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Corporate-degrowth Intrapreneurship

Jennifer Wilkins

Abstract

This chapter explores the contested notion of corporate degrowth, suggesting degrowth intrapreneurship as a way forward. First, the chapter questions the efficacy of corporate sustainability, assessing whether intensifying ESG practices would be a sufficient corporate response to the global poly-crisis, and proffers degrowth as a suitably strong socio-ecological approach. Next, the chapter explores why corporations are of particular importance to degrowth and what degrowth could mean for corporations, while introducing the concept of corporate-degrowth intrapreneurship as a lever for change. A classification of the degrowth business literature across core corporate functional perspectives reveals stark oversight of this lens, offering a promising avenue for scholar-intrapreneur collaboration to build a research agenda. Steering degrowth scholarship and corporate practice toward a shared aim could accelerate degrowth value creation, catalyse corporate transformation and expand support for degrowth in the mainstream.

Keywords

Corporate degrowth | degrowth intrapreneurs | degrowth re-orientation | degrowth case | corporate management

About the Author

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1. Corporate sustainability in a global poly-crisis

Humanity's current operating system is an unprecedented, "single, tightly coupled human social-ecological system of planetary scope" (Homer-Dixon et al., 2015, p. 2). To be sustainable, this system must operate within planetary boundaries and meet the basic needs of all people (Raworth, 2017). No national economy comes close (O'Neill et al., 2018) and progress is negligible, with none of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) expected to be met by 2030 (United Nations, 2023). Unsustainable activity is generating myriad inter-systemic problems forming a global poly-crisis with imminent implications for Earth system functioning and human wellbeing (Armstrong McKay et al., 2022; Heading & Zahidi, 2023; Lawrence et al., 2022). The need to shift onto a sustainable trajectory is both imperative and urgent.

The corporate sector could, and absolutely should, play a major role in this shift. The moral case is clear. In terms of industry climate impacts, electricity generation contributes to 24 percent of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions; manufacturing, 16 percent; oil and gas refining, 16 percent; transportation, 13 percent; and agriculture, 12 percent (Climate Trace, 2023). Biodiversity loss is being driven by unsustainable practices, inefficiencies, energy production and global trade, which has increased tenfold over the past 50 years (IPBES, 2019). Net appropriation by the Global North from the Global South worth US$10 trillion per year is inhibiting progress toward equality (Hickel et al., 2022), as are everyday workplace practices (The Business Commission to Tackle Inequality, 2022).

Sustainability issues are doubly material, impacting social and ecological systems and threatening industry (Bower et al., 2011). Inequality is a systemic risk, undermining business performance and destabilising supply chains (The Business Commission to Tackle Inequality, 2022), while environmental uncertainties dominate business perceptions of global risk within a 10-year horizon (Heading & Zahidi, 2023).

The business case for corporate sustainability has been articulated (Fink & Whelan, 2016) and the majority of large corporations now disclose information on their material sustainability issues. Nevertheless, fewer than half have sustainability leadership at the board level (KPMG International, 2022). Given the potential to substantially enhance business performance and resilience and address an array of urgent socio-ecological challenges, there is a compelling argument for corporations to foster transformative change. A fundamental question is whether intensifying existing initiatives would be a sufficient response.

1.1. Corporate ESG practices

Typical environmental, social and governance (ESG) practices have the potential to influence only about one quarter of the SDGs (Khaled et al., 2021) and tend to concentrate on just three areas: regulatory compliance relating to GHG emissions, diversity and inclusion and safety (Nylund et al., 2022), making a limited contribution to sustainability. Disclosure of ESG practices often involves greenwash. For instance, out of nearly 10,000 companies with declared climate commitments, a mere 81 possess credible climate action plans (CDP, 2023). Unsurprisingly, national economies are not decoupling from GHG emissions at the scale and pace necessary (Hubacek et al., 2021), with rich nations projected to take on average 220 years to reach net zero (Vogel & Hickel, 2023). Little to no evidence exists for any other forms of environmental decoupling (Haberl et al., 2020; Parrique et al., 2019; Vadén et al., 2020), with improvements in energy efficiency typically thwarted by output growth (Brockway et al., 2017; Ergene et al., 2021; Sakai et al., 2019) and material intensity actually increasing (Wiedmann et al., 2015). An inescapable conclusion is that typical ESG practices are far from adequate for driving global-scale, systemically effective outcomes within critical timeframes.

