whether or not degrowth can be applied to high and medium income strata in the global North, regardless of where they are located. There is evidence of extreme inequalities also in Southern countries. In rural and urban areas in the South, most of the population lacks access to the most essential requirements. In some cases, like in South Africa, there is an open critique from EJ organisations of (mainly white) hedonistic consumption norms and evidence of overconsumption. Even amid impoverished communities, hard earned money is being misused in purchasing expensive mobile phones as a symbol of status. What happens to the ‘catch up mentality’, where people strive to follow in the footsteps of the ‘developed’? For EJ movements, the whole idea of society tagging along with corporations is a deep concern. In fact, there are many analogies in terms of the need to rebuild peoples’ imaginaries in line with low and appropriate consumption, albeit paying careful attention to the considerations presented in the previous sections. This brings EJ and degrowth movements very close. Clearly, environmental education and communication work is key. An example presented is the ‘Story of Stuff’ project which includes a critique of cap-and-trade. The desire to critically influence the consumer imaginary can also foster (tactical rather than strategic) links between EJ organisations in the South and consumers’ organisations in the North.

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The alliance between the degrowth movement in the global North and EJ movements in the Global South has been explained as the logical consequence of their desire to combat similar disruptive drivers. In this paper, well-known activists for EJ in the Global South have critically examined this proposition. Significant differences between movements have been highlighted, in regards to terminology, underlying values, strategies for communication, dissemination and planning, history of ideas and political stances. These have been discussed with the explicit purpose of strengthening positive and constructive convergences between degrowth and Southern EJ movements.

These are possible and, as indicated above, desirable, despite the many divergences between the two broadly conceptualised sets of movements. However, they will only occur if alliances are mutually beneficial. Rather than looking for commonalities, analogies between both sets of movements are presented in relation to core themes of the Degrowth debate. In this paper, analogies are used as an epistemic

resource that facilitates cross-cultural encounters, since they promote learning without losing the essence of plurality. Analogies eventually help to identify homologies between movements that can become a base for collaboration.

Note that ‘a’ global strategic alliance is difficult in a context of plurality both in EJ and in degrowth movements. Yet, constructive processes are possible. Ideas such as those of subsistence-living, balance between all living beings and reciprocity, self-sufficiency and self-reliance open the possibility for debates in which both sets of movements can contribute. From there, specific alliances on concrete projects may flourish around topics such as convivial technologies, critique of debt, neoliberalism and accelerationism, and the support of alternative economies. With this in mind, and building on the political experience of the authors, some recommendations are presented so as to further progress towards a conversation between movements.

- a) Alternative terminologies need to be found. Admittedly, it is necessary to disseminate more broadly and clearly what degrowth is, in the South. The heterogeneity and pluralism within degrowth ideas themselves are still little known. Yet, organisations in the South have participated little in the conceptual development of the degrowth. Leaving aside the well-known critiques about ‘degrowth’ as an unfortunate term, a revised terminology is needed that gives people in the South an opportunity to contribute. In the terminological and conceptual exchange, proponents of degrowth need to be explicit about points such as: what should the debate focus on? Who needs to degrow? Where and when should degrowth start? For instance, should it start in places where consumption can no longer be sustained by locally available natural resources?
- b) Recognise diversity of contexts and entry points. Explicit calls from degrowth researchers calling for an organic alliance between plural movements, rather than imposing a homogeneous model for transformation, do not alter the fact that worldwide interest in degrowth has resulted from a body of literature emerging from Northern countries. EJ movements around the globe represent a multiplicity of grassroots experiences, struggles and strategies, each one coming from a different history and territory. There is not a correct strategy or principle for all movements, even if this is the idea of down-scaling the impact of humans on the planet. Every exchange is embedded in context and experience. As such, there will unlikely be ‘an’ alliance, but specific practices of solidarity with other people’s struggles and concerns. In each case, the entry point for the discussion may be very different. A corollary for degrowth researchers would be to articulate explicitly the contextual nature of their studies. Generic messages which do not situate the researchers themselves and their analysis in a clear manner may be counter-productive.
- c) Aim at tactic alliances based on concrete cases and examples, and only then think about strategic alliances. The conversation can start from identifying and exploring practical links. For this, EJ organisations propose to start asking ourselves about the relation between degrowth and the campaigns and projects EJ movements are currently engaged in, from transport mega-projects to young people’s groups opposing oil extraction in the Amazon. These events overlap with degrowth politics and may become key sources of concrete alliances. There is also an invitation to examine the alliances that degrowth has already created with some local EJ movements in the North, and to explore together the agreements and disagreements from such processes.
- d) Accept that timing matters in the conversation between movements. For an understanding of degrowth to flourish in the South, it needs to connect with the identities and realities of the Global South. This is a process and takes time. Degrowth is a useful frame that has been very effective and clearly positive for social movements and intellectuals in the North. That was the context for which this transition paradigm was intended. There it has created important



alliances and has generated strong multiplier effects. Whether it will also connect with the movements in the Global South depends on the necessity and opportunity of this discussion there. A line of thought indicates that degrowing in the Global North may make more space for growth in the Global South e.g., in relation to carbon emissions. One could argue that the Global North must degrow because it is consuming too much. As elaborated above, there are homologous ideas between degrowth and EJ movements, and mutual learning has already started through existing collaborations. This is promising, but it is up to the people of the Global South which ideas to endorse and when. The same goes for movements in the North.

The need for EJ and degrowth movements to work together is fundamental if they are to become more influential in their respective scopes of action, and to offer each other solidarity where feasible. The global influence of social movements is undeniable, as witnessed when the green groups walked out of UN climate talks in 2013. However, the situation today for EJOs in the South is different, and not necessarily

better than it was five or ten years ago. Alliances with a thriving set of movements such as degrowth is therefore beneficial, and surely welcome, as long as they reinforce each other's strengths and do not unintentionally create new forms of intellectual domination.

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### Annex 1. Interview Script

1. What are your information sources about the Degrowth debate? Do you consider information gaps as a barrier for an alliance between Degrowth and other movements around the world?
2. Which are your main concerns, or critiques about the Degrowth propositions?

[For a short overview (definition, short history, strategies and dimensions) you can check the webpage of Research and Degrowth (R&D) [www.degrowth.org](http://www.degrowth.org)].

3. Which are the analogies between the core themes in the Degrowth debate and environmental justice context that you know the best?

a) In the context of the environmental justice struggles in the country(-ies) where your organisation operates?

[You can use the table next for answering both questions. The listed core themes are taken from the section ‘Dimensions’ in the R&D webpage, where you can find a brief description of each one].

Core themes in the degrowth debate	a) Analogies with environmental justice struggles	b) Analogies with current activities in your organisation
Time		
Resources availability		
Hard Infrastructure		
Finances		
Institutions and socio-economic organisation		
Commons <sup>a</sup>		
Social comparison		
Material needs		
Consumer imaginary		

<sup>a</sup> Not listed in R&D webpage, added to this list after the exchange with the interviewees.

4. Final comments?

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