

## Ideological Criticism of Sustainable Development: Degrowth and Challenges to Ecological Capitalism

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the limitations of ethical green consumption as a solution to the environmental crisis, highlighting how such practices operate within an economic system that in fact reinforces ecological degradation. Green consumption is seen as incapable of addressing the root causes of the crisis, as it remains trapped in the logic of endless growth, commodification, and the individualization of ecological responsibility. This research is crucial given the increasing popularity of ethical consumption narratives in policymaking and popular culture, despite their often illusory contributions to sustainability. The study employs a qualitative approach grounded in semiotics and interpretive analysis. Data are collected through a literature review of academic texts, policy documents, and media narratives that engage with the concepts of green consumption and *degrowth*. The analysis deconstructs signs, symbols, and metaphors within sustainability discourse and situates them within broader social and ideological contexts. The main finding reveals that ethical green consumption functions as an ideological mechanism that stabilizes the capitalist economic system through moral aesthetics, rather than as a transformative effort that addresses the ecological crisis at its root. The discourses of green growth and sustainable development promoted by global institutions are framed in technocratic language that conceals power relations, global inequality, and ecological imperialism. In contrast, *degrowth* emerges as an alternative paradigm that proposes a redefinition of prosperity based on sufficiency, redistribution, reciprocity, and global ecological justice—particularly through selective contraction in wealthy nations and development autonomy for the Global South. The study's implications point to the need for a shift in sustainability policy and culture—from an emphasis on individual responsibility toward systemic transformation and global justice. This research

contributes original insights by integrating semiotic analysis and critical theory to uncover the growth ideology embedded in green consumption and by rearticulating *degrowth* not as austerity, but as a political, ecological, and social vision for a just and sustainable future.

## ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan mengkaji keterbatasan konsumsi etis hijau sebagai solusi terhadap krisis lingkungan, dengan menyoroti bagaimana praktik tersebut beroperasi dalam sistem ekonomi yang justru memperkuat kerusakan ekologis. Konsumsi hijau dinilai tidak mampu menyentuh akar masalah karena terjebak dalam logika pertumbuhan tanpa akhir, komodifikasi, dan individualisasi tanggung jawab ekologi. Penelitian ini penting dilakukan mengingat semakin populernya narasi konsumsi etis dalam kebijakan dan budaya populer, meskipun kontribusinya terhadap keberlanjutan seringkali bersifat ilusioner. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis semiotika dan analisis interpretatif. Data dikumpulkan melalui studi pustaka atas literatur akademik, dokumen kebijakan, dan narasi media yang memuat konsep konsumsi hijau dan *degrowth*. Analisis dilakukan dengan membongkar tanda-tanda, simbol, dan metafora dalam wacana keberlanjutan, serta menempatkannya dalam konteks sosial dan ideologis yang lebih luas. Temuan utama menunjukkan bahwa konsumsi etis hijau berfungsi sebagai mekanisme ideologis yang menstabilkan sistem ekonomi kapitalistik melalui estetika moral, bukan sebagai upaya transformatif yang menjawab akar krisis ekologis. Wacana pertumbuhan hijau dan pembangunan berkelanjutan yang didorong oleh lembaga-lembaga global dibingkai dalam bahasa teknokratis yang menutupi relasi kuasa, ketimpangan global, dan imperialisme ekologis. Sebaliknya, *degrowth* tampil sebagai paradigma alternatif yang mengusulkan redefinisi kemakmuran berbasis kecukupan, redistribusi, relasi timbal balik, dan keadilan ekologis global—khususnya melalui kontraksi selektif di negara-negara kaya dan otonomi pembangunan bagi negara-negara Selatan. Implikasi penelitian ini mencakup perlunya pergeseran arah kebijakan dan budaya keberlanjutan dari fokus pada tanggung jawab individu menuju transformasi sistemik dan keadilan global. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi orisinal dengan mengintegrasikan pendekatan semiotik dan teori kritis untuk mengungkap ideologi pertumbuhan dalam konsumsi hijau serta merumuskan ulang *degrowth* bukan sebagai penghematan, tetapi sebagai visi politik, ekologis, dan sosial untuk masa depan yang adil dan berkelanjutan.

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## 1. PENDAHULUAN

A series of disasters that have struck various regions across Indonesia since the beginning of the year reveals that the ecological crisis is no longer a future threat—it is a present reality (Triastari et al., 2021). Data from the Indonesian National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB) recorded 340 disasters as of February 7, resulting in 84 deaths, 13 missing persons, and 1.3 million displaced individuals (Salman, 2025). The majority of these were hydrometeorological disasters such as floods, extreme weather, and landslides, which, according to Abdul Muhari, Head of BNPB's Disaster Data, Information, and Communication Center, reflect a shift in disaster types since 2023 due to climate change and extractive activities. In fact, although the total number of disasters decreased in 2024, the number of hydrometeorological events rose sharply. Indonesia is also experiencing an ecological deficit of 42%, according to the Global Footprint Network (2020), indicating that the nation's resource consumption far exceeds the regenerative capacity of its ecosystems (Hanum, 2025). This phenomenon reflects not only poor environmental governance, but also suggests that the ecological crisis is rooted in an exploitative political-economic system. Therefore, critical inquiry into the systems and ideologies underpinning this destruction is urgently needed, both for scientific advancement and sustainable public policy.

