



Group Assembly Process (GAP) - Stirring Paper

Empowering the Willing – Practicing the Transformation

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The successful establishment of a degrowth-society, characterised by a high quality of life, requires a fundamental social and economic paradigm shift, both at the macro¹ and the micro level². This paper focuses on the micro level and the so-called **bottom-up approach**. If the individual production, consumption and interaction behaviour of a **critical mass**³ of people can successfully be influenced – thus the initial thesis of the paper – then it would be possible to induce a post-growth society.

In addition, we assume, that a critical mass of people, which are willing to change their lifestyle in a way that would significantly reduce global resource consumption and growth in production as well as considerably increase the overall quality of life, already exists. Thus, the main challenge would not consist in convincing a sufficient amount of people of the necessity of economic degrowth or a fundamental paradigm shift, but in providing them with the necessary incentives and assistance, required to implement the existing will to change. As a consequence, overall consumption and production would decrease and economic degrowth would take place.

There is good will, but...

Only a few doubt the necessity of a fundamental paradigm shift towards a sustainable economic system, which cultivates a responsible management of natural resources and in which economic returns are allocated more equitably. For instance, a survey in Germany came to the conclusion that *“under the impression of the European economic and debt crisis eight out of ten German citizens wish for a new economic order. Above all it should strengthen environmental protection, ensure the careful use of resources and more strongly take into account social equity and cohesion.”*⁴

The majority of the interviewees seems to acknowledge its part of the responsibility and is willing to contribute to the necessary change. According to a survey conducted by the Forsa Institute,⁵ *“acting in a sustainable manner is particularly important to Germans. Hence,*

¹ Referring to social subsystems (for example the global economic system).

² Including the individual human behaviour and the direct relationships between human beings.

³ In his latest book ‚Selbst denken – Eine Anleitung zum Widerstand‘ Harald Welzer assumes that 3-5% of the population would suffice.

⁴ Quote translated from German: TNS-EMNID; im Auftrag der Bertelsmann Stiftung: http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/cps/rde/xchg/bst/hs.xsl/nachrichten_113236.htm; http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/cps/rde/xbcr/SID-22F1E27B-5595E20D/bst/xcms_bst_dms_36359_36360_2.pdf (16.8.2012)

⁵ The Forsa Institute is an independent German corporation, which conducts market and opinion research.

95 percent of the interviewees try to save as much energy as possible. 91 percent indicate that, whenever they buy household appliances, they prefer products with low energy consumption and 79 percent indicate to specifically buy regional products such as fruits and vegetables.”⁶

Apparently however, the good intention to adopt a sustainable lifestyle is not actually carried out by many in practice. Reality shows that the economic framework essentially remains unchanged and the collective as well as the individual resource consumption is increasing steadily at a high rate.

Obstacles: or why good will is not enough

1. The majority of the interviewees, which indicated in the above mentioned survey that they wish for a new economic order, which strengthens environmental protection, ensures the careful use of resources and more strongly takes into account social equity and cohesion, consider - as the same survey reveals - economic growth “very important” or “important”.⁷ From a degrowth perspective such a standpoint obviously appears completely contradictory: How can economic growth ensure the careful use of resources, if we have identified it as being a main cause of the excessive use of global resources?

These contradictory statements might be due to the fact that the currently prevailing economic system is determined by a vast number of interacting and mutually influencing factors and that these global **interdependences** can hardly - presumably not at all - be grasped by the human brain in all their **complexity**. Therefore, persons pursuing identical goals may come to very diverging conclusions. Other people may simply resign confronted with the complexity of the issues. Thus, the will to lead a resource-friendly sustainable lifestyle alone does not provide a person with the prerequisites required to know what characterises a sustainable lifestyle and how to implement it.

2. In addition, the human being is a creature of habit and as such predominantly resorts to **accustomed behavioural patterns and automatisms**, which ease coping with everyday life. To break with a habit is not an easy task; what is more, the acquirement of alternative patterns of behaviour often requires the acquisition of new skills, which need to be learned first.

3. On top of that, human behaviour is always to a certain extent determined by a specific social, professional and leisure environment, which emits certain **social, economic and psychological constraints** on the individual. A person, who decides to turn his or her life upside down overnight, cannot necessarily expect their environment to be willing to adapt to it. For instance, he or she will risk drifting apart from his or her friends, acquaintances or even from their partner. Someone who decides to stop carrying out professional tasks that are not a hundred percent ethically acceptable or refuses to work more than 30 hours a week, might very well lose his or her job.

