COMMENTARY

Post-Growth, Degrowth, the Doughnut, and Circular Economy: A Short Guide for Policymakers

Federico Savini, *University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands*

ABSTRACT: Cities are searching for policy strategies able to meet climate and social targets while reducing their material footprint. To this end, post-growth approaches to urban sustainability have been rapidly gaining momentum. Rejecting the idea of green growth, the notion of post-growth includes a variety of agendas and approaches—for example, wellbeing economy, circular economy, degrowth, and Doughnut Economics. City officials, urban agencies, and policymakers recognize these terms as part of a same policy trend, one that focuses on the socio-ecological quality of urban development rather than its size. Yet, they often use them interchangeably and, in so doing, they risk making policy scenarios seem less incisive and inconsistent to the public. This commentary gives a guideline to the use of these terms in policy. It compares the terms of post-growth, degrowth, circular economy, and Doughnut Economics. It argues that post-growth is an approach, the doughnut is a tool, degrowth is an agenda, and circular economy is a business model. The article concludes with a manifesto for a post-growth city, a set of principles that can be used to build an urban post-growth policy strategy.

KEYWORDS: circular economy; cities; degrowth; doughnut economics; post-growth

SUMMARY FOR POLICYMAKERS

- The terms *degrowth*, *post-growth*, *doughnut*, and *circular economy* are becoming popular in urban policymaking but they are often used interchangeably.
- The paper clarifies the definitions of these terms and offers a list of principles that can be applied to post-growth urban policymaking.
- Post-growth strategies combine targets of material and energy reduction with goals of social justice.
- The doughnut framework offers a tool to create post-growth strategies and identify targets of reduction and social equality.

DOI:10.3138/jccpe-2023-0004

- A degrowth agenda proposes to reduce excess consumption and production, and to redistribute wealth to meet social universal needs.
- The circular economy is a model of economic development that can be used to implement a degrowth agenda if it combines targets of reduction with social equality.

Introduction

Many cities in Europe have recently begun embracing a post-growth framework to achieve their sustainability policy targets. Among others, Amsterdam was one of the first to include a post-growth vision within its circular economy strategy. In 2019, the city engaged in a co-productive process with research institutions, civic society, and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to define a *city portrait*, inspired by Kate Raworth's (2017) doughnut framework. In 2020, Copenhagen did the same. Barcelona adopted a municipal agenda oriented to sustaining public services, reducing evictions and promoting cooperatives in housing and productive sectors, which has not been without its challenges (Degen & García, 2012). Other cities have not explicitly used the doughnut post-growth tool but have instead preferred to focus on other repertoires and terminologies, such as the *wellbeing economy*: an approach that specifically stresses safety and security, community, civic participation, culture and spirituality, income, and wealth (Fudge et al., 2021).

These experiences identify a turn in sustainable policymaking. City administrations recognize that to meet climate targets, efficiency gains and infrastructural adaptation is not enough. It is instead necessary to move toward an economic organization that values well-being instead of material consumption and, in so doing, pursues a reduction of the environmental harm caused by the expansion of the urban economy.

Despite these new policy trends, however, hardly any public administration has engaged explicitly with the notion of degrowth. Meanwhile, degrowth is becoming a rather common agenda among environmental activists, designers, and architects (D'Alisa et al., 2013; Kallis et al., 2020; Kaika et al., 2023; Savini, 2022).

What we have in front of us is a constellation of terms that are often used interchangeably, depending on the setting and actors involved in the policy arena at hand. Within cities, it is not uncommon to witness roundtables, seminars, policy tables, think tanks, and workshops where these terms are being explored simultaneously. These activities often result in a discussion that is lacking focus because the participants do not share a common understanding of the terms at hand. As a consequence, the conversation often gets stuck on the terminology itself, rather than on the actual solutions needed to address the socio-environmental problem at hand (such as CO_2 reduction or social inequality). Participants use the terms that resonate the most with their background. In my practice, as an action-oriented researcher cooperating with governments, civic society, and social movements,

I notice that *circular economy* is highly appreciated as a term for sustainability among engineers, economists, and utility firms. Radical scholars and urban activists mobilize the term *degrowth* as much as those sustainability experts that want to stress the need to move away from an extractivist economy. The *doughnut framework* is becoming popular among radical environmental economists, even if it is not yet mainstream.

