

# Living well on a finite planet

Building a caring world beyond growth



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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**Lead author: Winne van Woerden**

**Co-authors: Sophie Bloemen and Thomas de Groot**

**Co-editor: Remco van de Pas**

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# Living well on a finite planet: Building a caring world beyond growth

## 1. From growth-based progress to post-growth thinking

Today, both amongst policymakers and the wider public, there remains a dominant belief that regardless how wealthy a country becomes, its GDP should continue to rise. Questioning the continued expansion of GDP feels almost counterintuitive if we want to safeguard human health now and in the future. Yet, widening global inequalities and rising ecological catastrophes are telling us to do exactly this: to question the desirability and viability of further GDP growth in rich nations, and follow a post-growth vision instead.

The acknowledgement that transitioning to a society that is more ecological and more just will be fundamental if we want to live well on a finite planet, lays at the heart of the recently launched field of **Planetary Health**. Following a post-growth vision for planetary health presupposes a radically different way of organizing our societies and economies. What could such a transformation look like? **Degrowth** is a post-growth paradigm which brings together a movement of people who are rethinking and redesigning ‘a good life for all within planetary boundaries’. Crucially, the degrowth movement focuses its attention towards wealthy nations in the Global North, and calls upon them to deliberately decrease their energy and resource use in a just way to bring their economy back into balance with the living world. In a degrowth society, values such as **care**, **autonomy** and **sufficiency** will stand at the core. Such an economy will have alternative ways of providing for our wants and needs.

What would a degrowth transformation in a rich nation like the Netherlands mean for how we think about health and organize care? To answer this question, we propose to look at what is already there. We would argue that degrowth envisions a world that is already in the making in those places in society where caring commoning practices are flourishing. There are quite a few of those places in the Netherlands, where there is a growing movement of citizens’ initiatives.

What can we learn from these dynamics of caring commoning practices at Dutch citizens initiatives as we shape the future of health and care beyond growth? What does this mean for policy? In 2020, we conducted research aiming to explore these questions by means of a qualitative explorative case study with five Dutch citizens' initiatives, part of the Dutch national network for citizens' initiative on care, housing and well-being, or NLZVE (short for 'Nederland Zorgt Voor Elkaar' or in English: The Netherlands Cares For Eachother). We also spoke to several experts working on the topic of our research.

## **2. Sparks of degrowth in the spirit of caring commoning**

Degrowth envisions a world that is more autonomous, ecologically sufficient and caring. We believe that the acts of caring commoning that already exist in the fringes of today's growth-based societies can provide us fundamental tools for building a caring world beyond growth. From our talks with people engaging in caring commoning practices at Dutch citizens' initiatives eight key insights emerged. They reveal clues of the potential that can be unlocked if the movement of citizens' initiatives that are organising care through commons would be empowered and promoted.

### **Insight 1: Approaching autonomy and self-reliance collectively**

- Citizens' initiatives respond to individual concerns of well-being through focusing on improving **community well-being**,
- a shared need for self-resilience becomes **together-reliance**,
- a shared need for self-autonomy becomes **together-autonomy**.

### **Insight 2: Promoting solidarity in personal relations**

- Citizens' initiatives promote a **sense of solidarity** in the way people relate to one another. This is an important way in which citizens' initiatives improve people's health and well-being.

### **Insight 3: Providing care in a needs-driven and integrative way**

- Citizens' initiatives aim to make the provisioning of care driven by local needs rather than by what care organizations are able or willing to provide within the frames of their organizations' reach.
- This requires a unique comprehensive approach focusing on **integration** rather than on specialization.
- Whether initiatives include an **ecological perspective** in how they give meaning to health and care highly depends on the characteristics of the community in which they are embedded.

### **Insight 4: Moving from competition towards collaboration, built on a culture of trust and respect**

- Citizens' initiatives active at community level are not obliged to follow market logic and don't have any incentive to be 'productive', 'efficient' or to compete with others. In fact, for citizens' initiatives to be successful, strong **collaboration** with other local care organizations built on a culture of **trust** and mutual respect is fundamental.
- Tasks are divided based on each parties' **strengths and capabilities** in a supportive manner, so that a rich community caring network can be developed.
- As initiatives work on **health prevention** and **health promotion** at community level, they can improve the efficiency of the formal healthcare system, since many problems are solved at the 'frontside of the system'.

### **Insight 5: Practicing reciprocity and nurturing accessibility**

- Through extending wage labor in the form of care work with voluntary activity at community level, citizens' initiatives make care services more **accessible**.
- By providing care in a **reciprocal** way, care becomes a source of wealth for the community as a whole, rather than as a service exchanged from a provider to a receiver.

### **Insight 6: Letting those affected decide the direction of decision-making**

- Decision-making processes are aimed to be steered by **those affected** by them as much as possible.
- Putting such a 'bottom-up' approach to governing care in practice meant ensuring **local support** and a sense of '**collective ownership**' within the community.

