

Expanding the Degrowth Narrative on Global Food Trade within the Agriculture Sector

While the theme of trade remains relatively underdeveloped in degrowth policy proposals, scholars attempting to systematically map degrowth policy proposals have identified two broad trade branches.¹ The first emphasises curtailing long-distance trade, reducing ‘unnecessary’ intra-industry trade between nations with comparable affluence levels.² This entails the application of export quotas and restrictions on international aviation and shipping.³ The second direction has remained predominantly unchanged over the last two decades, and calls for reconceptualizing trade by renegotiating agreements such as the TRIPS Agreement within the framework of the WTO.⁴ Revealed by the snowball literature review, the following expanded degrowth principles on global food trade within the agriculture sector are categorised using the format of five principles outlined by McGreevy et al.⁵ These principles lay the foundation for the methodological process in **Error! Reference source not found.** preceding the results of the legal analysis presented in **Error! Reference source not found.**, which analyses the extent to which this degrowth narrative fits within a world governed by WTO trade rules.

1. Economic Principles – Sufficiency

Food sovereignty and productive autonomy, rooted in global struggles, advocate for new social relations, free of oppression and inequality.⁶ According to Escobar,⁷ these concepts serve as a radical alternative to transform structural inequalities in agri-food systems, challenging existing aid and development discourses. Affluent nations no longer require sustained economic growth, instead they can adopt post-growth strategies to ensure economic stability and foster robust social outcomes.⁸ McGreevy et al.⁹ finds that ensuring the social, economic, and ecological well-being of both human and non-human life hinges on transforming predominant agrifood systems, along with reshaping research and education dedicated to these systems. Agri-food systems operating beyond continuous growth prioritize sufficiency and

¹ Fitzpatrick, N., Parrique, T., & Cosme, I. (2022). Exploring degrowth policy proposals: A systematic mapping with thematic synthesis. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 365, 132764.

² *ibid* (n 1).

³ *ibid* (n 2).

⁴ *ibid* (n 3).

⁵ McGreevy SR and others, “Sustainable Agrifood Systems for a Post-Growth World” (2022) 5 *Nature Sustainability* 1011 <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41893-022-00933-5>.

⁶ Escobar, L., G., (2019). Food Sovereignty. In A. Kothari, A. Salleh, A. Escobar, F. Demaria, & A. Acosta Espinosa (Eds.), *Pluriverse: A post-development dictionary* (pp. 185-188). Tulika Books & Authorsupfront.

⁷ *ibid* (n 6).

⁸ Hickel, J., Brockway, P., Kallis, G., Keyßer, L., Lenzen, M., Slameršak, A., ... & Ürge-Vorsatz, D. (2021). Urgent need for post-growth climate mitigation scenarios. *Nature Energy*, 6(8), 766-768.

⁹ McGreevy SR and others, “Sustainable Agrifood Systems for a Post-Growth World” (2022) 5 *Nature Sustainability* 1011 <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41893-022-00933-5>.

consider social and ecological factors in food trade, avoiding excessive reliance on trade.¹⁰ To break from current practices, Hickel et al.¹¹ state it as essential to explore convergence scenarios, addressing excessive throughput in the Global North and increasing necessary throughput in the Global South. Aligning energy and resource use at per capita levels that support human welfare and ecological stability is crucial.¹² Scholars propose to implement profound changes in production patterns,¹³ prioritize minimizing food waste, decrease industrial production of ruminant meat and dairy while promoting healthier plant-based diets, minimize advertisement,¹⁴ and embrace the recognition of rights and fostering harmonious relations among all living beings.¹⁵ Videira et al.,¹⁶ note living in harmony with nature due to throughput being adjusted to carrying capacity as one of the persistent overarching goals of implementing limits to international trade.

Hickel¹⁷ proposes to explore the path of international degrowth as an alternative to GDP-centric policies, emphasizing a swift transition to a steady-state economy. The fixation on GDP expansion drives demands for more loans, increased structural adjustments, heightened ‘free trade’, extensive land grabs, deforestation, and resource extraction, hindering sensible reformist solutions.¹⁸ Consider alternatives like the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) and Gross National Happiness (GNH). GPI builds upon GDP by incorporating positive factors such as household and volunteer work, deducting negatives like pollution, resource depletion and crime, and adjusting for inequality, maintaining material throughput and pollution at ecological equilibrium.¹⁹ Some regions, including several US states, Costa Rica, and soon Scotland and Sweden, have already adopted GPI as a secondary measure to GDP.²⁰ The GNH Commission establishes sufficiency thresholds for each indicator, prompting a holistic approach to well-being.²¹ Bhutan has adopted GNH and implements policies such as designating half of the country as protected areas; enforcing a constitutional mandate for 60% forest cover; redistributing land to landless farmers; expressing a commitment to 100% organic agriculture.²² It is noteworthy to mention that Bhutan refrains from a WTO membership.²³ Gerber²⁴ proposes to explore examples like the Samdrup Jongkhar Initiative (SJI) and initiatives focused on Universal Human Value training to gain insights into practical implementations of alternative metrics.

