

Conference Proceedings



**International
Conference**

SOCIOECOS

2024

**Climate Change, Sustainability
and Socio-ecological Practices**

June 6-7, 2024
Universidad del País Vasco /
Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea
Bilbao, Spain

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Universidad
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CIP: Biblioteca Universitaria

International Conference Socioecos (2024. Bilbao)

Socioecos [Recurso electrónico]: Climate change, sustainability and socio-ecological practices : Conference Proceedings June 6-7, 2024, Universidad del País Vasco/Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea, Bilbao, Spain / Benjamín Tejerina, Cristina Miranda de Almeida and Clara Acuña (editors). – Datos. – [Leioa] : Universidad del País Vasco / Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea, Argitalpen Zerbitzua = Servicio Editorial, 2024. – 1 recurso en línea : PDF (888 p.)

Textos en inglés y español.

Modo de acceso: World Wide Web

ISBN: 978-84-9082-680-5.

1. Clima – Cambios. 2. Desarrollo sostenible. 3. Ecologismo. 4. Sociología – Congresos. I. Tejerina Montaña, Benjamín, ed. II. Miranda de Almeida de Barros, Cristina, ed. III. Acuña Rodríguez, Clara, ed.

(0.034)316.42(063)

(0.034)316.504(063)

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ISBN: 978-84-9082-680-5

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1387/conf.socioecos.2024>

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Edition and book cover design: Mikel Azpiri Landa · mikelazpiri.com



GoiEner Energy Cooperative – a Social Economy Initiative Facing the Challenge of Degrowth

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Abstract: *The current situation of climate crisis, resource depletion and growing inequalities has led to the emergence of several alternative proposals to the conventional economic model. Among them arises the proposal of degrowth, which questions the current developmentalism and proposes a reduction in the use of resources, as well as a more equitable distribution of them.*

To analyse its viability, it is necessary to study the existence of degrowth initiatives in practice. For this purpose, using the methodology of the ethical triangle and the characterization of degrowth based on its normative and applied principles, the case of the Basque energy cooperative GoiEner is analysed to determine whether it can be considered a fully degrowth organization. The analysis shows that, although GoiEner is not yet one, by making progress in complying with the defined principles, it has the potential to become one in the future.

Keywords: *Degrowth, energy, sustainability, social economy, cooperativism.*

1 Introduction

Recently, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) set the human contribution to climate change at 90%, causing unprecedented global warming (IPCC, 2021). Hence, more people advocate a socioeconomic and value system change in the human production system and the environment (Musseta, 2020). Among alternative paradigms we find *commons* (Atutxa, Aguado and Zubero, 2020), *circular economy* (Pearce and Turner, 1990), *economy of the common good* (Felber, 2015) or the *steady state economy* (Daly, Urquidi and De la Peña, 1974). However, the *degrowth* proposal is of interest as it aims to face the problems associated with the capitalist system and its persistent focus on economic growth through a reduction in economic scale, resource use and a value system change in society (Andreoni and Galmarini, 2014; Hickel, 2021).

Degrowth theories are mentioned by the United Nations (IPCC, 2022) or the European Environment Agency (EEA, 2021). In 2023, European Parliament hosted a conference called *Beyond Growth* (Jensen et al., 2023). It stressed the difficulty of moving from theoretical constructions to practical initiatives (Schwartzman, 2022; Kongshøj, 2023). If we analyse energy, it is (a) a service at the core of the dominant socioeconomic system (Mitchell, 2011; Di Muzio, 2015) with (b) a highly regulated sector and oligopolistic Spanish market. However, with an increase of social and local energy initiatives in Spain (Sasia, Martínez and Domínguez, 2019; Atutxa, Zubero and Calvo-Sotomayor, 2020, 2022), degrowth could help investigate this tendency.

In this sense, finding a degrowth economic initiative and analysing it is a fundamental step to test its applicability. However, research analysing possible links between the Social and Solidarity Economy and Degrowth is scarce (Johanisova, Crabtree and Fraňková, 2013; Bauhardt, 2014; Yáñez, 2021). This is the main scientific contribution of this work. It creates knowledge to understand degrowth and its implications by analysing a local energy initiative. Through systematically tested dimensions, we create a tool studying the forms adopted by degrowth at a micro level. This tool could be used by other initiatives for their self-diagnosis about degrowth. Through the study of a cooperative enterprise, it explores if these initiatives promote an economic system respecting planetary limits.

