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Class, Degrowth and Transition to Just and Sustainable Society

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Abstract

Degrowth and steady-state economy need to be placed in a context of socio-economic classes for them to gain wider appeal and to become a transformative force. In this paper four global classes are identified with separate future scenarios. For the wealthiest over-consuming class of one billion a set of powerful degrowth interventions are urgently needed. They would include advances in taxation and prohibition of excesses. Similar, but more gentle degrowth interventions is needed for the second billion belonging to the consuming class. The members of the sustainable class of three billion have the basic needs met in a way that fits within the carrying capacity of the earth. For this class the principles of steady-state should be applied. The struggling class includes the two billion poorest in the world with empowerment as the transition path.

Keywords

Economic class, degrowth, environmental sustainability, social transformation

1 Introduction

Much of the discussion about environmental sustainability and social equity is trapped within a nation-state framework or in the idea of the globe or humanity. For example the declaration of the Paris Degrowth conference in 2008 talks about the environmental impact of the global economy in general and discusses social divide solely in the terms of nations. (Paris Declaration 2008) We argue that a class perspective would provide much more useful basis for the discussion degrowth or steady-state society. Income has strong relation both with the fulfilment of basic needs and the environmental damage caused by human activity and can be used as a helpful proxy for creating clearer, class-based understanding of the issue and optimal societal interventions.

In this paper we aim to take forward class-based discussion of environmental sustainability and social justice. Our first proposition is that income is almost equal to environmental harm: the greater the income of a person, households or a nation is, the greater the environmental damage. Second, we note that to live dignified life with basic needs fulfilled a minimum level of income is necessary and the related environmental harm acceptable. By combining the two propositions, we can classify humanity into four income-based classes: struggling, sustainable, consuming and over-consuming. By applying income thresholds established in earlier work by Alan Durning (1992) and Mathew Bentley (2003) and current data, also the size and geographical locations of these four classes can be established as an illustration and basis for further debate.

The class-based understanding of the global society can further be used for suggesting correct transition path for each class. For the over-consuming class of one billion richest person, a set of powerful and immediate degrowth interventions are urgently needed for three reasons. First, the members of this class are causing remarkable share of the environmental destruction globally. Secondly, there is strong cultural tendency for rest of the society to emulate the consumption styles of this class. Third, income inequality is a major impediment to societal well being. Successful degrowth interventions among this class would reduce the incomes for the benefit of the environment and well being of the society. They would include advances in progressive income taxation, introduction of progressive consumption taxes and prohibition of excesses.

Similar, but more gentle set of degrowth interventions is needed for the second billion belonging to the consuming class. The growth of income of this class needs to be halted in the short term and reduced gradually in the long term. The largest of the four classes, the sustainable class with three billion members, have the basic needs met in a way that fits within the carrying capacity of the earth. For this class the principles of steady-state economics should be applied. The livelihoods and ways of life of this class needs to be respected, promoted and protected. The struggling class includes the two billion poorest in the world. Permanent or reoccurring hunger indicates the powerlessness of this class. Therefore empowerment is the key to their transition path. This would mean access to land and other natural resources and full realisation of political and social rights. Economic growth among the struggling class would be an expression of successful empowerment.

2 Material and methods

This paper is an outcome of two studies carried out during 2008-2010. Then first one, Sustainable Futures, was done by the authors in an activist think-tank Coalition for Environment and Development (CED) during 2008-2009. The primary objective of the study was to work out definitions of sustainable culture, find living examples of them and propose transformation agendas for the unsustainable ones. The choice for the method was to conduct dialogues among various actors in three continents for direct inputs from the ground and balanced representation of different realities. For the study, eleven dialogues on sustainable futures were conducted in six countries: Finland, India, Kenya, Nepal, Sweden and Tanzania

Their purpose was to get inputs from the rich oral system of communication and knowledge that exists particularly in the Global South.

The second project is an ongoing work with the Left Forum, a research and dialogue organisation established by the political party Left Alliance of Finland. The purpose of the study is to discuss concrete ways to advance red-green politics. Also there dialogue workshops with activists and researchers were conducted in 2009, this time in various towns around Finland.