Various studies have investigated the causes and consequences of ecological degradation in Indonesia using diverse approaches. First, studies on deforestation and land-use change have identified illegal logging, land clearing by fire, plantation expansion, and peatland degradation as the main drivers of biodiversity loss and rising carbon emissions (Austin et al., 2019; Nurhidayah & Alam, 2020; Taylor, 2010). Second, research on aquatic and coastal ecosystems shows that nearly 50% of Indonesia's coastal zones have suffered severe damage due to anthropogenic pressures, while watersheds experience erosion and landslides that disrupt water availability (Anggalini et al., 2021; Rudianto & Bintoro, 2019). Third, literature on urbanization and population growth indicates that rapid demographic expansion and urban sprawl have led to widespread pollution, land-use conversion, and ecosystem disruption (Ashgaf et al., 2024; Wagianto et al., 2024). Although these studies have revealed many dimensions of the ecological crisis, most remain focused on technical or sectoral factors and rarely address its ideological and structural roots. Few have examined how the logic of global capitalism—with its imperative for infinite growth and commodification of nature—systemically reproduces ecological collapse. This gap reveals a pressing need to analyze the ecological crisis through a critical perspective that links global economic structures, the ideology of growth, and environmental colonialism.

This study aims to critique the underlying assumptions behind the idea of ethical green consumption, which is often promoted as a solution to the environmental crisis. It argues that ethical consumption, rather than addressing ecological problems, operates within an exploitative global capitalist framework and thus fails to confront the structural roots of the crisis. The study focuses on how green consumption reduces sustainability to individualized, transactional behavior and obscures the central role of overproduction and growth ideology in environmental destruction. Accordingly, this research explores and strengthens an alternative framework: *degrowth*—an approach that advocates for deliberate reductions in production and consumption, and a shift in values toward collective well-being, equity, and reciprocal relationships with ecosystems.

This research argues that the ecological crisis is not a dysfunction of the system, but the logical outcome of how contemporary capitalism operates—prioritizing economic growth and profit above ecological limits. Rather than solving environmental degradation, ethical green consumption merely offers a moral alibi to sustain excessive consumption under the guise of responsibility. Therefore, addressing the crisis requires more than individual reform; it demands systemic change and an ontological shift toward a post-capitalist system that centers life—not capital—as the foundation of civilization. This argument draws upon critical literature on consumption and

production under contemporary capitalism and a theoretical analysis of the *degrowth* paradigm as an ecological and social alternative.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

The unit of analysis in this study consists of theoretical texts, discursive concepts, and cultural symbols that shape contemporary understandings of sustainability, capitalism, and *degrowth*. The concepts under examination include terms, narratives, and metaphors found in academic literature, policy documents, and popular texts that promote, sustain, or challenge growth-based economic paradigms. The research focuses on how ideas such as “green growth,” “decoupling,” and “capitalist accumulation” are symbolically produced and constructed.

This study adopts a qualitative research design using a semiotic and interpretive approach (Djunatan et al., 2024; Lune & Berg, 2017). This approach is suitable for uncovering the symbolic structures and ideological meanings embedded in the language and representations of sustainability and economic growth. The semiotic method is used to analyze how linguistic and visual signs naturalize dominant narratives, while interpretive analysis enables a critical reading of the social, historical, and political contexts in which those meanings are produced. The combination of these two methods is effective in deconstructing ideological constructions within texts and examining how alternatives like *degrowth* are articulated—or marginalized—within public discourse.

The data in this study derive from secondary texts, including academic journal articles, critical theory books, environmental policy reports, and popular literature addressing issues of consumption, economic growth, ecological crisis, and *degrowth*. These data encompass discourses produced in both global and national contexts and reflect a wide range of ideological positions on development and sustainability.

The data collection technique involved systematic literature review. This process included retrieving and identifying relevant texts and documents through academic databases such as Scopus and Google Scholar, as well as other sources such as environmental organization reports and think tank publications. The search utilized keywords such as “green growth,” “degrowth,” “ecological crisis,” “capitalism,” and “green consumption.” Each document was reviewed and selected based on its thematic relevance and conceptual depth.

The data analysis employed semiotic and interpretive methods (Carver, 2020; Yanow, 2014). The semiotic analysis focused on interpreting the meanings of linguistic and visual signs within the texts, including technical terms, metaphors, and symbolic constructions that frame sustainability discourse. For example, phrases such as “planet as a finite resource” and “degrowth as post-capitalist abundance” were analyzed to uncover the underlying perspectives embedded within such narratives. Subsequently, the interpretive analysis situated the semiotic findings within broader contexts, utilizing critical theory to understand power relations, productivist ideology, and the cultural dominance of consumerism. By integrating these two approaches, the study aims to reveal both the symbolic and material limits of the growth paradigm and to elaborate on the potential of *degrowth* as an alternative grounded in ecological and social justice.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Ethical Green Consumption as a Moral Alibi in the Capitalist System

Mainstream responses to the global ecological crisis continue to be dominated by the narrative of “green growth”—the idea that economic growth can be sustained through technological innovation and efficient market mechanisms. At the core of this narrative lies the promise of *decoupling*, or the separation of economic growth from environmental degradation, either relatively (reducing emissions per unit of GDP) or absolutely (reducing total emissions and resource consumption even as GDP continues to grow) (Hickel & Kallis, 2020). However, empirical evidence demonstrates that such absolute decoupling has never occurred at the scale

or speed necessary to prevent ecological collapse. Global material production continues to rise alongside GDP growth, and while efficiency has improved, it often leads to *rebound effects*—where cheaper energy and goods increase overall demand, ultimately nullifying any ecological benefit (Aoki-Suzuki, 2015). This indicates that the root problem lies not in ignorance or a lack of innovation, but in the structure of the economic system itself. As Giorgos Kallis (2015) emphasizes, the belief that scientific data and rational persuasion alone can halt growth is flawed, as it overlooks the structural power of society that shapes both the capacity and will to move beyond the growth paradigm.