Because these terms are all very important to position urban policymaking in the current climate and biodiversity crisis, it is necessary to distinguish and compare them. In this commentary, I build on both the literature and the observation of how these terms are used in practice. Specifically, I want to compare the following four terms: *post-growth*, *degrowth*, *the doughnut* (or doughnut economy), and *the circular economy*.

In short, post-growth is an approach, the doughnut is a tool, degrowth is an agenda, and circular economy is a (business) model.

Post-Growth: A Term That Shifts the Focus from Economic Output to Social Change

The term *post-growth* defines an approach to the study and intervention of socio-ecological problems that is essentially opposite to that of green growth. Green growth expresses the belief that society can keep economic activity while achieving a reduction of emissions and material demands on the planet. Post-growth thinking takes a different stance, arguing that the unlimited expansion of production and consumption is impossible on a finite planet. Post-growth thinking takes the GDP (gross domestic product) as the main target of critique because it is an indicator that measures all economic transactions but overlooks the quality of these transactions and their actual value for well-being. Post-growth rejects the belief that the increase in GDP is necessary to meet social and climate targets.

Post-growth thinking builds on the evidence that society has not reached any absolute decoupling globally, which means delinking GDP increase from environmental degradation, both in terms of emissions and material footprint (European Environmental Bureau, 2019; Hickel & Kallis, 2019; Wiedmann et al., 2020). It is important to stress that post-growth is an approach, which does not yet have a strategy or an agenda. It is a rather straightforward way of recognizing that the current prime challenge for environmental policymaking does not lie in finding or applying new or more green technologies, but rather in rethinking the way society and the economy interact with the environment. Post-growth thinking happens as soon as one accepts that there are planetary boundaries that cannot be respected if industrialized societies double their economic output every 23 years or so (assuming a growth rate of 3% per year).

Accordingly, post-growth is a useful concept to stimulate a discussion, but it is hardly useful to define a concrete urban, national, or international policy strategy. It certainly counteracts the highly diffused idea that the expansion of the economy through more jobs, more output, and more demand is a pre-condition for carrying out sustainability agenda. Against this belief, a post-growth approach urges

policymakers to shift the focus from the expansion of the economy toward the quality of socioeconomic relations, to invest directly in well-being and reduction of environmentally harmful activities, and to tackle the climate crisis at its root. It's an approach without a toolkit.

The Doughnut: A Tool to Map Environmental Overshoot and Social Needs

The doughnut framework is very useful to fill this gap in the toolbox of city officials. The doughnut is, first of all, a model that provides policy content to a post-growth approach. It is a metaphor that brings to the centre of economy theory the notion of an *ecological ceiling* and problematize *overshoot* (see Figure 1). Accordingly, it implies a post-growth position in so far as GDP growth is not indisputably accepted as the main objective of policy making.