3 Class Perspective on Sustainability

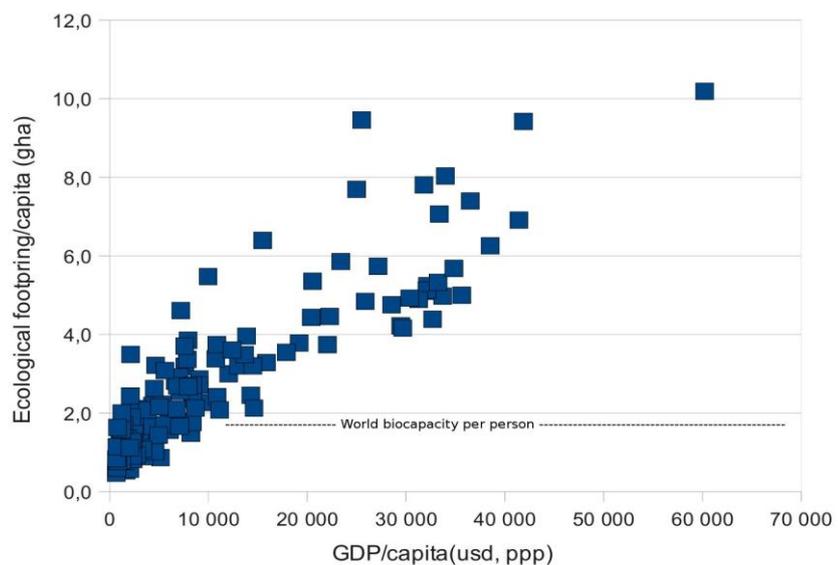
Building on earlier conceptualisations by Allan Durning (1992) and Check (2000) and calculations by Mathew Bentley (2003) we present a class perspective on environmental sustainability and well being. The basis of the discussion is an observation that income and environmental harm go hand in hand.

3.1 Income \approx environmental harm

We argue that monetary income and environmental harm are so strongly related that income serves as very useful indicator for environmental sustainability and unsustainability. Income is almost equal to consumption and consumption is almost equal to environmental harm.

One way to assess the relationship between formal economy and environmental impact is to look at the Ecological Footprint and GDP. When they are presented in a scatter plot for 126 countries, a strong relation between these two emerges. Per capita income of 10,000 USD per year on purchasing power parity seems to be an important threshold. With a higher national income, no country manages to stay within the annual 1.8 gha per capita sustainability threshold based on biocapacity. The result of the scatter plot of per capita Ecological Footprint in relation to GDP is presented in the Figure 1.

Fig. 1 Title Ecological Footprint and GDP Per Capita of Countries 130 countries
Source: NEF 2009

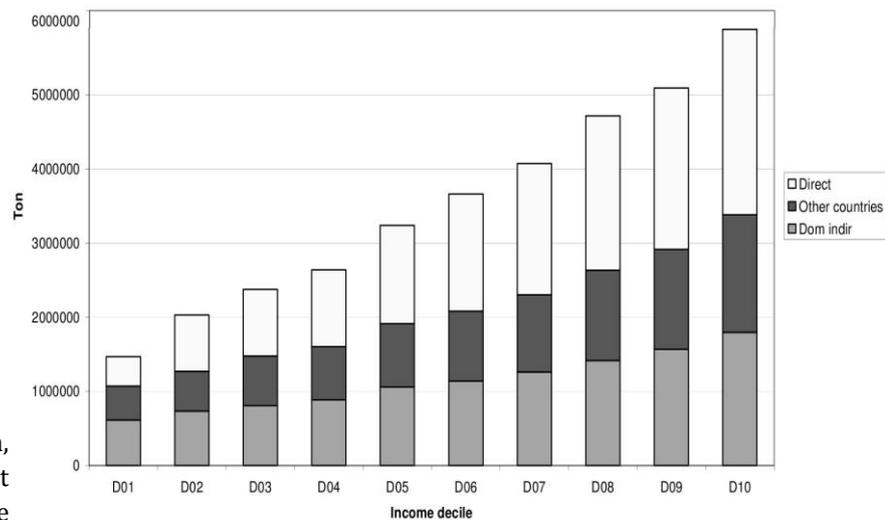


Similar pattern emerges when households and CO₂ emissions are studied. For example in the case of Sweden, the per capita CO₂ emissions have a strong relations with the per capita incomes of the households. The richer the people are the more they pollute. In Figure 2 the data is presented from year

2000.

Fig. 2 CO2 emission of income deciles in Sweden, 2000

Source: SCB 2003



In this case from Sweden, the members of the richest decile (ten per cent of the population) cause almost four times more CO2 emissions than the poorest. In countries with larger income inequalities, the difference would be higher.