### **Insight 7: Staying locally grounded while scaling-up through distributed networks**

- In order for citizens' initiatives to flourish, they need to maintain their small scale and **stay locally-grounded**.
- Meanwhile, initiatives are 'scaling-up' through **networks of knowledge and skills exchange**, both at the regional and the national level.

### **Insight 8: Appreciating different approaches to changemaking**

- People involved at citizen's initiatives **reflect very differently** on their role in the process of societal transformation. These different changemaking approaches are part and parcel of the dynamic process of societal change.

## **3. Towards a care-full degrowth transformation**

Rooted in the spirit of caring commoning practices, these eight insights give us sparks of what a care-full degrowth transformation could look like. What is needed to serve these dynamics of caring commoning practices in a structured manner? In this part of our report, we explore policy transformations to build a caring world beyond growth.

The current Dutch welfare system significantly depends upon high energy systems. Its associated policy vehicles all rely on fiscal transfers from a growing economy. As our economy becomes premised on low material and energy throughput, we will need to come up with new ones. We argue that a care-full degrowth transformation requires radical new policy strategies that support and promote the organisation of care through

commons. These policies need to be built around core dynamics of caring commoning practices like discussed in the previous part. Moreover, they should enable caring commoning practices to merge with degrowth's other key values of ecological sufficiency and autonomy.

We believe a shift at two levels is necessary. The first shift is conceptual, it concerns changing our growth-oriented imaginaries of health and human-wellbeing and the indicators that follow out of them. The second shift is concrete, it concerns changing our growth-oriented ways of political organizing.

### **1st shift (conceptual):**

Re-evaluate our concept of wealth/progress (at society level) and well-being/health (at individual level) and the indicators we use to measure them by:

#### ❖ Embrace planetary health thinking

We have to re-evaluate the way we conceptualize human health and well-being. The wellbeing of humanity and the degradation of the rest of the biosphere cannot remain disconnected for much longer. Putting care center stage means recognizing our interdependencies, humans and non-human ones. In short, we need to embrace planetary health thinking.

#### ❖ Abandon GDP to measure a society's progress, shift to more comprehensive wellbeing indexes

When we use GDP growth as an indicator of a society's progress, we are promoting the indefinite increase of all that can be turned into capital, regardless of its social or ecological cost. GDP is a misleading, if not dangerous, indicator of prosperity, as more governments are realizing now. GDP neglects those activities that are reproductive and regenerative including those activities taking place in the domain of the commons, where people engage in collectively organized caring activities. These caring commoning practices are fundamental for the well-functioning of the economy and societal well-being, and should be acknowledged as such in the ways we measure a society's progress.

Yet, solely adopting more holistic measures of progress without changing the way we organize our economies and societies will not be enough to shift to a post-growth world. We shall need to adopt post-growth policies as well, both nationally and locally.

## **2nd shift (concrete):**

If we want the transition to a degrowth economy that is reduced in size and scale to happen in a care-full way, we need to put caring commoning practices center stage. Key policy strategies for local and national policy makers in The Netherlands to explore are:

### ❖ **Care income and reduced working hours (national policymakers)**

The idea of a **care income** derives from the concept of a Universal Basic Income and is a way of investing in people's capacity to take care of themselves, their community and nature. Another policy vehicle of granting people more time to care is by liberating time from paid work through **reducing working hours**.

### ❖ **Local currencies and care credits (local policymakers)**

**Local community currencies** can contribute to downscaling and relocalizing economic activity, constraining the circulation of money within a community. One other policy strategy to achieve this goal is by introducing time credits. We propose the introduction of **care credits**. It would mean that the current system for the financing of care would be expanded and strengthened through local financing schemes.

### ❖ **Public civic partnerships (local policymakers)**

**Public civic partnerships**, or PCPs, are innovative approaches between public institutions and commons to co-produce ideas and policies, and deliver public goods and services collectively. As such, they are a key way to empower communities to engage in caring commoning practices in a meaningful and structural manner.

#### **4. The road forward - the importance of storytelling**

The final remark we would like to make revolves around the importance of storytelling. The story of unlimited economic growth on a limited planet inherently linked to the political ideology of neoliberalism, has ended. We are in desperate need of a story with which to replace it. Degrowth aims to tell such a story, although its script is far from finalized.

Meanwhile, degrowth opens up debates on topics that have been previously unthinkable, including the topic of the organizing of care through commons. In the world that we live in today, the tyranny of growth-focused economic and societal thought has made imaginative thinking outside the box impossible. Utopias like degrowth are crucial to free our imagination, so that we can conceive visions about the society we want to live in as we transition to a post-growth world, that motivate changes in our actions today. We need that imagination to explore the different routes that will bring about the transformation we need.

For sure, embarking on these paths will come with ambivalences and none of the narratives and practices that we will find on the way will hold all the answers. But if we want to have a chance at creating a caring future beyond growth where all of us can live well on this extraordinarily finite planet, utopian thinking and practices can show us the way.