Growth is not something that individuals, firms, or states can simply choose to abandon. In capitalism, growth is a structural imperative. Firms must grow to survive in competitive markets, states rely on GDP growth to maintain economic stability and fund public services, while individuals depend on consumption to meet basic needs and achieve social recognition. In this context, ecological action can no longer be reduced to moral or individual choices. On the contrary, dominant institutional structures and economic logics render self-restraint nearly impossible. Even for those fully aware of the ecological crisis and the dangers of endless growth, the system offers no viable exit—people remain locked into the reproduction of growth due to the absence of institutional and material alternatives (Kallis et al., 2020). This reveals the power of the growth ideology: it operates not only through GDP metrics but also through cultural norms that equate progress with expansion and well-being with consumption. Such thinking naturalizes growth as an inevitable human condition, while dismissing alternatives like *degrowth* as utopian or unrealistic.

In Indonesia, the green economy narrative has gained increasing prominence over the past decade, particularly in policy and national development discourse. However, its implementation remains severely constrained by structural and historical factors. The green economy is defined as the integration of economic growth with environmental sustainability, aimed at reducing emissions, improving resource efficiency, and preserving biodiversity. In practice, sectors such as renewable energy, industrial efficiency, and waste management have become the primary targets of green economy programs (Anderson et al., 2016). The Indonesian government has set a net-zero emissions target by 2060 and, through initiatives like the circular economy, expects green development to generate millions of jobs and promote sustainable GDP growth. The Ministry of Industry has reported energy savings of up to IDR 3.2 trillion and water savings of IDR 169 billion through green industrial practices. Government reports also claim that implementing a circular economy in five priority sectors could raise GDP by IDR 638 trillion and create 4.4 million green jobs by 2030 (Habibullah, 2025).

Yet beneath these numbers, the dominant economic structure remains unchanged. The economic pillar of Indonesia's Green Economy Index shows the greatest growth, while the environmental pillar lags far behind. This suggests that the core focus remains on economic expansion rather than ecological transformation. Even renewable energy, a key pillar of green transition, often depends on large-scale mineral extraction that replicates the same patterns of resource exploitation found in fossil energy. Meanwhile, unequal access to green jobs, the absence of environmental education in higher education curricula, and low public awareness further indicate that the envisioned green economy lacks both structural and cultural grounding. Indonesia's development history shows that throughout the early 2000s, the government prioritized rapid economic growth to combat poverty, with sustainability remaining a secondary concern. The extractive industry has continued to serve as the backbone of the national economy, while environmental issues are frequently marginalized in public policy (Citra, 2024).

Ultimately, the myth of green growth functions as a rhetorical instrument to sustain an economic system that is fundamentally incompatible with planetary ecological limits. It creates the illusion that ecologically sustainable growth is possible without transforming the underlying economic structure. Society is encouraged to believe that consumption can be "ethical" or "green," while in reality, such consumption still operates within the logic of accumulation and



expansion. Rather than offering a solution, green consumption acts as a moral alibi that allows excess to persist under the guise of individual responsibility.

Figure 1. Environmental Awareness Campaign in the Form of Eco-Bag Product



Source: Salsabila (2023)

This phenomenon is further reinforced by the growing prevalence of environmental awareness campaigns in everyday life—spanning social media, community movements, and visually oriented lifestyle practices. Images of individuals carrying tote bags labeled “Save the Earth,” as illustrated above, have become common representations of personal expression in sustainability discourse. Canvas bags, reusable water bottles, bamboo straws, and recycled clothing are promoted as symbols of ecological awareness. However, such symbolic expressions often only scratch the surface of much deeper structural issues. Green consumption in these forms tends to reflect moral aesthetics rather than systemic change. In many cases, these campaigns function more as lifestyle performances or markers of personal identity—a means of signaling concern without transforming the production and consumption patterns that underlie the ecological crisis (Salsabila, 2023).

Advertising and media narratives further reinforce the image of green consumption as a matter of individual responsibility, divorced from the global economic system. Within the landscape of contemporary capitalism, environmental care—such as the “Save the Earth” tote bag—has itself become a commodified object. Consumers are encouraged to “save the planet” by purchasing eco-friendly products, yet always within the logic of market exchange. Rather than challenging exploitative production models, such narratives normalize sustainability as a purchasable commodity, while marginalizing structural change (Lau et al., 2022). These representations reflect green consumerism, in which acts of consumption are framed as a form of activism, even as the root causes of the crisis remain unaddressed.

