

Degrowth 2

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With my daughter I was with a top riding instructor, who explained to her that even a talented horse dulls if the rider doesn't make a real connection with the horse. Anyone can sit on a horse, she said, but horsemanship is an art of connection. The thought just occurred to me that she was talking about how we all work and live, as avatars in a social media world. Losing and dulling passion is also the rule rather than the exception for us.

Continuous improvement, lifelong learning, plan-do-check-act... And yet every new day the planet is a little worse off than the day before! In the first 10 months of this year alone, an area the size of the Netherlands has been deforested and twice that area has been added to desert! Technology development, continuous improvement and quality approaches are (at most) aimed at doing the best possible. That's not the same as doing the right things. Implementing wrong (disastrous) practices as efficiently as possible is actually accelerating the ever-growing problems we face. We must switch from prosperity to well-being, economic degrowth in favour of ecological growth and increasing connectedness. Eight suggestions.

1. Live with passion (functioning as a “robot” in a system dictatorship is humanly far from ecologically sustainable). Hope springs eternal!
2. Think small-scale and diverse! A lot is possible. However, we are used (addicted) to scale up practically everything we do to “Bigger than Life” (blind copy-paste)! We must stop believing in 'one size fits all' solutions, because they side-line local ecological opportunities and challenges.
3. Labour offers the key to ecological recovery, because the damage to the ecology (environment and nature) is mainly the result of the labour process.
4. Be extremely critical when striving for efficiency. Often economically efficient scaling up is ecologically disastrous! Even in work and leisure, the fun and passion quickly wear off, if every step we take is continuously weighed in performance indicators and evaluation systems (see 1). Where nothing may fail, nothing new can arise! The mother of change is exploring, dreaming, messing around. Change is desperately needed!
5. Be critical of Big-Tech innovations, usually soon after the initial excitement, the serious drawbacks quickly emerge. An example. Globally, the Internet of Things and cloud computing are leading to more reckless storage of data (including chats, files, photos, videos, etc.). Presumably by 2050, data servers will use more energy than global air traffic before the Corona crisis. In addition, Innovative Technology often provides excellent solutions to wrong practices, which get us from bad to worse (for example, use AI to sustain large-scale agriculture even more “efficiently”)! Tech is much more about doing things right than about doing the right things!
6. Consume less! Whatever we do – heating our house, moving house, buying raw materials – let's realise that it really can be done with less. A thick sweater, or not all the fruits of the world in the supermarket every month, living with the season and the time of day, is no shame and not old-fashioned and narrow-minded. A 24-hour economy quickly costs more than the ecology can provide.
7. Don't go for short-term popularity, don't live for the likes on social media, but seek physical connection. Realize that no one has a monopoly on the truth, but that the social network we identify with sometimes defines our (un)truths more than our rationality (McRaney, 2022).
8. Don't turn away from politics, but be gentle. With all the social media and division, doing politics is not easy! Our politicians with too many scattered interests and partners, who (sometimes against their better judgement) are too preoccupied with themselves and their popularity, offer too little prospect of a substantial transition to more sustainability. Here too, Big-Tech (see point 5) plays a disastrous role with its algorithms and revenue models on social media. Developing awareness about this is essential.

Bar-On, Y. M., Phillips, R., & Milo, R. (2018). *The biomass distribution on Earth. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 115(25), 6506-6511.

McRaney, D. (2022). *How minds change*. Amsterdam: Maven Publishing.