A similar case is there when the total material requirement (TMR) was studied for 23 households in Finland. In the richest household the members consumed more than five times more natural resources than in the poorest family. The research concluded that there is a strong relationship between income and natural resource consumption. (Kotakorpi et al 2009)

3.2 Four income-based classes: Over-Consuming, Consuming, Sustainable and Struggling

There have been several earlier discussions of environmental impact with an income-based class perspective. The first such was made by Alan Durning in 1992. He presented three ecological classes and called them consumers (1,1 billion), middle (3,3 billion) and poor (1,1 billion). He used the per capita share of the gross national product on purchasing power parity as the measurement. The threshold for the consumers was set at 7.500 usd per capita annually and for the poor at 700 usd. (Durning 1992, 26-28). Later David C. Korten used the same categories renaming them as overconsumers, sustainers and marginals and calling them socio-ecological classes (Korten 1994).

Some years later Brian Czech applied also three classes for looking at the humanity. He called them the liquidating class consisting of the richest one per cent of humanity, the amorphous class of the next 19 per cent and steady-state class of the bottom 80 per cent. (Czech 2000, 118-122). While Czech's focus on the richest one per cent makes good sense, we find the way he has grouped together the people struggling with hunger and mere survival with the low-income world majority too coarse.

Matthew Bentley has done most detailed work in identifying the members of the consumer class across the world in his Ph.D. dissertation (2003). He defined a member of the consumer class as a person who has an annual share of the gross domestic product exceeding USD 7,000 in terms of purchasing power parity. His finding about the consumer class in selected major countries are indicated in Table 1. An important element to note there, is the sizeable over-consuming in populous countries such as China and India. On the global-scale, nearly an equal number of consumers are located in the developed and developing groups.

Table 1 Consumers Class in Selected Countries and Regions 2002

Source: Worldwatch 2004

Selected Countries	Consumers (Nos. in Millions)	Share of Population (%)
United States	243	84
China	240	19
India	122	12
Japan	121	95
Germany	76	92
Brazil	58	33
WORLD	1,728	28
Of which :		
-In industrial countries	912	
-In developing countries	816	

Building on the earlier work described above, we have worked out four income-based classes with regard to fulfilment of basic needs and environmental impact. It rests on the assumption that income has strong relation with both. With too little income basic needs such as safe and sufficient food, water and shelter, can not be met. With increasing income environmental damages increases. Applying the three elements four classes are indicated in the Table 2 below.

Table 2 The conceptual basis for the four income-based classes

Source: No source

Income level	Basic needs	Environmental damage	Class
Low	Not met	Small	Struggling
Moderate	Met	Moderate	Sustainable
High	Met	Significant	Consuming
Very high	Met	Very high	Over-consuming

For this paper we have estimated the numbers for the four classes in today's world of nearly 7 billion people. The calculations for our two consuming classes are based on the figures for the consumer class of Matthew Bentley. Using a rough threshold of 14.000 between the consuming class and over-consuming class and OECD data about the average income levels and their distribution (OECD 2008) we have estimated that of the Bentley's consumer class 3/4 belong to the over-consuming class. Similar estimates were done for other regions ranging from 1/4 in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia to 2/3 in Eastern Europe. As an outcome, both over-consuming class and the consuming class would have 1 billion members.

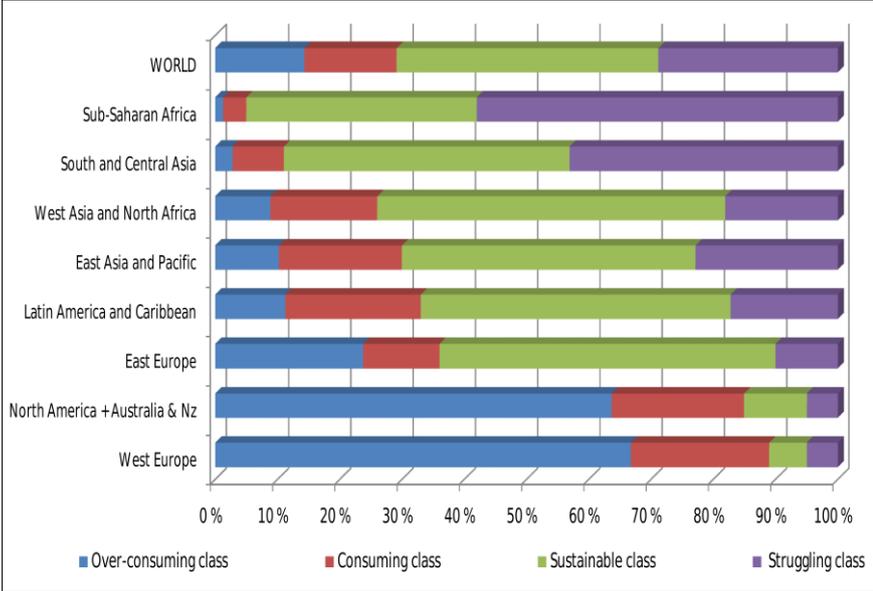
The second set of data is for the group that we call the struggling class. It is roughly the people who try to survive with less than 2 usd per day or 750 usd per year. (World Bank 2007) For the industrialised