¹⁰ *ibid* (n 9).

¹¹ Hickel et al (n 8).

¹² *ibid* (n 11).

¹³ Acosta, A. (2019). Post-economia. In A. Kothari, A. Salleh, A. Escobar, F. Demaria, & A. Acosta Espinosa (Eds.), *Pluriverse: A post-development dictionary* (pp. 280-283). Tulika Books & Authorsupfront.

¹⁴ Videira, N., Schneider, F., Sekulova, F., & Kallis, G. (2014). Improving understanding on degrowth pathways: An exploratory study using collaborative causal models. *Futures*, 55, 58-77; Hickel et al (n 8).

¹⁵ Acosta (n 13).

¹⁶ Videira et al (n 14).

¹⁷ Hickel J, “Addressing the Structural Causes of World Suffering,” *Social indicators research series* (2017) https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-51391-1_12.

¹⁸ *ibid* (n 17).

¹⁹ *ibid* (n 18).

²⁰ *ibid* (n 19).

²¹ Gerber, J.F., (2019). In A. Kothari, A. Salleh, A. Escobar, F. Demaria, & A. Acosta Espinosa (Eds.), *Pluriverse: A post-development dictionary* (pp. 194-197). Tulika Books & Authorsupfront.

²² *ibid* (n 21).

²³ *ibid* (n 22).

²⁴ *ibid* (n 23).

2. Social-Ecological Principles – Regeneration

According to Videira et al.,²⁵ introducing limits to international trade would have the following mid-term causal effects: decreasing trade of raw materials and finished goods, working towards food sovereignty and productive autonomy, and reducing rates of introduced invasive species. Food sovereignty and productive autonomy embrace environmentally responsible systems like agroecology, recognizing the interdependence of biodiversity and cultural diversity.²⁶ Scholars propose to emphasize on agroecological methods for carbon sequestration and biodiversity restoration,²⁷ and ensure small farmers' rights to use, save and exchange seeds.²⁸ In the context of the global labour market, implementing a comprehensive system of labour standards is imperative for ensuring fair working conditions worldwide.²⁹ According to Hickel,³⁰ the key component of such a system is the establishment of an international minimum wage. As proposed by economist Thomas Palley (2011), the minimum wage would be calculated at a percentage of each country's median wage, allowing for adaptation to local economic conditions, costs of living, and purchasing power.³¹ As wages naturally increase, the minimum would adjust accordingly, eliminating the need for frequent political interventions.³² This proposal treats all countries equally, preserving the comparative advantage of nations with lower labour costs and minimizing disruptions.³³ To address concerns in countries with exceptionally low median wages, a global minimum should guarantee that wages exceed the national poverty line in each country.³⁴

3. Allocative Principles – Distribution

The snowball literature review reveals three categories within the distribution post-growth metabolism: agricultural distribution, trade and debt.

1. Agricultural Distribution

²⁵ Videira, N., Schneider, F., Sekulova, F., & Kallis, G. (2014). Improving understanding on degrowth pathways: An exploratory study using collaborative causal models. *Futures*, 55, 58-77.

²⁶ Escobar, L., G., (2019). Food Sovereignty. In A. Kothari, A. Salleh, A. Escobar, F. Demaria, & A. Acosta Espinosa (Eds.), *Pluriverse: A post-development dictionary* (pp. 185-188). Tulika Books & Authorsupfront.

²⁷ Hickel, J., Brockway, P., Kallis, G., Keyßer, L., Lenzen, M., Slameršak, A., ... & Ürge-Vorsatz, D. (2021). Urgent need for post-growth climate mitigation scenarios. *Nature Energy*, 6(8), 766-768.

²⁸ Hickel J, "Addressing the Structural Causes of World Suffering," *Social indicators research series* (2017) https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-51391-1_12.