Table 1. Representations of Green Consumption in Media and Their Structural Critiques			
Aspect	Example of Representation	Symbolic Meaning	Structural Critique
Eco-friendly lifestyle	“Save the Earth” tote bag, reusable bottle, bamboo straw	Personal concern for the planet	Framed as individual choice but fails to address capitalist production structures

<b>Media campaigns and advertising</b>	Green product ads, “go green” promotions, sustainability themes on social media	Green aesthetics as moral and ethical identity	Promotes green consumerism: consumption continues under the guise of responsibility
<b>Product-based environmental solutions</b>	Recycled goods, “eco-friendly” labels, environmental merchandise	Consumption as environmental action	Reduces ecological crisis to consumer choice rather than systemic transformation
<b>Individual responsibility</b>	Slogans like “change your lifestyle,” “buy green,” “consume responsibly”	Ecological responsibility is personalized	Ignores role of governments, corporations, and global production systems
<b>Social effects of green aesthetics</b>	Moral branding through eco-friendly goods	Green lifestyle as status and awareness symbol	Obscures fact that consumption still occurs within a growth-driven capitalist framework

Source: Research findings, 2025

Based on these findings, it becomes evident that the green growth paradigm—widely promoted as a solution to the ecological crisis—only offers surface-level changes without addressing the structural roots of the problem. The promise that technology and markets can decouple economic growth from environmental harm has proven to be unrealized. The decoupling that is often cited remains largely illusory, as efficiency gains frequently result in rebound effects, where increased consumption offsets environmental savings. Within global capitalism, growth is not a voluntary choice—it is a systemic necessity embedded in how firms, states, and individuals operate. Even green consumption discourse, often presented through lifestyle campaigns such as the use of “Save the Earth” tote bags, functions more as a symbol of identity than as a genuine strategy for ecological transformation. Herein lies the irony of green consumption: it promises ecological change while remaining entrenched in market logics that demand perpetual expansion.

From the analyzed data, at least four key patterns emerge. First, a strong rhetorical pattern exists in the use of technocratic language—such as green economy, net zero emission, and circularity—which wraps the ecological crisis in promises of solutions that fail to confront production structures. Second, the structural logic of capitalism emerges dominantly, where the imperative of growth is tied to capital accumulation, market competition, and state dependence on GDP. Third, a pattern of transformative illusion surfaces in green consumption narratives, which blur the line between symbolic awareness and substantive change. Society is encouraged to believe that purchasing decisions contribute meaningfully to environmental salvation, while such acts remain regulated by the same production systems. Fourth, there is a cultural tendency to naturalize economic growth as a marker of progress, rendering alternatives like degrowth irrational or implausible in public discourse.

These patterns reinforce one another and create conditions in which the ideology of growth not only dominates policy but also infiltrates everyday life and moral expression. As such, the green economy narrative fails not only as an ecological strategy, but also functions as an instrument for reproducing the dominant ideology.

Language and Metaphor in Sustainability Discourse that Naturalizes Growth

In mainstream sustainability discourse, terms such as *green growth*, *sustainable development*, and *decoupling* have evolved into hegemonic linguistic instruments that shape the global horizon of environmental thinking. These terms do not emerge neutrally; instead, they carry ideological weight, naturalizing the assumption that economic growth is not only inevitable but also the sole

path to prosperity, social justice, and planetary salvation. In various reports and official documents produced by international institutions such as the World Bank and the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), *green growth* and *sustainable development* are defined with technocratic precision: resource-use efficiency, pollution reduction, disaster resilience, and green investment stimulation. The World Bank explicitly defines *green growth* as a strategy that integrates economic development with environmental preservation through improved data systems, spatial planning, and energy transitions. Within this framework, human-made capital is expected to substitute for the degradation of natural capital—reflecting a deep belief that ecological damage can be managed, or even reversed, without abandoning the growth paradigm (Hapsari et al., 2024). The OECD, through a more systematic approach, emphasizes the need for *policy coherence*—that is, cross-sectoral and intergenerational policy integration—to ensure ecological justice for future generations. It reinforces the principle of *intergenerational equity* and promotes the SDGs as the central framework for global development. However, beneath this entire rhetoric lies one untouched assumption: that growth remains the irreplaceable foundation of collective human life (Mészáros, 1995, p. 33).

This kind of sustainability language does not function merely descriptively, but also acts as a form of symbolic power. When terms such as *green growth* are continually produced and reproduced, they act like incantations that enchant collective consciousness, creating the illusion that change is underway—when, in reality, the dominant capitalist structure remains intact. This rhetoric deceives the public by promoting the belief that the planet can be saved without fundamentally altering our way of life—without restructuring social relations, questioning production systems, or confronting market logic. Within this framing, growth is not merely preserved; it is glorified.

It is precisely in this context that *degrowth* emerges—not merely as a counter-economic theory, but as an epistemological and political project that rejects the foundational logic of modern development. As emphasized by Giorgos Kallis (2018) and Kohei Saito (2024), *degrowth* calls for a cessation of material growth and market transactions while building institutions, social relations, and subjectivities that enable humans to live well without dependency on expansion. *Degrowth* rejects the false promise that technological efficiency or green investment can rescue us from ecological collapse, which is itself a product of economic activity (Pirlea et al., 2023).

Rather than resting on scarcity or sacrifice, *degrowth* is grounded in an ethic of sufficiency, relationality, and care. It proposes slowness as a form of healing, as a release from the systemic exhaustion generated by capitalism's obsession with speed, efficiency, and consumption. In the *degrowth* vision, the meaning of life is not found in income or accumulation, but in meaningful social relationships, quality leisure time, and access to a thriving natural world. In a *degrowth*-oriented society, abundance is redefined—not as a surplus of goods and services, but as collective assurance of basic needs, safe communal spaces, vibrant democracy, and ecological regeneration. While in capitalist logic abundance is an exclusive right of those who can afford it, in *degrowth*, abundance is the outcome of redistribution, decentralization, and the subordination of accumulation to the logic of life. In this sense, *degrowth* is not merely an economic theory but an alternative cosmology that challenges the dominant mythology of development (Kallis et al., 2014).