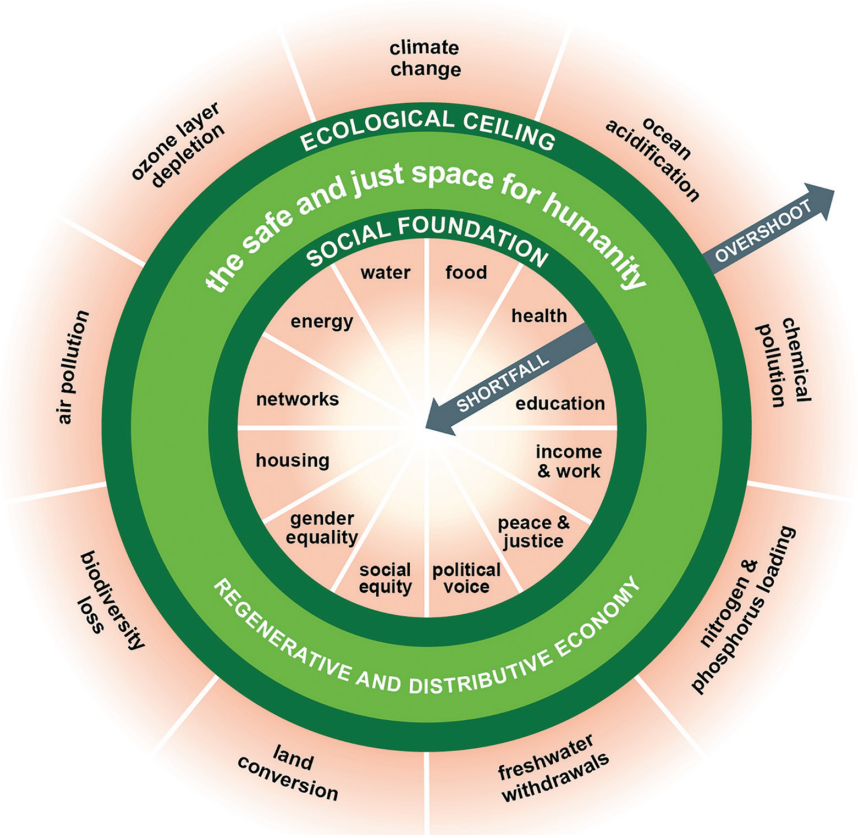

Figure 1: The doughnut economics conceptual model, Source: *Wikimedia Commons*.

As with any analytical framework, a doughnut is a tool that allows policymakers to do two important things: first, to map and survey the sectors—within a city or a nation, for example—that are overshooting planetary boundaries, and second, to identify those sectors of society that are not meeting minimum standards. Using the doughnut as a policy tool makes it possible to identify and discuss those sectors that overshoot and those sectors that instead do not meet basic human needs. Where data are available, the doughnut allows policymakers to estimate how much each of these sectors should either decrease or increase. It's a tool to build a target. This is how it has been used in Amsterdam, where the city has engaged in several workshops and research to establish key sectors to reduce at the municipal level and to list key indicators of well-being to be achieved.

The limit of the doughnut lies in the fact that, as with any other tool, its effectiveness and potential consequences fully depend on the actors that use it, the data that they gather to implement it, and the policy response in terms of regulations, incentives, and divestments. As a tool, the doughnut does not offer a unique course of action; it helps actors to create one. It offers a map of a problem but gives no direction as to how this problem should be approached in practice. The result is that even if a city approves a doughnut policy, officials could still undertake policies that displace environmental costs elsewhere—for example, greening the urban economy (rather than downscaling it) or increasing the wealth of all people in its administrative borders without reducing inequality on a broader scale. In sum, the adoption of the doughnut does not protect against the risk of greenwashing in so far as it is not a sufficient condition to enact socially redistributive policies by public administrations.

An example of this phenomenon is *cost-shifting* (Conde et al., 2022), which may take place in the electrification of urban mobility infrastructure and vehicles. The massive investment in private or shared electric mobility drives the demand for lithium worldwide, which is expected to double in 2030. The success of the smart city obscures the dramatic social and environmental costs of e-waste disposal in the Global South. Even if cities employ the doughnut as a tool, they still may rely on techno-fixes of the economy that hardly change the way wealth, consumption, and production are organized in cities, and the way environmental damages are distributed.