²⁹ *ibid* (n 28); Hickel, J., Dorninger, C., Wieland, H., & Suwandi, I. (2022). Imperialist appropriation in the world economy: Drain from the global South through unequal exchange, 1990–2015. *Global Environmental Change*, 73, 102467.

³⁰ Hickel (n 28).

³¹ *ibid* (n 30).

³² *ibid* (n 31).

³³ *ibid* (n 32).

³⁴ Hickel J, "Addressing the Structural Causes of World Suffering," *Social indicators research series* (2017) https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-51391-1_12; Videira, N., Schneider, F., Sekulova, F., & Kallis, G. (2014). Improving understanding on degrowth pathways: An exploratory study using collaborative causal models. *Futures*, 55, 58-77.

Hickel³⁵ emphasizes the significance of prioritizing land reform as a cornerstone for ensuring food security, challenging current UN initiatives such as the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition that promote the concentration of agricultural land in corporate hands. The 2014 special report from the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to food recommends key measures for food security, including protecting small farmers from land grabs and eviction.³⁶ Scholars propose to decrease trade, introduce limits on trade distances and volume³⁷, adopt decentralized and deconcentrated production approaches³⁸ and consumption where feasible to reduce freight.³⁹ Videira et al.,⁴⁰ proposes the promotion of development of localized cooperatives and resource sanctuaries. This approach does not require aid funding but demands political advocacy, challenging powerful entities benefiting from the existing system.⁴¹

2. Trade

Fakhri⁴² proposes to wind down the Agreement on Agriculture and replace it with international food agreements, of which Bodirsky et al.⁴³ proposes the facilitation within established self-sufficiency limits. In response to increased demand, establish equilibrium by expanding croplands and irrigated areas, necessitating the relocation of crop production to higher-yielding areas.⁴⁴ According to Daly,⁴⁵ auction mechanisms can capture scarcity rents for fair redistribution, while trade facilitates efficient allocation to the highest users. Daly additionally proposes the implementation of Cap-Auction-Trade systems to govern fundamental resources, setting caps based on the most stringent biophysical constraints.⁴⁶ Hickel⁴⁷ notes to address the inequitable agricultural subsidy system by reforming it, providing fair access for Global South countries to Western markets, and safeguarding their domestic markets from the impact of cheap imports. Based on previous proposals to rebalance the trade system, suggesting a departure from across-the-board tariff reductions to a bias favouring poor countries, Hickel⁴⁸ proposes all WTO members to grant free market access in all goods to countries in the Global South smaller or poorer than themselves in terms of GDP and GDP per capita. Implementing this concept would enable them to benefit from rich-country markets without requiring

³⁵ Hickel (n 34).

³⁶ *ibid* (n 35).

³⁷ Videira et al (n 34).

³⁸ Acosta, A. (2019). Post-economia. In A. Kothari, A. Salleh, A. Escobar, F. Demaria, & A. Acosta Espinosa (Eds.), *Pluriverse: A post-development dictionary* (pp. 280-283). Tulika Books & Authorsupfront.

³⁹ Hickel, J., Brockway, P., Kallis, G., Keyßer, L., Lenzen, M., Slameršak, A., ... & Ürge-Vorsatz, D. (2021). Urgent need for post-growth climate mitigation scenarios. *Nature Energy*, 6(8), 766-768.

⁴⁰ Videira, N., Schneider, F., Sekulova, F., & Kallis, G. (2014). Improving understanding on degrowth pathways: An exploratory study using collaborative causal models. *Futures*, 55, 58-77.

⁴¹ Hickel J, "Addressing the Structural Causes of World Suffering," *Social indicators research series* (2017) https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-51391-1_12.

⁴² Fakhri, M. (2022). Human Rights Principles for Trade.

⁴³ Bodirsky, B. L., Chen, D. M. C., Weindl, I., Sörgel, B., Beier, F., Molina Bacca, E. J., ... & Lotze-Campen, H. (2022). Integrating degrowth and efficiency perspectives enables an emission-neutral food system by 2100. *Nature Food*, 3(5), 341-348.

⁴⁴ *ibid* (n 43).

⁴⁵ Daly, H. E. (2008). The steady-state economy.

⁴⁶ *ibid* (n 45).

⁴⁷ Hickel J, "Addressing the Structural Causes of World Suffering," *Social indicators research series* (2017) https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-51391-1_12.