What *degrowth* offers is not a nostalgic return to an idealized past, but rather a vision of the future that redefines human civilization based on ecological stability and social connectedness. It represents a political project aimed at liberating humanity from the tyranny of a logic that refuses limits, rejects any form of self-restraint, and equates growth with existence. While institutions like the World Bank and the OECD continue to promote green investment and financial sustainability within the growth paradigm, *degrowth* emerges as a radical voice of defiance—rejecting development as the only path forward and proposing a reconfiguration of values rooted in ecological solidarity, intergenerational justice, and the restoration of metabolic harmony between humans and the Earth. By integrating ontological, ecological, and political dimensions, *degrowth* is not about reduction—it is about liberation: liberation from false needs,



from imprisoning labor, and from the ideology of development that has neutralized the possibility of alternative futures.

In today’s global configuration, the dominance of the green development discourse is not merely rhetorical; it is also a governing practice that shapes policy horizons and collective imagination. When green growth and sustainability are framed as issues of efficiency, investment, and risk management, the ecological crisis is reduced to a technical problem solvable by experts and market actors. This approach depoliticizes ecological debates: it silences questions of who makes decisions, in whose interest, and at what cost. Within this framework, sustainability is not conceived as a radical restructuring of the human-nature relationship but as a new business opportunity for capital expansion. Consequently, energy transition projects can reproduce ecological colonialism, as green energy minerals are brutally extracted from the Global South in the name of saving the planet. In other words, when sustainability is handed over entirely to market logic and global financial institutions, the potential for transformation is diminished and redirected to reinforce an exploitative status quo.

*Degrowth* critiques this situation by asserting that discourse is not merely a communication tool—it is an ideological battlefield that determines what is perceived as realistic and possible (Kallis & Kallis, 2018). Within the dominant symbolic order, *degrowth* is constructed as a threat to progress—an irrational or utopian discourse incompatible with the real world. This reveals that resistance to capitalism is often marginalized not because it lacks substance, but because it does not fit the meaning frameworks sanctioned by power. Therefore, the struggle for *degrowth* is not only about designing alternative policies; it is also about dismantling dominant narratives that constrain social imagination. Political and cultural courage is needed to acknowledge that genuine sustainability may only be possible if we dare to reject the imperative of growth and begin to imagine a future founded not on expansion, but on stability, reciprocity, and consciously embraced limits. In this sense, *degrowth* is not anti-modernity—it is an invitation to build a new modernity: one that is more just, slower, more humane, and more attuned to a fragile yet full-of-potential world.

Table 2. Comparison of Sustainability Terms and Definitions in Global Discourse

Institution	Key Term	Definition / Core Components	Dominant Orientation
World Bank	<i>Green Growth</i>	Economic growth that preserves natural resources and the environment through efficiency, green investment, social protection, and spatial planning.	Techno-economic; upholds the growth paradigm
World Bank	<i>Sustainable Development</i>	An effort to balance three pillars—economic, social, and environmental—while ensuring intergenerational equity through economic growth and poverty reduction.	Reformist; growth as a prerequisite for well-being
OECD	<i>Sustainable Development</i>	An integrated approach encompassing social, economic, and environmental dimensions, emphasizing policy coherence and intergenerational equity.	Normative-technocratic; avoids production structure issues
United Nations	<i>Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)</i>	A global set of goals addressing poverty alleviation, gender equality, clean energy, economic growth, and climate action.	Instrumentalist; sustainability framed within development

Source: Research findings, 2025.

The comparative table above illustrates that terms such as *green growth* and *sustainable development*, though widely used by global institutions like the World Bank, OECD, and the United Nations, contain fundamental internal contradictions. On one hand, these terms claim a commitment to environmental protection, poverty reduction, and intergenerational balance. On the other hand, their definitions consistently rest on the assumption that economic growth can—and should—continue indefinitely, as long as it is managed efficiently and inclusively. In other words, sustainability is not framed as a paradigm shift, but rather as a technocratic adjustment within the dominant capitalist framework. As such, sustainability discourse promises transformation while simultaneously avoiding the systemic roots of the global ecological crisis. Precisely because of this, these terms stabilize the system by projecting a “green” image while preserving the exploitative global architecture of production and consumption.

A semiotic analysis of the language and core concepts found in official documents and institutional narratives reveals four major patterns showing how contemporary sustainability discourse naturalizes the logic of growth. First, we observe the metaphor of technology as savior, which frames the ecological crisis as a technical problem—rather than a political one—and offers solutions based on innovation, efficiency, and green energy investment. This view reduces the complexity of the crisis to a matter of technical capacity, rather than power relations and value systems. Second, there is a construction of *green growth* as a technocratic myth, where the idea that “we can grow the economy while reducing emissions” is promoted as a future development dogma—even though empirical evidence on absolute global decoupling does not support this claim. Third, sustainability itself is reduced to a project of administrative efficiency, rather than social transformation. Terms like *sustainable development*, in both the World Bank and OECD’s versions, do not aim to restructure the relationship between humans, the economy, and ecosystems. Instead, they focus on risk management, spatial planning, and the accumulation of “human-made capital” to compensate for environmental degradation. Fourth, the epistemic dominance of international institutions is evident. Through their global legitimacy and policy authority, these institutions monopolize the language of sustainability, establishing it as a universal standard while constraining the imaginative space of civil society, local communities, and transformative movements like *degrowth* to propose truly alternative sustainability cosmologies.