Degrowth: An Agenda That Reduces Excess

Degrowth addresses this limit. It offers an agenda of action that makes it possible to reach the targets defined through a doughnut framework. Degrowth is a post-growth approach, but it goes one step further. It recognizes that to remain within planetary boundaries (i.e., the external border of the doughnut), it is necessary to actively reduce all those economic activities—production and consumption—that generate environmental damage and that concentrate wealth in the hands of a few. To do this, degrowth opens a trajectory of reduction that targets excess first (Hickel, 2020). At the same time, degrowth demands distributional justice. It requires recognition by policymakers of the fact that overconsumption by the wealthy is

damaging the urban and planetary commons for all. At the same time, it draws attention to the fact that those who do not meet minimal living standards (falling short of the inner border of the doughnut) can only achieve well-being if the wealthy give up their overconsumption, which is taking away housing, land, and carbon budgets. On the production side, degrowth claims that a true space for an ecological transition can be achieved by redirecting productive capacity from less necessary and environmentally destructive productions (e.g., SUVs) to those that deliver collective well-being. Degrowth is the opposite of trickle-down economics.

This is an agenda of socio-ecological redistribution. As such, this agenda opens several related issues: the democratic distribution of power, the taxation of excessive wealth, the marginalization of care and social work, and even the system of property rights, which predispose some to accumulate material resources while dispossessing others. Yet it also gives a clear indication of which sectors need to be prioritized to improve the well-being of cities: health care, education, social relations, family and friendship, cultural development, tradition, and heritage, for example. It allows for revaluing the position of key investments that, while boosting economic performance, also improve well-being: public transport, pedestrian zones, city markets, cycling infrastructures, polycentric land use, and urban biodiversity (Savini, 2021a).

Degrowth is therefore a useful concept to build an agenda for thriving cities. Yet public officials often dismiss it as unusable. The reason is that this term opens sensitive political issues: achieving ecological limits and social equality requires a planned reduction of excess, and this excess is mostly concentrated in the wealthier and more powerful actors that govern the city economy, starting from those actors with key positions in the energy, farming, transportation, and building sectors.

The most critical example is the real estate industry, the primary sector of investment by ultra-wealthy groups and pension funds, which consumes 30% of all materials extracted and produces 20% of all solid waste (Benachio et al., 2020). Real estate is the one sector that mostly challenges public opinion when dealt with from a degrowth perspective, with housing being a critical long-term asset for households. Other examples are the shareholders of the aviation industry and of urban airports holdings, harbour operators, cargo industries, fossil fuel distributors, financial and insurance elites (who mostly live in cities and enjoy frequent flying), and the servers' operators that run the smart economy. These are all urban infrastructures that currently drive the economic wealth of city administrations.

Circular Economy: A Mode of Urban Development That Thrives on Regeneration and Reduction

Degrowth stimulates a discussion on the reduction of these infrastructures and at the same time requires policymakers to design strategies that allow for increasing well-being where necessary. The circular economy has rapidly gained momentum because it offers a possible solution to this conundrum.

The term *circular economy* is commonly defined as a model of economic production and consumption that strives to maximise the productivity of materials

and in so doing reduces waste and raw materials intake (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017; Kirchherr et al., 2017). Accordingly, the model gives public officials and companies the possibility to map where the loss of value in materials takes place and to set in motion changes in production and consumption that make it possible to capture that value. This is a sustainable goal, also from a degrowth perspective.

Yet, as a model, it is so neutral that it can be used for almost any kind of socio-environmental policy, from socially oriented repair cafés to multinational oligopolies governing large value chains (Savini, 2021b). The concept of the circular economy alone offers little for dealing with socio-ecological problems because it does not demand the reduction of consumption and production. If combined with degrowth, however, the circular economy concept can offer a powerful trajectory for material reduction. It can target planned obsolescence, penalize waste producers, and promote a decentralized, democratic economy of material reuse. Furthermore, if framed within a post-growth perspective, the circular economy model can be actively used to reduce consumption, radically shifting production away from raw-materials-intensive sectors, and open a debate about the key sectors where production and consumption are the most environmentally harmful and socially unnecessary. Concrete examples include the fashion industry, the aviation industry with short-haul flights, and the meat and fast-food industry as well as the abuse of electronic appliances.

