



Impressions from the *Fourth International Conference on Degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity* Leipzig, Germany, 3.-6th of September 2014

Degrowth is a political, economic, and social movement based on ecological economics, anti-consumerist and anti-capitalist ideas. It is also considered an essential economic strategy responding to the limits-to-growth dilemma. Degrowth thinkers and activists advocate for the downscaling of production and consumption—the contraction of economies—arguing that overconsumption lies at the root of long term environmental issues and social inequalities. Key to the concept of degrowth is that reducing consumption does not require individual martyring and a decrease in well-being. Rather, 'degrowthists' aim to maximize happiness and well-being through non-consumptive means—sharing work, consuming less, while devoting more time to art, music, family, culture and community.¹

About 3000 people from all around the world gathered together in September 2014 in Leipzig to explore and research ways and means of how to face the recent economic, social and ecological crisis and how to create a society that is not based on economic growth. This was enough reason for the Brahma Kumaris “green” team to participate in order to gain a better understanding of the spirit of the movement and to share a positive and value based vision of our future.



Sonja Ohlsson (Copenhagen), Steffen Robbi (Dresden), Edda Planck (Leipzig) and Patrizia Heise (Freiburg) came together to create a think-tank looking at alternatives to the paradigm of permanent growth of economy in the industrialized countries. The question was: “Do we really need this type of growth that destroys nature?”

¹ Wikipedia



Pictures: Preparing for todays conference

In most cases, observed climate changes have turned out to be more drastic than researchers had predicted. The impact of climate change is not an issue to be considered as happening in far off years - it is already happening. Some of the feared tipping points of the climate system appear to have been passed already: large parts of the West Antarctica ice sheet have begun to disintegrate. Rise of sea levels will soon be experienced and heavily populated coastlines around the world face inundation.



The conference dealt with one of the most obvious reasons for this: the global warming caused by emissions of carbon dioxide from our factories, power plants and cars used to keep our economy running. Most of these topics are well known. The drivers are: profit and power: greed for more profit. It results in resource exploitation until exhaustion, wars for resources, environmental catastrophes, expanding poverty and misery. Masses of refugees are moving out from areas without water or too much water; hunger and diseases are already on the way.

The Degrowth conference was a meeting of people from all over Europe to explore alternatives to an economy of constant growth. They looked into many interconnected topics like social security, money and finances, learning, transition towns, feminism, food, deep-ecology and the connection of inner and outer change. The creative and well-organized energy of mainly young people was very impressive. The talks, based on research, gave a good understanding of the background of the economic crisis. Plenty of grassroots activities were encouraging people to create small communities of action, to deepen the understanding of cause and effect of one's own lifestyle and to find alternatives for change.

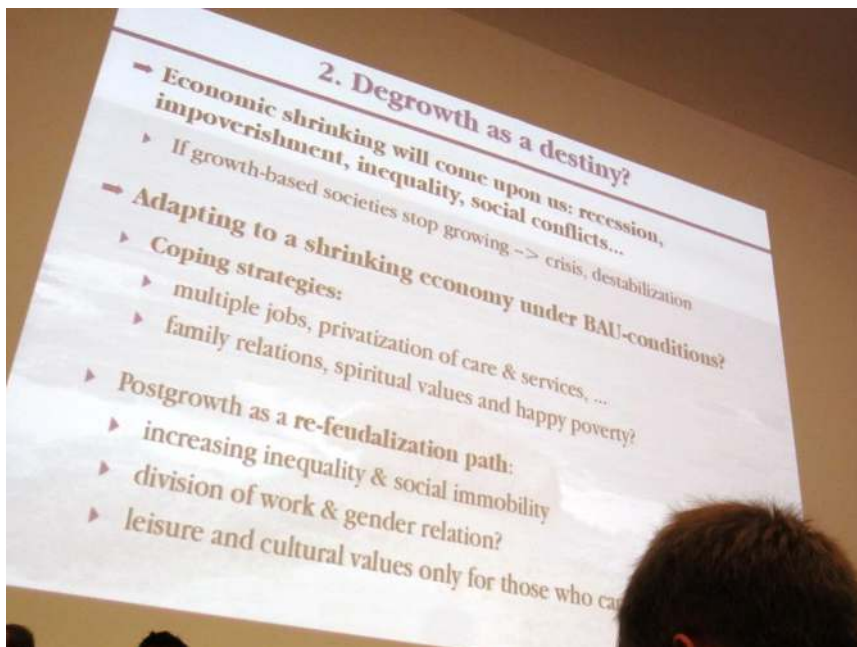
It became apparent that there is no single solution that will cure the problem but that the sum of different individual, active, small scale communities will make a difference. It is not time anymore for a single person to stand up and give directions. That would only work for short time. Now is the time for a wider intelligence, working through different ideas, structures and solutions of a variety of people and communities. The complexity of the problems is too big for simple solutions in which we only adjust our economic system. It is necessary to fundamentally transform our society and that transformation starts in the mind-set of its people.

Topics were discussed in workshops, lectures, art-events and open space formats. Each day there was the choice between at least 40 topics, morning and afternoon. We decided to split up, visit different events and exchange our experiences afterwards.

There was a workshop on Dragon dreaming which was booked out- so many were interested in it. It is a very good tool for creating big scale visions beyond “it is not possible”.