regions, we have included five to ten per cent to the struggling class, because homelessness, unemployment and inadequate access to health care deny dignified life for at least this kind of share also in the high income societies. This adds up to some 2 billion people.

What is left between these two groups, we have named the sustainable class. The members of the sustainable class have their basic needs met by livelihoods that do not cause excessive industrial greenhouse gas emissions. And they lead ways of life that are not consuming excessive amount of energy or non-renewable resources. By discovering this sizeable class between annual per capita incomes of around usd 750 and 7,000 we hope to bring optimism to the gloomy picture about the future: more than one-third of the humanity has made it, and it should be very much possible also for the rest! In reality, this class faces constant challenges with the appeal of the 'consumer paradise' on the one hand, and precarious existence in the lower ladders of power structures on the other hand.

The number of people belonging to these classes and their relative share in the World and its regions is indicated in Figure 3 below. As issues such as basic needs and environmental sustainability can not really be measured, the graph below and the numbers above should be primarily seen as an invitation to further debate.

Fig. 3 Age The four Classes Across Regions in 2010
 Source: No source



Looking at the figures, we can see that West Europe and North America are dominated by the over consuming class, while the sustainable class has the largest share in Latin America, East Europe & North Africa, and East Asia. Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia have members of the struggling class as the most dominant group.

One thing worth noting here is similarity in the regions that we have found to be predominantly inhabited by members of the sustainable class with the outcomes of the Happy Planet Index by the New Economics Foundation. The top ten countries in their ranking that is based on the efficient use of ecological footprint for achieving reported life satisfaction and measured longevity all fall in the same regions. The countries are Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Guatemala, Vietnam, Colombia, Cuba, El Salvador, Honduras and Brazil. (NEF 2009)

3.3 Gender and the income based classes

The presentation of the three classes below did not pay attention to gender, as the income statistics used did not readily have gender specific data. As that is difficult to find, we go ahead discussing the gender aspects of the sustainable culture and classes with some rough estimates.

In Table 3 below, we present a scheme for the gender division of the three classes. Our estimate is that two out of three members of the over-consuming class are male, and similarly two out of three members of the struggling class are female. The sustainable class would have equal share of both genders.

Table 1 Schematic Estimate of the Gender Division Among the Cultural Classes

Source: No source

	Male	Female
Over-consuming and consuming class	2/3	1/3
Sustainable class	1/2	1/2
Struggling class	1/3	2/3

The purpose of this scheme is to highlight the fact that the consumption patterns in classes differ considerably in gender terms. This has to be kept in mind when thinking about the transformation agendas and sustainable futures.

The male-dominated over-consumption is creating significant hardship among the women of the struggling classes. It is the poor women in developing countries who bear the heaviest burden of environmental degradation. These women typically lack access to essential resources, but at the same time they are responsible for food, fuel and safe water supply. Environmental loss and degradation considerably increase women’s workloads in obtaining these essential resources. (Hemmati & Gardiner 2002, p. 24)

Gerd Johnsson-Latham has studied the issue of gender and consumption and made pertinent observations. Even though family is often taken as a single socio-economic unit, she observes that it seldom represents a balanced distribution unit and the differing access to resources and consumption is most pronounced in poor families. She concludes, “If women's consumption levels were to be the norm, both emissions and climate change would be significantly less than today”. (Johnsson-Latham 2007, p. 50)

4 Class-wise transition scenarios

Using the four classes established above, we present different transition scenarios for each of them. The idea is that best ideas of ecological economics and environmentalism at large would have best impact when applied in class-based understanding of the society and political intervention.