⁴⁸ *ibid* (n 47).

reciprocal liberalization of their trade rules.⁴⁹ Daly⁵⁰ however proposes to shift away from the principles of free trade, free capital mobility, and globalization in international commerce, and to embrace compensating tariffs to safeguard efficient national policies of cost internalization from competition that may lower standards in other countries. Daly⁵¹ argues that free trade is incompatible with a Steady State Economy due to the inevitable environmental and future costs borne by its producers, unlike foreign firms in growth economies. Regulated international trade with compensating tariffs for such differences to protect national policies could coexist, as could ‘free trade’ among countries equally committed to sustainability.⁵² While international institutions like the IMF, WB and WTO advocate for free trade and capital mobility, diverging from protecting efficient national policies, gradually transitioning the IMF, WB and WTO to a nation-based multilateral clearing union might be challenging, but feasible.⁵³

While these transnational policies may seem radical, they are grounded in conservative institutions like private property and decentralized market allocation.⁵⁴ These institutions recognize that excessive inequality undermines private property legitimacy and that markets lose legitimacy when prices do not truthfully reflect costs.⁵⁵ Moreover, acknowledging the macro-economy’s unsustainability beyond Earth’s biophysical limits, the policies address the conservative economic limit where extra costs of growth surpass extra benefits.⁵⁶ According to Daly,⁵⁷ nations may withdraw individually as it becomes apparent that they are incapable of recognizing the possibility of uneconomic growth and have forsaken their federated internationalist nature of their Bretton Woods Charter in favour of a capital-dominated globalist vision.

3. *Debt*

While Daly⁵⁸ proposes to introduce penalty rates on surplus and deficit balances, striving for balance on the current account to prevent substantial capital transfers and foreign debts, Hickel⁵⁹ advocates for the abolition of debt burdens in the Global South. Hickel⁶⁰ proposes the elimination of structural adjustments policies to provide these nations with essential policy flexibility, enabling the use of tariffs, subsidies, capital controls, social spending, and other necessary measures for effective development and poverty reduction. Proposals advocated by organizations such as the Jubilee Debt Campaign and Committee for the Abolition of the Third World Debt should be backed.⁶¹ According to Hickel et al.,⁶² implementing these measures

⁴⁹ *ibid* (n 48).

⁵⁰ Daly (n 45).

⁵¹ Daly, H. E. (2008). The steady-state economy.

⁵² *ibid* (n 51).

⁵³ *ibid* (n 52).

⁵⁴ *ibid* (n 53).

⁵⁵ *ibid* (n 54).

⁵⁶ *ibid* (n 55).

⁵⁷ Daly, H. E. (2008). The steady-state economy.

⁵⁸ *ibid* (n 57).

⁵⁹ Hickel J, “Addressing the Structural Causes of World Suffering,” *Social indicators research series* (2017) https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-51391-1_12.

⁶⁰ *ibid* (n 59).

⁶¹ *ibid* (n 60).

⁶² Hickel, J., Dorninger, C., Wieland, H., & Suwandi, I. (2022). Imperialist appropriation in the world economy: Drain from the global South through unequal exchange, 1990–2015. *Global Environmental Change*, 73, 102467.

could enable the South to attain a more equitable share of income from international trade. This strategy, centred on utilizing internal resources and mobilizing labour for domestic needs, is considered a more effective development approach compared to traditional methods involving aid, liberalization, and market integration, as the result would empower Southern rather than servicing Northern consumption.⁶³ Moreover, this shift may diminish ecological implications on the South, by reducing North-South price differentials, curbing ecologically unequal exchange, and restraining excess consumption in the North.⁶⁴

4. *Institutional Principles – Commons*

Fitzpatrick et al.⁶⁵ advocate for the democratization of key global economic governance institutions, including the World Bank, IMF and WTO, ensuring enhanced representation and decision-making power for countries in the Global South concerning trade and finance policies. Specifically within the WTO, the call is made for enhanced transparency in all proceedings to guarantee equal participation for all representatives.⁶⁶ This involves ceasing exclusive Green Room meetings where decisions are pre-determined by affluent countries and abolishing secretive tribunals handling accusations of breaking WTO trade rules.⁶⁷ Hickel⁶⁸ notes it as crucial to prioritize addressing these fundamental inequities before imposing additional demands for market liberalization on the Global South.