2 Theoretical Framework: Degrowth for the Transition to Social and Ecological Sustainability

Considering the so-called *maldevelopment* involving inequality, poverty or environmental degradation (Tortosa, 2001; Unceta, 2009), the North-South divide that externalizes pollution costs to developing countries (Hickel, 2021, 2022), as well as a possible (eco)systemic collapse (Bergstrom et al., 2021; Willcock et al., 2023), degrowth emerges as an alternative. It does not imply austerity, but an orderly and planned reduction of economic activity. If accompanied by a change to how we regard welfare, it would not imply its decline. Conversely, Parrique (2023) calls degrowth a temporary transition towards a post-growth economy, once we have reduced our economic scale until respecting the natural planetary capacities.

Moreover, degrowth can also be understood as “a more equitable distribution of existing resources” (Hickel 2019, p. 12). At this point, we encounter “the need to assume a radical distribution of wealth” (Taibo 2021, p. 155), in order to cover people’s basic material needs. From another perspective, degrowth criticizes the normative guiding principles in our societies (Latouche, 2009). In this way,

for Petridis, Muraca and Kallis (2015) and Kallis et al. (2018), degrowth involves a cultural-political reform for radical social change, creating new institutions that create well-being. Degrowth would also be an alternative to sustainable development paradigms that hide a contradiction within themselves (Latouche, 2009).

Hence, degrowth is wary of some principles of the 2030 Agenda. If we focus on the *Beyond Growth 2023* conference by the European Parliament, we find an interesting critique of Sustainable Development Goal 8. This goal has two indicators that require an increase in economic growth and productivity that seem incompatible with the need to reduce production and consumption (Jensen et al., 2023). Similarly, Jensen et al. (2023) state that goal 12 (responsible production and consumption) and goal 13 (climate action) would be contradictory.

The previous considerations are consistent with the findings of Fitzpatrick, Parrique and Cosme (2022) who demonstrated that the breadth and diversity of degrowth inexorably leads to an equally diverse agenda, full of goals, objectives, instruments, etc. Considering an extensive bibliographical review, we have distilled the following degrowth principles, among which we distinguish the normative principles from the applied ones in Table 1 below:

Table 1. *Normative and Applied Principles of Degrowth (2024), Self-elaboration.*

Normative Principles	Applied Principles	Brief Description
1. Sustainability and environmental justice	1.1. Reduction in the use of inputs necessary for the development of economic activity	From the viewpoint of resource exploitation, we become aware of our ecological footprint and the carrying capacity of the ecosystem. In response, an active and conscious position is taken to reduce the use of fossil resources and energies.
	1.2. Reduction of waste generated by economic activity	From the viewpoint of waste generation, the initiative tries to reduce it. It uses sustainable technologies and tries not to jeopardize the existence of other initiatives in different regions of the planet.
	1.3. Protection of environmental impacts to the most vulnerable groups and people	The initiative is aware of the asymmetric impact of various environmental problems and makes a conscious effort to protect the most vulnerable social segments.

Normative Principles	Applied Principles	Brief Description
2. Equity and social justice	2.1. Wealth distribution	Through a sufficient level of economic activity and not leaning towards perpetual growth, the initiative seeks an equitable and fair distribution of the wealth generated (goods, services and dividends).
	2.2. Primacy of the people towards capital	Capital accumulation and economic profit are not the objectives of the initiative. Placing people at the center of the activity, the initiative ethically reflects on its purpose, tries to improve working conditions and the working day, etc.
3. Autonomy and political justice	3.1. Recognition and integrity	The Human Rights of all individuals, as well as their human autonomy and inherent dignity, are effectively recognized.
	3.2. Deliberative and direct democratic processes	A separation of economics and politics is proposed. A participatory and political negotiation of the conditions of the economy is sought.
4. Conviviality and sobriety	4.1. Care and promotion of relational goods	Spaces are created in which to relate and coexist outside the logic of the market. A slowdown of processes and greater non-commercial exchange are advocated.
	4.2. Search for voluntary self-limitation	This principle is not a response to objective limits, but rather an action that aims to generate cultural changes. Self-limitation or austerity to achieve a more egalitarian and autonomous society.