### **Degrowth as an Alternative Paradigm and a Challenge to the Hegemony of Consumerism**

In the landscape of ecological crisis driven by excessive consumption and the logic of endless growth, *degrowth* emerges as a radical paradigm that dismantles the foundational assumptions of global capitalism. Rather than centering well-being on material accumulation and economic expansion, degrowth proposes the reorganization of economic life around principles of sufficiency, ecological regeneration, and collective well-being. This paradigm rejects the notion that prosperity can only be achieved through increased output. Instead, it emphasizes that a planned reduction in production and consumption in wealthy nations is an ethical and ecological requirement for building a just world. In this context, degrowth is not a call for poverty, but a call for the redistribution of global resources and the liberation of society from dependence on unnecessary labor and consumption.

Degrowth critiques the current system of production, which is organized not to meet human needs but to create and maintain private wealth (Kallis et al., 2014). History shows that human societies once interacted with nature in participatory and regenerative ways. However, the capitalist mode of production severed that relationship by commodifying land, labor, and life itself. This process has produced structural alienation, wherein individuals are no longer the primary agents of their subsistence, but are instead dependent on market systems they do not control. Consequently, massive productive capacities are deployed not for sustaining life, but for the luxury of a minority, financial speculation, and military power. Degrowth sees this as the manifestation

of an irrational system in which environmental destruction and labor exploitation serve as core mechanisms of economic sustainability.

Targeting the most destructive sectors—such as the fossil fuel industry, intensive agribusiness, advertising, and militarization—degrowth calls for a planned reduction of economic activities that do not support life. Conversely, it demands the expansion of sectors that enhance well-being, including healthcare, education, regenerative agriculture, and free public transportation. This paradigm also emphasizes the redistribution of wealth and working time as part of a structural transformation. Reducing working hours not only frees individuals from the alienation of productivity, but also fosters more meaningful social and ecological relationships. This redistribution involves progressive taxation, limits on extreme wealth, and the elimination of socially unproductive labor (Saito, 2017).

Degrowth further exposes the imperial logic embedded in global growth. Industrialized nations in the Global North, which have built their prosperity on the exploitation of resources and labor from the Global South, continue to promote growth agendas that externalize ecological and social costs to other regions. As countries such as China, India, Brazil, and Indonesia adopt the Northern capitalist consumption model, the ecological crisis is intensified by simultaneous expansion across the globe. Degrowth challenges the development narrative of “catching up” by advocating selective contraction and rejecting the imperial development model that is neither ecologically sustainable nor globally just.

The degrowth paradigm asserts that the definition of “enough” must be determined democratically and contextually. Nations in the Global South, long subjected to colonial and neocolonial domination, must be granted the autonomy to determine their own development paths. This transition must not be dictated by international institutions or wealthy nations through a one-size-fits-all model, but must instead be grounded in the recognition of historical structural injustices and the right to development sovereignty. Degrowth rejects the universality of Northern lifestyles, which are wasteful and exploitative, and instead upholds a plurality of lifeforms that are equitable and sustainable (Saito, 2017).

Degrowth also articulates a sharp critique of productivist socialism. The history of modern socialism demonstrates that many leftist movements, although rhetorically anti-capitalist, have continued to uphold the logic of growth as the primary benchmark of success. Soviet industrialization, social-democratic programs, and numerous twentieth-century socialist visions remained trapped in the paradigm of GDP and technological progress. Degrowth challenges socialism to redefine itself—not as a large-scale production machine, but as a social organization rooted in sufficiency, care, and democratic control over surplus. The central question is no longer “how much can we produce?” but rather “for whom and for what are we producing?”

To this end, degrowth calls for a complete overhaul of economic rationality. Value should no longer be determined by exchange value, but by its use-value and its social-ecological contribution. Sectors that exist solely for capital accumulation—such as speculative finance, luxury real estate, and single-use consumption—must be dismantled and redirected toward life-sustaining sectors. Work should no longer be viewed merely as a means of income distribution, but as a meaningful social activity that aligns with ecological limits and collective well-being. In this regard, degrowth does not separate labor from the environment; it demands their integration (Brand & Wissen, 2021).

Moreover, degrowth places global justice at the center of its transformative agenda. The Global North, responsible for the majority of emissions and ecological destruction, bears both a moral and material obligation to drastically reduce its consumption while simultaneously supporting a just transition in the Global South. This includes debt cancellation, technology transfer, and ecological reparations—not as acts of charity, but as recognition of historical debts. A global transition cannot rest on equally distributed burdens; justice demands asymmetrical responsibility and differentiated space for action.

Degrowth also targets the imperial standard of living, which was never designed to be accessible to all. Consumption standards in developed countries have been built on the foundations of colonial extraction and structural inequality. Degrowth calls for the rejection of the myth that all

nations must or can replicate this lifestyle. This vision demands not only the reduction of consumption but also the dismantling of global structures that allow a minority to live in luxury at the expense of the majority's suffering.

Ultimately, degrowth is not merely an economic agenda; it is a civilizational shift. It proposes a transition from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism; from competition to solidarity; from expansion to stability. It calls for a radical redefinition of progress, prosperity, and even freedom—not as the capacity to dominate and accumulate, but as the capacity to live within limits and to care for one another. This is a new ethic for a time that demands profound moral courage and political imagination.

As Stephen M. Gardiner (2011) asserts, when systemic transformation seems distant and existing powers obstruct meaningful change, our moral responsibility is to continue documenting, revealing, and imagining alternatives. Degrowth answers that call. It is a conscious and organized form of resistance against the logic of destruction embedded in global capitalism. It offers a vision of a world that is sufficient, just, and sustainable—a world that places life, not capital, at the center of civilization.

