



Group Assembly Process (GAP) - Stirring Paper

Degrowth by leisure – step down the upwards escalator!

by Christer Sanne

Western economies tend to increase their labour productivity by a couple of percent annually. Since the volume of paid work is more or less constant, 2% higher productivity per year for 20 years amounts to 50 % economic growth, larger production volumes and consumption. But for a sustainable society, we need to reduce the present consumption, in particular in areas with a high environmental impact like travelling, housing and material consumption in general.

This means that we have a *moving* target of growth before we can even approach a degrowth in the economy. If degrowth is taken in the literal sense as a measure of registered economic activity, it requires reduced inputs to the economy. But higher productivity is by and large a matter of technical development that we can benefit from and should accept. Instead we can and must *reduce the working hours*. This must also be regarded as a positive development: more leisure does appeal to most people, especially as part of a general change in society.

The situation can be pictured as an upward going escalator of rising production due to the productivity increases that bring us up to ever more unsustainable levels of consumption. To counteract it, we must take deliberate action by stepping down the escalator, matching the higher productivity with a reduced work volume.

We might also “slow down the escalator” by refraining from some types of productivity growth. This may be justified for changes that are harmful from other aspects, e.g. in farming, animal husbandry or fishing. We may also consider switching to economic sectors that are less harmful for the environment, such as care services or education. In the main, however, I believe that degrowth must rely on a reduced volume of work. Thus the aim is to reduce the *work volume* but it must not result in a loss of jobs. By sharing the “socially necessary work” between those who want to work – including the growing number of unemployed – everyone can enjoy shorter hours. Work sharing also has practical implications like training, geographical distribution etc but those are issues we already deal with today.

Shorter hours has classical proponents in the economic and philosophical literature. A famous essay from 1930 by J M Keynes (*“The Economic Possibilities of our Grandchildren”*) is based on the same assumption as above that labour productivity increases steadily. Keynes proposes that this will lead to a production that can satisfy our needs and a gradual liberation from the onus of work. He even prophesized that his grandchildren might be able to satisfy their needs with a 15-hour workweek. Advocates of shorter hours also include Karl Marx, J S Mills, Bertrand Russell and Andre Gorz. They all share a vision of

“working less and living more” that could be a model for degrowth or for an ecological Steady State of the 21st century.

These writers all insist – and this is crucial – that work is a means to an end, not an end in itself. This is still a radical idea and the idea of shorter hours has proved difficult to sell politically in the last decades. It obviously runs counter to the interests of the employers but also to the main political agenda because more work means increasing tax bases and economic growth – in short it spells “progress”.

In practice, Keynes’ prophesy about 15 hours work per week is hardly interesting since he neglects a number of issues that we have to consider: Public services like health, education and the care of children, handicapped and elderly can hardly increase their productivity because they basically offer person-to-person services which must take their time. This will increase the share of such work within the total work volume. The demographic pattern, with a growing share of elderly, will also increase the need for such services and demand more work. There are also claims that switching to non-renewable energy sources might require more labour input. The productivity growth still allows for a sizeable reduction of the work hours: if the whole increase were to be used to cut down hours, we could have a steady production and still reach a 30 hour week within 15 years. This is a great step on the road to a degrowth society but shorter hours seems to be under-discussed, under-researched and under-promoted in this context.

Of course degrowth can mean more than an economic arithmetic. Degrowth by shorter hours offers a vision of a more humane society that makes other activities and ways of life possible. Unpaid work in the released time could offer new opportunities to fulfil various desires

But individuals changing their working time is likely to be insufficient for two related reasons. First people are social animals who like to do as others do. This applies to working patterns just like it does to e.g. consumption. Second, the idea of choosing work hours individually seems to be outside the mindset of most people (even if there is nascent understanding that we cannot, for ecological reasons, consume more and so we might as well work and earn less). “Full time” work is an ingrained habit that one is reluctant to question. All in all, it is necessary to act collectively and change the definition of “full time”. Many actors need to be involved: the government, the trade unions, the employers and the employees and their families. Traditions may differ between countries and the solutions will be different due to organisational patterns and legal frames.

So why is our society so reluctant to walk down the escalator?

Today’s politics points in the very opposite direction, for *more* work, “creating jobs” in order to promote growth and avoid unemployment (which is obviously not just a personal dilemma but also a political one). But the only “permitted” remedy for unemployment is economic growth. Employers are also reluctant to shorter hours for the practical problems it may entail. They take no responsibility for those who fall outside the labour market – they are left to the government to deal with.

But we must also ask why employees and their organisations, the trade unions, seem indifferent to the issues. A number of questions need to be discussed:

- a) the economic effects of a non-growing income: although average incomes have doubled since the 40-hour week was established, this has not benefitted everyone
- b) are people in general ready to trade higher income for free time? There is a lot of evidence from surveys to support this but it is contrary to a common belief
- c) the competition for jobs (making employees likely to accept employers demands)
- d) the problem of being different in the workplace (which can only be met by changing the norm for “normal” work hours)
- e) the need for adjusting living patterns within the family with shorter hours

- f) different perspectives between rank and file in the trade unions about shorter hours.

In sum: I suggest that more attention should be given to the importance of shorter hours as a means to degrowth. The notion of degrowth is a rather theoretical concept (and very much in opposition to established political thinking) but everyone can understand and appreciate shorter hours.