Note: This table was elaborated by the authors using secondary data available in Fitzpatrick, Parrique and Cosme (2022) and Jensen et al. (2023).

Normative principles refer to the theoretical categories on which degrowth is based, as well as the awareness necessary to reduce our consumption, protect our societies, and move towards political, economic and social equality. The applied principles, in turn, refer to the concrete ways in which an initiative can be developed. The latter have been described and provided with a set of questions to serve as a reference for the analysis of initiatives. When it comes to evaluate each company´s degrowth condition, it can develop guidelines for improvement, and no principle should prevail over the other.

3 Results: GoiEner in the Face of Degrowth

GoiEner Cooperative (from now on GoiEner) is established as a non-profit cooperative of consumers and users whose territorial scope is the Spanish Basque Autonomous Community. It belongs to the energy marketing sector,

providing energy only from renewable sources and personally advising its contractors. In addition, it is characterized for its collective and democratic decision-making, within a cooperative mindset. GoiEner works to create a change in the energy and business governance model, as well as to take care of the environment and help its partners save. As of January 2024, the organization has around 17,600 members, 21,300 contracts and six physical offices.

According to the Basque Network of Alternative and Solidary Economy REAS Euskadi (2022), during the last financial year they obtained income of 20,068,265 euros (with only 1% coming from subsidies) and incurred expenses of 20,678,581 euros. Likewise, it belongs to networks such as REScoop.eu, promoting cooperative governance and alliance work. GoiEner has also been adding partner entities such as GoiEner Association ('GoiEner Elkartea') focused on awareness tasks, training, etc. and, in the Spanish Autonomous Region of Navarre, with Navarrese Cooperative ('Nafarkoop') intended to be the legal instrument through which to invest in renewable generation projects. These entities, including GoiEner itself, converge under the umbrella of GoiEner Group ('GoiEner Taldea').

3.1 What GoiEner should be or the Normative Axis

GoiEner was born in 2012, surrounded by a growing concern for sustainability. The Millennium Goals were coming to an end and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) gained traction. In Europe, different governments developed energy transition policies promoting renewable energy, as well as energy efficiency. Among the population, there is increasing awareness about promoting a green energy model, decarbonization and non-dependence on limited natural resources (IPCC, 2021).

In this context, the population demands a governance model based on transparency and participation. A project where you make certain decisions in a cooperative and democratic way, and where you can access all important information. The normative dimension is then favourable to these alternatives. In fact, concerning the joint analysis of this first normative axis and the applied degrowth principles, GoiEner continues to develop its activity in a socioeconomic context that recognizes the social value it creates.

3.2 What GoiEner wants to be or the Declarative Axis

In the declarative axis we want to find out what strategic elements GoiEner includes in its purpose that allows it responding to the normative challenges, which will help it govern its behaviour on a day-to-day basis, and will guide its business conduct and account for the social good that GoiEner provides

(Martínez and Unigarro, 2023). Like any cooperative, GoiEner seeks to respond to the needs of stakeholders (workers, partners, customers...) and communities (GoiEner, 2019).

The cooperative members are committed to the project, which GoiEner rewards through democratic participation processes to advance self-organization and trust. Its social aspect is also "to a certain extent degrowth-oriented (although not explicit)" (GoiEner 2019, p. 17). Likewise, they are strongly committed to social innovation and "citizen empowerment for the direct management of a basic resource for life, such as energy" (GoiEner 2019, p. 11). They ultimately put the person and life at the center, versus economic profit.

3.3 What GoiEner in fact is or the Practical Axis

Here, we talk about those "specific behaviors that the organization demonstrates in relation to the implementation of the strategy" (Martínez and Unigarro 2023, p. 85). GoiEner demonstrates great accessibility and transparency: the client has access to updated rates, general contract conditions, company financial statements, regulations, REAS Euskadi social audits, etc. We also find great efforts in innovation: GoiEner participates in research projects funded by the European Union, through which it exposes new formulas to achieve energy empowerment.