**Table 3. Key Quotes and Core Values in the Degrowth Paradigm**

Thinker / Source	Key Quote / Main Idea	Core Degrowth Value Represented
<b>Giorgos Kallis (2018)</b>	"Degrowth is not forced on deprivation, but an aspiration to secure enough for everyone to live with dignity and without fear... to enjoy leisure and nature."	Universal sufficiency, dignity, leisure, ecological harmony
<b>Kohei Saito (2023)</b>	"Degrowth is meant to put the brakes on capitalism run amok and bring about a type of economy that would prioritize the needs of both humanity and nature."	Rejection of productivist capitalism, prioritizing life and ecology
<b>Serge Latouche (2009)</b>	"Degrowth is a political slogan with theoretical implications. It calls for the abandonment of the obsession with economic growth as a societal goal."	Deconstructing growth as a dominant ideology
<b>Degrowth Barcelona Manifesto (2023)</b>	"Redistribute wealth and work, relocalize economies, reduce production and consumption, and restore ecosystems."	Economic decentralization, redistribution, ecological regeneration
<b>Jason Hickel (2020)</b>	"The only path to climate justice is through degrowth in rich nations and ecological sovereignty in the Global South."	Critique of ecological imperialism, global justice, Southern sovereignty

**Source: Research Findings, 2025.**

The degrowth paradigm must not be misunderstood as forced austerity or planned poverty. On the contrary, degrowth represents a proactive effort to redefine prosperity and to reconstruct the human-nature relationship based on reciprocity, regeneration, and sufficiency. It is not about lowering living standards, but rather dismantling the illusion that prosperity must always be linked to rising material consumption. Degrowth challenges the assumption that economic expansion is a prerequisite for well-being, and instead proposes an alternative way of life grounded in time, social solidarity, and ecological sustainability as a new form of abundance.

From the conceptual framework and key quotes of leading degrowth thinkers, four main tendencies emerge that distinguish it radically from the conventional development paradigm. First, degrowth rejects GDP as the primary indicator of progress. It views GDP as a misleading metric that fails to capture wealth distribution, ecological degradation, or the overall quality of human life. Second, degrowth upholds values such as reciprocity, justice, and leisure—



emphasizing that human life should not be dominated by endless productivity but should include time for care, community, and the environment. Third, degrowth delivers a sharp critique of global ecological imperialism, particularly the Northern practice of externalizing environmental harm and resource exploitation to the Global South to sustain high-consumption lifestyles. Fourth, degrowth underscores the need for decentralized production and wealth redistribution as integral to structural transformation: economies should return to a local scale, be managed democratically, and focus on meeting real human needs rather than serving the exploitative logic of global markets.

## Discussion

This study has revealed how the globally circulating sustainability discourse—especially in the forms of *green growth*, *sustainable development*, and the *decoupling* of economic growth from environmental degradation—not only fails to address the roots of the ecological crisis but actively reinforces them. The findings show that mainstream solutions tend to be technocratic, reformist, and compatible with capitalist logic. Discourses on ethical green consumption, technological efficiency, and eco-friendly investments are reduced to instruments for maintaining the system rather than transforming it. Within this context, the *degrowth* paradigm emerges as an alternative that not only challenges the logic of growth but also deconstructs the dominant meanings of prosperity, time, and the human–nature relationship. By rejecting GDP as a measure of well-being and emphasizing values such as sufficiency, redistribution, and regeneration, *degrowth* offers a new foundation for sustainability grounded in ecological and social justice.

The relationship between this study's findings and the ideological structure of capitalism becomes increasingly apparent: dominant sustainability discourses function not as tools for transformation but as instruments for normalizing the crisis. Technological metaphors, efficiency rhetoric, and investment promises not only obscure ongoing ecological degradation but also conceal the systemic nature of the crisis. The rebound effect in energy efficiency, the consumption gap between the Global North and South, and the reproduction of the growth myth by international institutions demonstrate that the global economic system is structurally unable—and unwilling—to reduce its ecological footprint. The *degrowth* paradigm addresses this by severing the link between material accumulation and well-being. It argues that the root of the crisis lies not in a lack of technology or data, but in an economic orientation that sacrifices sustainability for unlimited growth.

Compared to previous literature, this study enriches the discourse by introducing semiotic and ideological approaches to the reading of sustainability policies. Earlier studies tend to be divided between ecological critiques of capitalism (e.g., Foster, 2002) and technical analyses of energy efficiency or green transitions. Few have analyzed how language and symbols within sustainability narratives function to stabilize hegemonic power. In this regard, the study offers a novelty by integrating discourse analysis, political ecology, and post-growth alternatives into a unified framework. Furthermore, its global dimension highlights that resistance to the ecological crisis cannot be separated from global inequalities between the North and South—whether in terms of ecological footprints, historical debt, or the right to development.

The implications of these findings are substantial—historically, ideologically, and ethically. They demonstrate that the growth ideology constitutes a form of symbolic power so deeply embedded that it disguises itself as objective truth. In this context, the radical ecopolitical approach advocated by *green ecological ideologists* becomes highly relevant as a lens through which to deconstruct dominant development narratives. Unlike mainstream *environmentalism*, which seeks technical fixes within the existing system, *ecologism* calls for comprehensive structural transformation—from the economic base to cultural values (Dobson, 2007; Luke, 2009). By exposing the ideology of growth and proposing an alternative cosmology grounded in human–nature interdependence, this research contributes to reimagining the global socio-

economic structure. This vision aligns with the belief that nature holds intrinsic value—not merely as an economic resource (Brennan, 2014)—and that ecological justice must advance in tandem with social justice (Martinez-Alier et al., 2014).