4.1 Degrowth for the Over-Consuming and Consuming Classes

For the members of the over-consuming class, an immediate degrowth scenario is urgently needed to reduce their ecological footprint to an acceptable level. This would also lead to contraction of the monetary wealth/income as measured in the GDP. Such degrowth scenario is being welcomed by an increasing number of scholars and actors. Proponents of degrowth argue that current economic growth is not sustainable over the long term because it depletes natural resources and destroys the environment, and because it fails to help populations improve their welfare significantly. The challenge is to work out degrowth politics that would be just and bring about the changes in a democratic and incremental manner, rather than through collapse and unfair burden on the least powerful.

Immediate degrowth measures addressed to the richest one billion or 14 per cent of humanity would be the first priority. Such approach has been proposed for example by Herve Kemp (2008). In a similar line Shobil Chakravarty et alia have argued that in the case of climate reducing the CO2 emissions of the most polluting billion would take a climate protection forward in a just and significant way (2009).

Proposals addressing the over-consumption by the rich also includes maximum income through high progressive income taxes or laws limiting the highest salaries to lowest ones, for example in the range of 5:1 or 10:1. On the resource use side helpful economic instruments that would be various kind of luxury taxes that would progressively increase tax of energy or other material use.

For the consuming classes a gentle degrowth scenario is appropriate. The measures would be similar, but would have an effect mainly after there has been a break through with the degrowth of the over-consuming classes.

On a societal level obtaining degrowth would mean a major transformation from plutocratic fossil capitalism to eco-sufficient, democratic and egalitarian society. It is beyond this paper to describe such transformation in any detail. Suffice to say, that the society has to be liberated from the growth imperative that is part and parcel of the capitalist world system. This would mean moving from hierarchies to equality, from competition to cooperation, from growth to sufficiency and from violence to peace. (Cf. Ulvila and Pasanen 2009)

4.2 Steady-State for the Sustainable Classes

For the sustainable classes, a steady-state scenario of economics of permanence would be the appropriate scenario. Such communities and societies would continue to change and evolve, but within the current level of environmental impact and further improvement in human dignity for all, especially for the last person.

The phrase steady-state economy originates from ecological economics, most notably the work of Herman Daly. The idea connotes constant populations of people and constant stocks of capital. It also has a constant rate of throughput; i.e., energy and materials used to produce goods and services. Constancy does imply stagnation. In the short run, mild fluctuations in population and throughput are normal, with the aim of stable equilibrium in the long run. (Daly 1977; Czech & Tietenberg 2007)

An older definition for a similar idea has been provided by the Gandhian economics J.C.Kumarappa in 1948 with the idea of economy of permanence as the desirable societal goal for liberated India. Observing the natural economy, Kumarappa noted that nature ensures the cooperation of all its units, each working for itself and in the process helping other units to get along. When this works out harmoniously and violence does not break the chain, there is an economy of permanence. Its highest form is the economy of service which "functions neither for its present need nor for its personal future requirement, but projects its activities into the next generation, or generations to come, without looking for any reward". (Kumarappa 1997, see also pp. 4-7, Lindley 2008)

While the sustainable classes have also a case for achieving a more fair share of power and resources the

agenda regarding this group includes respect, protection and promotion. So far, this sizeable class has been to a large extent ignored in the debates about environmental sustainability, because the focus has been on over-consumption on one hand, and poverty on the other. It is high time this middle ground gets appropriate positive attention and becomes a acknowledged source of inspiration and learning.

If we gave more recognition to the ways of living in the sustainable classes, we might begin to see that the good life might be something different from the image produced by the entertainment-advertisement industry and experienced by the over-consuming classes. The members of the sustainable class should, therefore, be considered experts and contemporary examples and role models for living well within one's fair and sustainable share of environmental space.

An meaningful task ahead would be to conduct a global mapping of presently sustainable livelihoods and ways of living in the sustainable classes. We should have clear ideas and definitions of the typical occupations, resource bases, housing arrangements and other features of such communities. Many people in sustainable classes probably obtain their living directly from the land through gathering, farming, animal husbandry; in addition there is probably small scale artisanal production and the provision of non-industrial services. It would also be important to study the cultural dynamics of the sustainable classes, such as how members of this class perceive the attractions of the consumer culture, what are the elements of resilience in dealing with environmental disaster, what are the threats that would cause a member of the struggling class to fail, and so on.