In 2015, GoiEner Elkarte was founded with the aim of "facilitating volunteer activities that would not be typical of a marketing company" (GoiEner 2019, p. 9). Later that year, Nafarkoop was founded to overcome GoiEner's main competitive disadvantage: not having energy generation capacity. As a marketer, GoiEner depends on the large market operators and the general network to supply its contractors. In this regard, Nafarkoop carries out photovoltaic installations in private homes or companies, in order to achieve (renewable) energy self-sufficiency.

4 Comprehensive Assessment of the Contribution that GoiEner Makes to Degrowth

It could be stated that GoiEner has a degrowth cultural dimension. In fact, in its strategic plan degrowth is contemplated as a course of action (GoiEner, 2019). They seek to adopt degrowth as an internal value that can subsequently be spread through their Social and Solidarity Economy alliances. The following Table 2 has a double-entry table that, in the declarative and operational axes, evaluates on a three-level scale ('Responds appropriately', 'Responds Partially' and 'Does not respond') the response that GoiEner gives in the applied principles of degrowth:

Table 2. Axis of the Ethical Triangle and Applied Principles of Degrowth (2024), Self-elaboration.

Applied principles of degrowth							
Normative or Axiological Axis	1.1 Reduction of the economic scale	1.2 Reduction of waste	1.3 Impact on environment	2.1 Wealth distribution	2.2. Primacy of people	3.1. Recognition and integrity	3.2. Deliberative democratic processes
	4.1. Promotion of relational goods	4.2. Voluntary self-limitation					
	They take the environment into account in their habits, even if it means giving up comforts.	High degree of concern for sustainability. However, the assessment of environmental protection services and policies is low.	Affordable and non-polluting energy is a priority.	Concern for both environmental sustainability and social sustainability energy poverty in Spain reaches 14.3%.	Need to address the climate crisis and economic inequality while promoting democratic participation.	Importance of multilevel framework: regional, national and European legislation.	In socio-environmental decision processes, there is a lack of reflection on the importance of women.
	It is believed that the industry has great responsibility in environmental deterioration and that the importance of small local businesses plays an important role in sustainability.			Heating homes in winter is a main problem that affects the well-being of Basques.	A new energy model should prioritize people and economic justice in the transition to 100% renewable, efficient and smart energy.	Recognition of social and political diversity.	The need for the European Union to promote economic integration and democratic sovereignty is highlighted.
				Growing awareness of limited resources, promoting the idea of sharing instead of producing without limits.	There is a change in perspective, going from being "customers" to citizens who demand their right to participate in the production and consumption of clean energy.	Social initiatives that put the person at the centre including Social Economy, Social Markets, initiatives like Flavors (Zaporeak) and Neighbours (Bizilagunak), etc.	More than half of Basque citizens have signed initiatives in favor of the environment, and 21% have participated in protest events.
							Politicized and industrialized society, with various social and political organizations that have influenced the country.
							Practices such as Auzolan (collective work for community benefit) and the importance of relational networks in situations of social vulnerability stand out.
							Basque society believes in collective action.
							44.8% of Basque society believes in collective action.
							The path to the future is established in the evolution from the industrial paradigm of continuous growth to one of voluntary sobriety, moderation and simplicity.
							Consideration of the transition to fairer economic models for poorer countries.
							Importance of circular economy.
							Space for solidarity consumption where we can obtain common well-being, supporting solidarity and mutual reciprocity, and local production.

Table 2. Axis of the Ethical Triangle and Applied Principles of Degrowth (2024), Self-elaboration.

