

Discovering degrowth practices: exploring the relationship between market pressures and green jobs in worker cooperatives

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Background

What is Degrowth?

Degrowth is an academic field and social movement that argues the pursuit of infinite economic growth is ecologically and socially incompatible with life on earth. Societies must transition to steady-state economies that operate within planetary boundaries. This requires a fair and just social foundation and importantly, a transformation in how work and employment are organised.

Figure: The Doughnut Economics Model: A framework for sustainable societies that defines a 'safe and just space for humanity.'

Green jobs

At the level of the worker, green jobs:

- Are made up of tasks that actively combat or do not contribute to climate change
- Enable a sustainable work-lifestyle

A job influences the sustainability of work-lifestyles in 4 ways:

1. The income it provides
2. The use of time it requires
3. The habits it forms
4. The political views it encourages

It has been shown that worker cooperatives are capable of providing green jobs.

Figure: A taxonomy of sustainable employment.

Methodology

Research strategy

This project will consist of a comparative case study. Cases will be selected through purposive and criterion sampling. These cases aim to capture worker cooperatives at different stages of degeneration and with different relationships to the market. Data on work practices and their sustainability will be collected through:

- Semi-structured interviews
- Participant observation
- Focus groups.

Data will be analysed from three perspectives:

- Horizontal comparison – organisational level
- Vertical comparison – societal level
- Transversal comparison – temporal level.

This approach aims to account for the cultural and historical structures inherent in organisational contexts.

Practice theory

Practice theory understands the social world as constantly made and remade through relations between individuals, artefacts and practices.

This project will use practice theory methods and tools to gather and analyse data on the relationship between market forces and the sustainability of work.

One such tool is the activity system map, which can produce a visual representation of the actors and structures involved in work practices. This tool will enable the comparison of activities across cases.

Figure: Activity system map.

Research Questions

1. How do market pressures influence the sustainability of work practices?
2. How do market pressures influence the sustainability of work-lifestyles?

Context

Worker Cooperatives

Worker cooperatives are organisations owned and managed by their workers. They come in many shapes and sizes but most try to adhere to the 7 cooperative principles.

The 7 cooperative principles:

1. Voluntary and open membership
2. Democratic member control
3. Member economic participation
4. Autonomy and independence
5. Education, training, and information
6. Cooperation among cooperatives
7. Concern for community

They tend to be non-hierarchical, have a great commitment to job quality and focus on metrics of success other than just profitability. Moreover, cooperatives exhibit greater environmental, economic and social sustainability than a traditional business.

In particular, not-for-profit worker cooperatives have been touted as having the potential to provide the green jobs of the future.

Therefore, this project will expand our understanding of the sustainability of jobs in worker cooperatives.

The degeneration thesis

Critics argue that a cooperative's principles will inevitably deteriorate due to the "omnipresent threat of capitalist imperatives".

Figure: cooperative regeneration framework.

As cooperatives grow, market pressures such as growth, efficiency, productivity and competition mean they must prioritise economic rationality.

However, others dispute the inevitability of degeneration – instead, cooperative principles can be maintained through the performance of regenerative practices.

Due to a cooperative's principles being directly linked to their sustainability, we need to understand how degeneration and regeneration impact the sustainability of worker cooperative jobs.

Contribution

The research gap

"Large data gaps exist for the micro-level (of green jobs), particularly the activities at the workplace, time-use effects of employment, and habitual and political influences of jobs."

This project will contribute to the gap by exploring how cooperative degeneration and regeneration influences:

- Work-lifestyles – the sustainability of lives outside of work
- Work practices – the sustainability of job roles and their tasks

"The degrowth proposal should thus more broadly tackle the material and discursive ways in which growth enables the reproduction of contemporary political-economic systems."

This research will contribute to this gap by exploring how market pressures (such as growth) influence the performance of labour and construction of job-roles.

Finally, this project will develop a needed understanding of not-for-profit worker cooperatives as a distinct type of organisation.

Methodological contribution

This project also has the potential to contribute to the methodological debate around case study and practice theory analysis, as: "the analysis of the case study is one of the least

developed aspects of the case study” and “because relationism and practice theories tend to refrain from developing analytical models, it is difficult to generalize how they understand the dynamics of transitions.

Therefore, the use of activity systems maps and horizontal, vertical and transversal comparison will provide a novel analytical approach.