Facilitating the change

These obstacles must be dismantled in order to get a sufficient number of people who are willing to change to actually implement the transition towards a sustainable resource-

⁶ Quote translated from German: <http://www.verivox.de/nachrichten/umfrage-mehrheit-der-deutschen-will-nachhaltig-leben-83981.aspx> (14.2.2012)

⁷ According to the survey nine out of ten persons questioned maintain that economic growth is generally “very important” or “important”.

friendly lifestyle. However we cannot force anyone to lead his or her life the way we consider appropriate. What we can and should do, is to familiarise people with the benefits of a sustainable lifestyle and provide them with helpful incentives, guidance and support.

Guidelines for a good life

If it applies, that some good-willed people fail in the attempt to implement a sustainable lifestyle, because they are misled by the complexity of global interdependences or because they feel paralyzed by them, then the elaboration of a set of guidelines, which would be accessible in a condensed and easily comprehensible format, could be a key asset in realizing the transformation. Such guidelines would describe what a sustainable lifestyle could look like and especially how to acquire it. This evidently needs to be an adaptable device, since not all people are subjected to the exact same preconditions, but certain templates could be developed.

Training programmes

As already pointed out above, adopting a sustainable lifestyle implies breaking habits and acquiring alternative skills and behavioural patterns.⁸ Giving up a car means having to plan differently in order to reach destinations in a similar manner by public transportation or other means. Another possibility is finding pastimes and working places available in the vicinity of ones home. Quitting ones regular job means having to learn how to manage on less money and possibly how to satisfy ones basic needs by other means; for instance through self-production and repairing. Hence, in order to help people to accomplish the transition towards a sustainable lifestyle, easily accessible “alternative lifestyle training facilities” would represent another key factor: learning groups, Do-It-Yourself festivals, thematic holiday camps, school curricula, which are adjusted to sustainable lifestyles, etc.

Mainstreaming

Too many people do not consider a sustainable resource-friendly lifestyle as a viable option; instead they associate it exclusively with hippies and dropouts. In order to counter social, economic and psychological constraints, which hinder the change in individual behaviour, a sustainable lifestyle needs to become socially acceptable. A possible approach consists in connecting the people inclined to change, in order to make them experience social cohesion, instead of social exclusion. Online as well as offline exchange platforms, working groups, house projects, and the like qualify for this purpose. Moreover, such common spaces facilitate mutual psychological support and the mutual transfer of skills.

In order to avoid, that these common spaces merely turn into a microcosm of a parallel society, they should be as open as possible and ties to the outside world should be cultivated. Degrowth campaigns should possibly focus on issues, that a large number of people can identify with. For instance, many people consider so-called planned obsolescence absurd and morally unacceptable; as well as excessively long transport routes for goods. If a sufficient number of people feel encouraged to fight such practices, or at least to stop supporting them, they could contribute to a decrease in resource expenditure, consumption and production, without necessarily having to be avowed critics

⁸ Niko Paech stated in the documentary film ‚Weniger ist mehr‘: „Exercising a lifestyle, that is compatible with an economy without growth is not a declaration of intention, but a training programme.“

of the growth paradigm.

If in turn a critical mass of people adopts such behaviour, that kind of lifestyle would become socially acceptable, accordingly it would lose its alternative nature and the degree of alienation and external pressure would decrease considerably for those willing to undertake the transformation.

Our Contribution

At the beginning of this year, the good:matters team launched the 'good:matters//goods:don't - one year without stuff' initiative. It consists of the individual as well as collective challenge not to buy any consumer goods during one year.⁹ The one-year partial¹⁰ renouncement is meant as a critique of and an alternative to the current economic system and general behaviour of consumption. Incidentally it is meant to provide incentives to acquire new behavioural (consumption) patterns that are less detrimental to natural and human resources. Additionally, the corresponding facebook page allows subscribers to stay informed about new relevant developments and to exchange their experiences and thoughts with others. The initiative focuses on the following key questions: What characterises a sustainable lifestyle and with what means (incentives, impulses and tools) can a critical mass of people, which are already inclined to change, be lead to perform the transition towards a sustainable lifestyle and how can they be assisted in the respective undertaking?

⁹ For more information visit <http://goodmatters.de/pro-aktivismus/goodmatters-goodsdont/> and <https://www.facebook.com/goodmatters.net>.

¹⁰ Partial because it is a renouncement „only“ of new durable consumer goods.