Applied principles of degrowth									
	1.1. Reduction of the economic scale	1.2. Reduction of waste	1.3. Impact on environment	2.1. Wealth distribution	2.2. Primacy of people	3.1. Recognition and integrity	3.2. Deliberative democratic processes	4.1. Promotion of relational goods	4.2. Voluntary self-limitation
Declarative or Strategic Axis	They are committed to sell exclusively renewable energy, generated by sustainable and fair technologies. Interest in promoting (self) generation. They are committed to energy efficiency and reduction in consumption through innovation.		They contemplate an ethical limit to have a dignified life and an ecological limit to avoid the plundering of resources. Developing a Contingency Plan and raising the possibility of creating resilience tools.	Non-profit policy and commitment to improving prices for its members. Their commitment to salary parity is very high.	People and life at the center, versus economic profit. They have an Equality Plan that seeks to raise awareness about critical consciousness, equality training and ecofeminism.	Recognition of autonomy based on the freedom-responsibility binomial. They promote a business model that generates better people and is also free of discrimination.	High commitment to equitable participation and accountability. They advance in communication and in the generation of trust. They maintain a structure that is as horizontal and democratic as possible.	They defend that their company is a habitable space that transversally integrates people's care and development. They promote a recognition of "invisible tasks", carried out mostly by women.	Interest in influencing society politically and culturally, as well as promoting a change in values. They want to introduce aspects related to the finite limits of the planet into the educational curriculum.
Practical or Operating Axis	Management of 106.8 GWh renewables and generation of 10.5 GWh. Expansion of renewables. They advance in better modeling and prediction of consumption. Reduction of final energy consumption.		It does not seem to translate into practice everything it declares in relation to this principle.	The economic surplus is allocated to reserves or donated to other entities in the group. They use ethical finance. There is no wage gap and the wage band index is minimal.	They develop actions to promote equality, safety and health of their employees. Trend towards parity in the composition of the workforce and to integrate the gender perspective. Actions to empower individuals.	They develop communication actions as dynamics of recognition of the work done. There does not appear to be any form of discrimination. They only collaborate with projects that guarantee individual autonomy.	They call General Assemblies for voting open to all members. They actively review internal power relations and mechanisms of internal democracy.	Volunteering, talks and events for reflection, awareness and sensitization. Volunteers collaborate in training and advice processes free and accessible.	CoEner seems to have not moved far enough in the direction of voluntary self-limitation.

Legends:

Responds adequately

Responds partially

Does not respond

Note: This table was elaborated by the authors using secondary data available in Barcena et al. 2009; Etxarri and Morandeira 2012; Curridi and Pérez-Mendiguren 2014; Zibechi 2015; Greenpeace 2017; Alejos 2018; CoEner 2019; Bengoetxea 2020; Chaves 2020; Enfokamer 2022; Márquez and Etxarri 2022; Cadena SER 2023; CoEner 2023; Rioja 2023; Universidad de Deusto 2023.

Although GoiEner transfers renewable energy from large operators, it is also making progress in creating a quantifiable demand from users interested in consuming only renewable energy (an information that is essential for a socioecological transition). Furthermore, GoiEner has taken giant steps towards energy sovereignty and renewable self-sufficiency. At the same time, GoiEner is offering and demanding real transparency, which could force large operators to enhance their accountability; a tendency that could be transferred to the rest of the economic actors in the system through *cultural pollution*, understood as the process by which the strategic commitments pursued by GoiEner are shared and implemented by the actors with whom they collaborate.

In this regard, GoiEner has a careful strategic plan, defining initiatives with ambitious lines of action regarding degrowth. Despite this document and certain areas still being at a strategic stage, Goiener has made an important progress to become a fully-degrowth organization through waste reduction, the promotion of democratic processes and relational goods, among other aspects. By also advancing in self-limitation policies and the protection of environmental impacts, Goiener might achieve a fully degrowth status that aligns the normative, declarative and practical axes analysed.

As a weakness, it should be noted the absence of procedural elements in the described principles. By themselves, these principles determine an initiative's position with respect to degrowth at a given moment, but they do not guarantee that it will continue to be degrowth-orientated in the future. To overcome this, initiatives must integrate these principles into their processes and move towards a motivation that is not excessively self-referenced or that depends on charismatic leaders. The vital importance of ideological reflection in organizations comes into play to ensure the conservation of these principles.

5 Conclusions

This article tackles one of the main criticisms traditionally directed at degrowth: the difficulty of implementing at a micro level the frameworks and principles defined on the macro scale. The novel joint use of the ethical triangle methodology and the principles defined in this article for the analysis of potentially degrowth praxis favors (a) the demonstration that it is possible to advance degrowth from the daily action of already existing initiatives and (b) contributes to raising awareness of the contribution that these initiatives may be making without, possibly, themselves being fully aware of it.

The fact that GoiEner meets some of the conditions to be considered degrowth is supported by the declaration of its strategic plan, which is part of its

declarative axis, where the initiative advocates a global approach to a reduction of consumption and better wealth distribution, solidarity and support for the creation of transformative governance models. However, despite adequately responding to the criteria presented during the selection of alternatives, GoiEner in practice appears not to respond to two of the nine principles applied. Although this leads to conclude that GoiEner is not fully degrowth-orientated, the important transformative potential that it shows should not be ignored.