A Post-Growth Manifesto for Cities

Both public officials and green-economic actors recognize that post-growth approaches are necessary to meet climate targets at the speed that is required, as well as to maintain and increase well-being in cities. To do this, it is important to invest in developing the doughnut as a tool to identify clear targets for material reduction and social improvement. Circular economy strategies can trigger practical actions on the ground and generate a different economic development that thrives on reduction and repair, rather than short-term consumption. This economic transition forms coalitions between the most innovative views on sustainability and the emerging landscape of economic actors involved in the economy of care, repair, regeneration, education, and health.

To trigger this process, however, city officials need to engage with a degrowth agenda that actively pursues reduction in key unsustainable sectors and is not afraid to give clear directions to redistribute wealth and space.

Space is the most wanted currency for many of the most innovative circular economy projects that foster the reduction of consumption: repair cafés and swap shops need locations; organic waste reuse in urban agriculture requires collection points and urban gardens located in the proximity of large waste streams; wastewater and heat waste reuse require decentred infrastructures in dense urban areas; shared, slow, and public mobility needs the space that is presently wasted on cars and parking lots; and circular housing at affordable prices needs the space that is today allocated for vacant office spaces, underused land, or mass-produced real estate.

Without a degrowth agenda, a post-growth approach will remain wishful thinking, the doughnut will remain a tool without purpose, and the circular economy will lead to no gain in terms of environmental targets. A degrowth agenda engages with a socio-ecological transition strategy and cities are key sites for it.

In a recent publication, a collective of writers has identified key sectors in which a post-growth approach for cities can be applied: dwelling, mobility, governance, regulations, food (i.e., *nurturing*), and the worldviews that drive urban planning itself (i.e., *being*) (Savini et al., 2022, p. 219). Within these sectors, they argue, it is possible to define key principles of actions; the stepping stones on which to build a political discussion for a post-growth agenda for cities. According to this manifesto, with their eyes set on a post-growth world, planners and policymakers, people, and organizations will promote the following:

For Dwelling

- approaches to dwelling that cease being environmentally destructive and sources of lifelong financial debt for isolated individuals and fragmented communities;
- non-commodified ways of dwelling in which housing becomes a catalyst for human flourishing, community building, and democratic engagement; and
- residential buildings that foster a symbiosis between humans and natural ecosystems through the implementation of regenerative and participatory design, and through the reduction of resource consumption and energy use.

For Moving

- integrated approaches to transport, land use, and patterns of activity in which mobility ceases to be provided by environmentally destructive machines that constrain human beings and predetermine what or whom they need or aspire to reach;
- patterns of land use and activity that allow people to access healthy food, care, meaningful social engagement, and work in their vicinity, thereby reducing their dependence on mobility; and
- transport systems that prioritize ecological and social sustainability, as well as slow mobility and physically active travelling.

For Governing

- approaches to urban governance that cease to fetishize private property as an inevitable right and are no longer dominated by standardized state bureaucracies;
- approaches to governance that are oriented toward fulfilling essential needs, namely social care, health, meaningful social engagement, and human well-being; and
- institutions that pursue autonomy and democracy in communities in an inclusive and just manner, and enable the commoning of resources and services.

For Regulating

- planning regulations that cease to facilitate land development and ever-increasing land values as the key solutions to urban problems;
- planning regulations that set constitutional limits to the ecological impacts of human activities and promote ecological regeneration; and
- planning laws that recognize the social value of land and real-estate, above and beyond its economic value, and enable the social and spatial redistribution of resources and wealth.

For Nurturing

- urban metabolisms that cease to be ravenous recipients of resources and predatory fabricators of carbon emissions, pollution, and waste;
- approaches to territorial planning that balance and synergize the mutual prosperity of urban, rural, and natural areas; and
- resource provision practices that actively foster human health and ecological regeneration, while doing as much as possible to engage local communities in the design, governance, and maintenance of their own biophysical sustenance.