Socially, *ecologism* offers space for a more inclusive and meaningful definition of prosperity—one no longer measured by GDP or material accumulation, but by the quality of human relationships, ecosystem health, and access to basic needs (Bhandari, 2024). Historically, it challenges the legacy of ecological colonialism that persists through global trade patterns, uneven green investments, and debt traps that reinforce structural inequality (Bina & La Camera, 2011; Xu & Xu, 2025). Ideologically, it opens possibilities for envisioning a future no longer dominated by growth and accumulation, but by care, sufficiency, and interconnectedness. The success of Green parties in Europe—evident in their influence on energy and social policy (Rovinskaya, 2015)—and the increasing role of environmental education in shaping sustainable behavior (Duong & Ngo, 2024) clearly demonstrate that this ideology is not confined to discourse but is also taking form in concrete political praxis. In a world marked by climate crisis and structural inequality, this green ecological ideology is no longer a utopian vision—it has become a historical and ethical necessity.

However, these findings also prompt critical reflection. The emancipatory function of *degrowth* discourse may be undermined if it is not accompanied by transition strategies that are context-sensitive and responsive to global political realities. One potential dysfunction lies in the risk of universalizing *degrowth* prescriptions without accounting for historical and structural global inequalities—which could, paradoxically, reproduce the very injustices it seeks to resist. As Hung (2021) and Ding (2016) have shown, globalization has not only driven growth and connectivity but also deepened internal and transnational inequalities while reinforcing structural disparities in access to wealth and opportunity. The global economy, structured around international value chains and free-market institutions, has generated power asymmetries that exacerbate labor exploitation and deepen social inequality (Amis et al., 2018; Phillips, 2017). In this context, applying *degrowth* uniformly—without acknowledging unequal historical emissions and differentiated responsibility—risks reproducing the extractive logics of the existing global system.

Therefore, the *degrowth* discourse must operate asymmetrically: wealthy nations must drastically reduce their growth and consumption as an act of historical and ecological accountability, while Global South countries must be granted full sovereignty and space to chart their own development paths. Grugel and Uhlin (2012) emphasize the importance of listening to Global South voices in shaping a more just global governance framework, while Wilde (2020) stresses that economic redistribution must be supported by the fulfillment of social rights and recognition of enduring colonial inequalities. Honneth and Pilapil (2020) further argue that global justice is not solely about material distribution, but also about recognizing the suffering and dignity of marginalized groups. *Degrowth*, then, is not about lowering everyone's living standards but about redefining sufficiency in a fair and democratic way—based on redistribution, recognition, and the restoration of historically denied rights.

From a policy perspective, the findings demand multi-dimensional transformation. Governments and international institutions must go beyond the logic of “efficiency within growth” and adopt policy frameworks genuinely rooted in ecological justice. These include progressive carbon consumption taxes, limits on extreme wealth, the expansion of public care sectors, and the decentralization of production systems. At the international level, mechanisms for ecological reparations and debt cancellation must be implemented to allow Global South nations to pursue their own sustainable development pathways free from neo-colonial pressure. The transition toward a *post-growth* future must be guided by democratic, participatory institutions that prioritize life over accumulation. Public policy should begin facilitating community-based alternative economies, agroecology, and non-commodified exchange systems as integral components of liberation from global market dominance.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the contemporary ecological crisis is not merely the result of technical errors or inadequate policy decisions, but rather stems from an economic-political structure grounded in unlimited growth, capital accumulation, and the commodification of nature. The main findings reveal that dominant discourses such as *green growth*, *sustainable development*, and *ethical green consumption* fundamentally fail to challenge the ideological roots of ecological destruction. Instead, they often obscure and reproduce these roots through technocratic language and illusory solutions. In response to this failure, the *degrowth* paradigm emerges as a radical alternative that not only offers a new reading of the ecological crisis but also proposes ethical, social, and political foundations for building a post-capitalist society based on sufficiency, justice, and ecological regeneration. As this study has argued, *degrowth* is not simply a call to reduce consumption, but a civilizational project aimed at transcending productivist logic and dismantling the global hierarchies that have long distorted the relationship between humans and nature.

The scientific contribution of this research lies in its integrative approach that combines semiotic discourse analysis with ideological critique of mainstream sustainability narratives. Unlike previous studies that have primarily focused on the technical dimensions of energy transition or environmental policy, this research introduces *ecologism* as a framework for reinterpreting sustainability as a site of political and symbolic conflict. By connecting the concept of *degrowth* with critiques of global capitalism, ecological colonialism, and structural inequality, this study broadens the analytical horizon of the climate crisis—moving beyond questions of policy to interrogate the deeper structures and values that sustain it. Furthermore, it emphasizes the need for epistemic courage to deconstruct established concepts such as GDP, development, and prosperity, and to replace them with a new cosmology that is relational, ethical, and regenerative.

Nevertheless, this study also acknowledges several limitations. Methodologically, it focuses on discourse analysis and does not include empirical field data or concrete case studies. As a result, it does not explore in depth the social reception and practical implications of *degrowth* discourse in specific local contexts such as Indonesia or other countries in the Global South. Additionally, due to its normative and critical orientation, the study does not offer technically detailed or actionable policy transition schemes. Future research should therefore focus on empirical investigations into how *degrowth* principles are being implemented in public policy, social movements, or alternative economic practices at both local and global levels. Such studies would enrich our understanding of the potential for *degrowth* to serve as a viable path out of ecological crisis and as a foundation for building a more just and sustainable future.

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