In this sense, it is essential to emphasize the development that GoiEner has experienced in the practical axis through the reduction of the economic scale and waste, the distribution of wealth and the primacy of people through democratic processes. All these actions located in the practical axis invite us to think that the cooperative will continue to advance in degrowth praxis. Future research about the potential of GoiEner to achieve a fully degrowth-orientation, as well as its practical promotion of synergies with other similar synergies are possible future research avenues. Similarly, the practical application of degrowth paradigm in other organizations is also another possible area of research.

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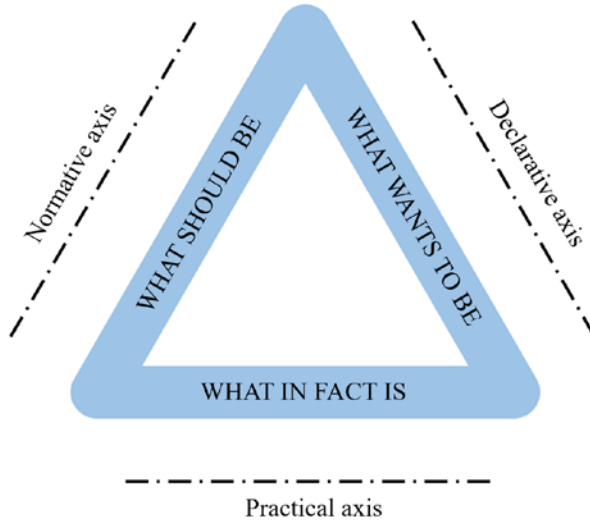
Methodological Appendix

Firstly, the descriptive method was applied for the characterization and formulation of principles and the case study for the exploration of praxis through an exhaustive review of the literature. Respecting the methodological rigor necessary in all descriptive research (Blessing, Chakrabarti and Wallace, 1998; Abreu, 2014), an interpretation of degrowth is proposed which has enabled the formulation of its normative and applied principles. This has paved the way for the empirical contrast of GoiEner's degrowth character, allowing a more holistic understanding of degrowth (Vallespín, 2000).

For the second phase, a case study was chosen, a research strategy that builds knowledge through in-depth information analysis from a case (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Ramírez and Hervís, 2019). Hence, we have analysed primary documents of Goiener (official strategic documents, internal regulations, social audits, etc.) and scientific publications about GoiEner (Antepara 2020; Capellán-Pérez, Campos-Celador and Teres Zubiaga, 2016; Atutxa, Zubero and Calvo-Sotomayor, 2022), to name but a few. To choose GoiEner, all member organizations from the Network of Alternative and Solidary Economy of the Basque Country (REAS Euskadi) were reviewed and ten initiatives (9.17% out of 109) were selected due to their cultural or economic model recognizing biophysical limits and/or economic inequalities.

GoiEner has been studied based on its normative, declarative and practical elements proposed by the ethical triangle methodology (Sasia, Martínez and Domínguez, 2019; Martínez and Unigarro, 2023), as shown in Figure 1 below. This has enabled to understand the project from three axes: what society recognizes that the initiative 'should be' (normative or axiological axis), what the company 'wants to be' (declarative or strategic) and what the company 'in fact is' (practical or operational).

Figure 1. *The Ethical Triangle and the Axis of (Self)Understanding of the Organization* (2023),
Self-elaboration



Note: This figure was elaborated by the authors using secondary data available in Martínez and Unigarro (2023, p. 83)

Once the context in which the GoiEner arose is understood and its internal and external characteristics are explained, we proceed to study its degrowth condition.

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Abbreviations

REAS Euskadi: Basque Network of Alternative and Solidary Economy (Red de Economía Alternativa y Solidaria), association that aims to develop Alternative and Solidary Economy in the Spanish Basque Autonomous Community through the inclusion and cooperation between its different member organizations.
SDG: Sustainable Development Goals, established by the United Nations.

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Notes

The authors have not received any external funding or grant to complete this work. The authors hereby declare that there is no conflict of interest in this paper.

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