4.3 Empowerment for the Struggling Classes

For the struggling classes, the case would be primarily for an empowerment scenario. Current hunger and poverty of the struggling classes is clearly a symptom of powerlessness. Successful transformation would mean a situation where the poor people would have the right to natural resources that they depend on, right to have basic needs met by their own effort whenever possible, and right to equal say in matters that affect their life through a political process. When all these positive changes happen and some people find their economic growth, using the GDP formula, the growth should not be a problem.

A last-person-first principle in economics would be of primary importance for the empowerment of the struggling classes. Current planning and understanding is too much focused on national or regional averages, leaving the conditions of the weakest sections of the society in the dark. The leading principle for the last-person-first economics is in the maxim of Gandhi that the condition of a culture can be determined by the way it treats its weakest members. This way societies would strive not for the growth on national GNP or its per capita average, but for the well-being of the last-person, for example, the lowest ten percent. In this, allocating resources from the top to the bottom and thereby reducing inequalities would be the natural process.

Since the members of the struggling classes are predominantly women, the role of women's movements is of central importance. One of the demands of such movements is to get recognition and respect to the productive work done by women in the informal sector, which is currently ignored in the GDP accounts.

The popular movements of the struggling classes have provided detailed suggestions for transformations that would enhance the power and resources of the people in these classes, thus creating a more sustainable world. Such movements include the Via Campesina of the rural workers and small farmers, the World March of Women which unites feminist groups and actions across the World, the Friends of the Earth International which addresses environmental concerns and in a way represents future generations, and War Resisters International which promotes peace and non-violence in many aspects of society.

In the enhancing of power in any group, the first step is to recognise the rights of the poor. The right to food and a dignified place in the society are primary basic needs which require our attention first and foremost. This is also an issue of the customary right to the natural resources of the local environment, such as common forests and lands, the right to vote freely for a preferred, freely chosen candidate, and the right to information about policies and programmes that will affect the lives of the people. Since most

members of the struggling class are female, all these rights are of particular importance to women.

The end of violence against members of the struggling class is also a must, be it beating or harassing of women, atrocities against minority groups, or genocidal processes inflicted on indigenous people. Since compensation for people facing forced evictions by development projects has proven to be non-existent or inadequate, communities should also have a right to reject such projects.

In sharing of resources, land reforms are more acutely necessary than ever. For the struggling members of rural communities, even a small plot of land for a dwelling and a kitchen garden makes a great difference. In the urban context, giving title deeds to the families, also called squatters, who have built their huts on common lands, would be one place to start.

5 Conclusion

In this paper we have presented a transformation agenda, pointing to various directions for different classes. The obvious question comes up: even if we agree with the approach, how could such major changes happen within the relatively short time frame that the urgency of environmental protection has?

Our view is that cultural and political change is likely to happen when the members of the classes that have most to gain from transformation to just and sustainable future will rise up and force the changes. For this reason we should take keen interest in the popular movements of the struggling and sustainable classes. An important contemporary gathering place for such movements is the World Social Forum process, where many of them come together and energise each other around the slogan 'Another World is Possible'. The non-hierarchic structure of the 'open space' created by the forum and the minimalist joint agenda of non-violence and rejection of neo-liberal corporate capitalism resonate well with the content of this paper. Also recent large gatherings with precise political focus such as the Kilmaforum in Copenhagen in December 2009 and World People's Conference on Climate Change and Mother Earth's Rights held in Cochabamba, Bolivia in April 2010 are significant land marks in such process.

The looming environmental crisis and the inadequate responses so far can easily create an atmosphere of hopelessness and even despair. However, in the round of dialogues in East-Africa, South-Asia and Northern Europe, however, there has been very little pessimism in the air. We hope to leave the readers of the paper with this optimistic spirit. Focusing on life itself gives us answers and resources to imagine and build a sustainable future for all. We have suggested alternatives constituting a thorough cultural and societal transformation for each of the four classes.

Transformation towards sustainable futures should be seen as an journey leading to something clearly better than what we have now. There is no need to be fearful or worried. Embracing degrowth should be an empowering experience for the over-consuming classes as by giving up unnecessary but environmentally and socially costly luxuries one can discover much more valuable things in life. And lending support to and calling for political and structural transformations towards sustainability will be saluted by the world majority and future generations. There are plenty of rewards in waiting in the sustainable future.

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