Speakers from a Christian and a Buddhist background talked about the roots of the present money system with interests and compound interests. The title was: **Interreligious critic of the growth driving forces in a capitalistic civilisation and alternatives**. In the Christian view, explained by **Professor Dr. Ulrich Duchrow** (Professor for systematic theology, University of Heidelberg, cofounder of Kairos Europe, an inter-religious and ecumenical grassroots network, and member of the scientific board of Attac Germany), a cut of debts every few years would mean a more human solution – this had been practised for centuries with success. The word of a “jubilee year” comes from this practise to cut debts ever 5-10 years, so the poor ones had a new chance. The Buddhist speaker was **Franz-Johannes Litsch** from Buddha-net (international network of engaged Buddhists, member of the German Buddhist union and cofounder of the Buddhist academy Berlin). He concluded that greed is present in human beings, but it shows itself only if there are outer temptations. The present system is built on a maximisation of temptations and advertising is aimed at raising as much greed as possible. The whole economy of over-consumption is based on this. He was suggesting a more simple life-style.

These topics were especially interesting for us - as we see a transformation of consciousness as the first basis for the building of any new form of economy and community.



Patrizia attended a workshop that took the practice of awareness as a format. Participants agreed that new thoughts also need new formats and this was not so present in the conference overall. The principle of awareness used in the “Dialogue” of David Bohm could be a working tool for this. The workshop was called: **Beyond efficiency, sufficiency and mindfulness training** facilitated by Dr Aram Ziai (University of Kassel), Niko Schöpke (Leuphana University Lüneburg), Laura Henn, Laura Stanzus (Technische Universität Berlin). It was a workshop where the participants really had the feeling that they could contribute something and others are really listening because

the atmosphere was quiet and receptive. The method is practised specially in groups to communicate complex issues. It connects information with the art of listening in silence so that everything is reduced to the essence and connected to personal experience and feelings. People felt very satisfied. The topic was about ways of living together and how to establish shared community gardening in towns as a form of stepping out of critical economic dependencies and improve the quality of food. More people eat vegan for protecting the climate these days. At the same time, a new culture of sharing and working together is established. Such cooperatives are growing now everywhere in Europe, USA and Australia.

Another workshop was: **Towns in transition- a fishbowl of problems and solutions** with Sarah Ackerbauer from “Dresden in transition”, together with “Leipzig in transition”. There are about 100 cities and communities worldwide engaged in the transition town initiative. Their aim is actively preparing and transforming regions for the time after peak oil usage. They created a space where those active in initiatives from different towns could meet and exchange their experiences.



Conclusion: This new frame of consciousness has to still spread beyond the eco-alternative-green-spiritual bubble. Brahma Kumaris were able to communicate a message that personal change based on universal values will add lots of benefit to future conferences like this. It was very helpful for Brahma Kumaris to participate, contribute and learn.

More information: leipzig.degrowth.org/de The website has now been converted to an active sharing platform about how to progress after the conference.

Reporter: Patrizia Heise.

Thanks to Edda for hosting the team so generously.

Appendix - Detailed notes from Inter-religious critique of the forces driving growth in a capitalistic civilisation and alternatives.

Prof. Dr. Ulrich Duchrow:

- There is a saying: “Dance around the golden calf.” Gold was a universal measurement of value in the hellenic culture. King Daneus changed it to money. Gold was a treasure - money became currency in a global economy. There was a deep change in history in a time called the “Achsenzeit” (Ax-time). The changes were socio-economic and the religious leaders of all cultures appeared between 800 and 300 BC. The Buddhists in China protested as well as the biblical prophets against the new order depending more and more on money. They even saw it as a threat to human life on earth. One of the most prominent problems at that time was that people entangled themselves in debts. So the bible advised to do debt-cuts every 7 years to relieve these problems and give the opportunity for a second chance. The example of Greece shows how this practise is missing today, but it is an act of humanitarianism. People should not worship “Mammon”, money. The latent sleeping vice of greed is waking up through this. That epoch was a very special time of great change in human history. All modern states today are build upon this foundation. It is

worth to do a little research into this time as one of the roots of our present civilisation. Why have the Buddhist, Confucius, and Zoroastra religion and the Greek culture all emerged at the same time? Because around this time the gold coin was invented in Millet, Turkey. Within 100 years it had spread around the world, reaching India.

Franz-Johannes Litsch

- The roots of capitalism are to be found 2500 years ago. The economic system we have now dates back to 500BC.. The new system introduced greed for money and sacrifice for money. The western philosophy, originating in Greece, now focuses on the outside phenomena. The Indian philosophy focus on the inside - that everything we see is created in our consciousness. Addiction started in accumulation for money - sense them, shape them, grasp them, appropriate them, get property. The GROWTH original roots in our consciousness to do actually that (above mentioned) - a divide is created between the subject and the object. It originates in a divide between the ego and that which the ego wants, the substance. A momentary experience is turned into a substance, by believing it to be permanent. It needs to be made permanent in order to own it. The ego and the object then need to be permanent. This original illusion created greed for what we don't 'have. The wanting (and repelling) creates suffering. Interest is institutionalizing of greed - you want more without doing anything. Buddha found the answer 2500 years ago in "degrowth", in letting go, in de-construction of ideas and concepts. The DEGROWTH movement indicated that our society is not sustainable nor desirable.
- Practical steps we can take now: Buddhist and Christian two different systems of thought and practice, but raise the same challenges. For Buddhist perspective we have to start on the inner steps. The monks in Buddhism have to step out of the system of work and money. They can't touch money, neither allowed to accumulate. Living comes from donations and gifts. They only own what they use. Today, in mindfulness, we need to take a closer look at the self as part of a capitalist system.



www.environment.brahmakumaris.org