For Being

- a societal ethic no longer dominated by competitive collaboration and individualism, extractivism, and anthropocentrism;
- a professional ethic of mutual understanding, trust, and compassion, which places the regeneration and protection of ecosystems at the centre of a new generation of professional deontologies; and
- education systems for planners and associated professions that focus on developing deep listening abilities and respectful mentalities so that graduated professionals are prepared to truly engage with all people and communities that are affected by planning and urban management decisions.

Author Information

Federico Savini is Associate Professor in Environmental Planning, Institutions and Politics at the University of Amsterdam. He combines approaches of political sociology, urban planning and critical geography to the study of institutions and socio-spatial change in cities. In his works, he studies the politics that drive institutional change, focusing on the different sets of regulations that shape the working of city-regions and their ecological impact on the planet.

References

Benachio, G. L. F., Freitas, M. do C. D., & Tavares, S. F. (2020). Circular economy in the construction industry: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *260*, 121046. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2020.121046

Conde, M., D'Alisa, G., & Sekulova, F. (2022). When greening is not degrowth: Cost-shifting insights. In *Post-growth planning: Cities beyond the market economy* (pp. 19–31). Routledge.

D'Alisa, G., Demaria, F., & Cattaneo, C. (2013). Civil and uncivil actors for a degrowth society. *Journal of Civil Society*, *9*(2), 212–224. https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2013.788935

Degen, M., & García, M. (2012). The transformation of the "Barcelona model": An analysis of culture, urban regeneration and governance. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *36*(5), 1022–1038. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2012.01152.x

European Environmental Bureau. (2019). *Decoupling debunked—Evidence and arguments against green growth as a sole strategy for sustainability*. https://eeb.org/library/decoupling-debunked/

Fudge, M., Ogier, E., & Alexander, K. A. (2021). Emerging functions of the wellbeing concept in regional development scholarship: A review. *Environmental Science & Policy*, *115*, 143–150. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2020.10.005

Geissdoerfer, M., Savaget, P., Bocken, N. M. P., & Hultink, E. J. (2017). The circular economy—A new sustainability paradigm? *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *143*, 757–768. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2016.12.048

Hickel, J. (2020). *Less is more: How degrowth will save the world*. Random House.

Hickel, J., & Kallis, G. (2019). Is green growth possible? *New Political Economy*, *25*, 469–486.

Kaika, M., Varvarousis, A., Demaria, F., & March, H. (2023). Urbanizing degrowth: Five steps towards a Radical Spatial Degrowth Agenda for planning in the face of climate emergency. *Urban Studies*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980231162234

Kallis, G., Paulson, S., D'Alisa, G., & Demaria, F. (2020). *The case for degrowth*. John Wiley & Sons.

Kirchherr, J., Reike, D., & Hekkert, M. (2017). Conceptualizing the circular economy: An analysis of 114 definitions. *Resources, Conservation and Recycling*, *127*, 221–232. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resconrec.2017.09.005

Raworth, K. (2017). *Doughnut economics: seven ways to think like a 21st-century economist*. Chelsea Green Publishing.

Savini, F. (2022). Maintaining autonomy: Urban degrowth and the commoning of housing. *Urban Studies*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980221121517

Savini, F. (2021a). Towards an urban degrowth: Habitability, finity and polycentric autonomism. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, *53*(5), 1076–1095 https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518x20981391

Savini, F. (2021b). The circular economy of waste: recovery, incineration and urban reuse. *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, *64*(12), 2114–2132. https://doi.org/10.1080/09640568.2020.1857226

Savini, F., Ferreira, A., & von Schönfeld, K. C. (2022). *Post-growth planning: Cities beyond the market economy*. Routledge

Wiedmann, T., Lenzen, M., Keyßer, L. T., & Steinberger, J. K. (2020). Scientists' warning on affluence. *Nature Communications*, *11*(1), 3107. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-020-16941-y. Medline:32561753