Acosta⁶⁹ proposes to evaluate criteria centred around community-based perspectives, and to move away from the commodification of nature and common resources.⁷⁰ Hickel⁷¹ calls for a reform of the TRIPS agreement to ensure fair access to essential technologies for human development. This requires the relaxation of patent protections, to permit generic forms and effectively decommodify vital technologies.⁷² Gibson-Graham⁷³ proposes to empower the fair-trade movement by instituting robust standards that guarantee the well-being of both people and the environments, preventing adverse effects from renegotiated commodity transactions under international regulations. Videira et al.⁷⁴ propose the integration of ecological and social impact indicators in trade policies and agreements as an entry point to implement limits to international trade, with equal access to resources and the preservation of local ecological knowledge as one of the persistent overarching goals.

⁶³ *ibid* (n 62).

⁶⁴ *ibid* (n 63).

⁶⁵ Fitzpatrick, N., Parrique, T., & Cosme, I. (2022). Exploring degrowth policy proposals: A systematic mapping with thematic synthesis. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 365, 132764; *ibid* (n 64).

⁶⁶ Hickel J, “Addressing the Structural Causes of World Suffering,” *Social indicators research series* (2017) https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-51391-1_12.

⁶⁷ *ibid* (n 66).

⁶⁸ *ibid* (n 67).

⁶⁹ Acosta, A. (2019). Post-economia. In A. Kothari, A. Salleh, A. Escobar, F. Demaria, & A. Acosta Espinosa (Eds.), *Pluriverse: A post-development dictionary* (pp. 280-283). Tulika Books & Authorsupfront.

⁷⁰ *ibid* (n 69).

⁷¹ Hickel (n 66).

⁷² Hickel J, “Addressing the Structural Causes of World Suffering,” *Social indicators research series* (2017) https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-51391-1_12.

⁷³ Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2019). Community Economies. In A. Kothari, A. Salleh, A. Escobar, F. Demaria, & A. Acosta Espinosa (Eds.), *Pluriverse: A post-development dictionary* (pp. 127-130). Tulika Books & Authorsupfront.

⁷⁴ Videira, N., Schneider, F., Sekulova, F., & Kallis, G. (2014). Improving understanding on degrowth pathways: An exploratory study using collaborative causal models. *Futures*, 55, 58-77.

5. *Relational Principles – Care*

According to Fakhri,⁷⁵ the food sovereignty movement does not oppose trade per se; rather, it is critical of free trade agreements that disrupt people's longstanding relationship with each other, the land, and waterways. In their publication, Fakhri⁷⁶ notes three principles for trade that respond to the food sovereignty movement; dignity, self-sufficiency and solidarity. Videira et al.⁷⁷ and Hickel⁷⁸ propose to advance food sovereignty by dismantling corporate controls over food systems and implement a moratorium on large infrastructures, to which Escobar⁷⁹ notes that introducing strategies promoting transparent trade and just income and integrating consumer control contribute to this envisioned solidarity. Defending the knowledge, practices, and territories of food-producing peoples, are concepts that perceive solidarity as fundamental, fostering connections among global food producers and consumers.⁸⁰

6. *Concluding Remarks*

This chapter explored the intersections between degrowth principles and global food trade within the agricultural sector, emphasizing the need to curtail unnecessary long-distance trade and reconceptualize trade agreements under the WTO's framework. The analysis highlights the expanded post-growth metabolism principles laid out by McGreevy et al, which suggest a radical shift towards sufficiency, regeneration, distribution, commons, and care. These principles challenge the prevailing economic paradigms and propose an agricultural system that prioritizes ecological stability, social equity and local autonomy over industrial efficiency and profit maximization.

However, the WTO's current regulatory framework often impedes the adoption of such transformative approaches. The rigid rules that govern international trade favour large-scale, industrial agriculture practices that conflict with the degrowth agenda of reducing ecological footprint and enhancing food sovereignty. This interesting observation will be further elaborated in chapter six through practical cases such as the GMO disputes in Mexico. Before this step, however, Chapter 5 will investigate the extent to which the WTO's legal structure already holds the degrowth narrative among its 164 WTO members.

It will do so by screening the extent to which the degrowth narrative is present amongst the WTO members through the applied terminology.

⁷⁵ Fakhri, M. (2022). Human Rights Principles for Trade.

⁷⁶ *ibid* (n 75).

⁷⁷ Videira et al (n 74).

⁷⁸ Hickel (n 72).

⁷⁹ Escobar, L., G., (2019). Food Sovereignty. In A. Kothari, A. Salleh, A. Escobar, F. Demaria, & A. Acosta Espinosa (Eds.), *Pluriverse: A post-development dictionary* (pp. 185-188). Tulika Books & Authorsupfront.

⁸⁰ *ibid* (n 79).