Larger businesses that are deemed leaders in sustainability management[1] have shifted their sights to "the next horizon for truly sustainable companies" (Kering, 2023, para. 3), which is to achieve absolute reductions in resource use and environmental impacts while growing revenue. Planned approaches encompass circular, renewable and regenerative practices. This involves transitioning to renewable energy sources, using recycled materials, creating durable designs, minimising plastic use, offering repair services, facilitating product take-back and resale and promoting product rentals. Other initiatives include sustainable sourcing, investments in supply chain projects that rejuvenate nature or enhance agricultural practices, B Corps certification, inventory management to reduce overproduction and waste, and prioritising high-value products over quantity (Chaudhuri, 2022; Edie Newsroom, 2018; Finch, 2010; Kent, 2023).

1.2. A sufficiency lens to business conduct

Striving for absolute decoupling is a laudable and necessary business goal. However, it may still result in impacts that exceed planetary limits. A sufficiency approach, respecting limits, is vital. Hege Sæbjørnsen, Global Circular Strategy Leader at Ingka Group, IKEA has said: "This is not even a sustainability mindset thing to do, it's actually a survival thing to do at a societal and a business level. And this is

[1] Includes Unilever, IKEA, H&M and Kering. Unilever and Kering ranked in the top half of the Corporate Knights Global 100 'most sustainable companies' in 2023, as did H&M in 2020, while Unilever and IKEA were ranked within the top three sustainability leaders in the GlobeScan-SustainAbility survey 2023.

sometimes a conversation that does not always sit comfortably inside or outside the business." (Sæbjørnsen, 2023).

Sufficiency (i.e. operating within globally equitable limits) demands significant adaptation by business to a new reality. Achieving net zero within the carbon budget for 2°C, for instance, is plausible only if economic growth is virtually zero and aggressive mitigation commences immediately (Hickel & Kallis, 2020). To shift to renewable energy by 2050, households, transport and industry must undergo electrification and dramatically lower energy demand (Luderer et al., 2022). Absolute reductions in materials use must also be sufficient to bring firms in line with global ecological and wellbeing goals. More than two thirds of extraction currently serves the demands of just ten affluent nations, providing an extravagant 27 tonnes of average annual material use per capita, while the poorest nations obtain just 2 tonnes per capita (Oberle et al., 2019). A universal 'decent living standard' depends on a global annual distribution of 6 tonnes per capita (Vélez-Henao & Pauliuk, 2023).

A "deprivileging" of the affluent (Schmelzer et al., 2022, sec. 4.2) through a dramatic reduction in their purchasing power (Hickel, 2023), an unprecedented correction to global wealth inequalities (Millward-Hopkins & Oswald, 2023), a transition to more universally sustainable modes of living (Brand & Wissen, 2017) and selective economic degrowth (Hubacek et al., 2021) are all pivotal to achieving global wellbeing within planetary boundaries. This necessitates corporations moving beyond intensifying ESG initiatives to bringing a socio-ecological lens to business decision making.

1.3. Degrowth and the socio-ecological transitioning of the global economy

Degrowth is a systemic socio-ecological approach to transitioning the global economy into the corridor of sustainability. It is “a planned reduction of energy and resource use designed to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a way that reduces inequality and improves human wellbeing” (Hickel, 2021, p. 1105). Crucially, degrowth is not a call to shrink the existing economy to a smaller version, but to find a “prosperous way down” (Odum & Odum, 2006) to a metabolically smaller and qualitatively different economy (Kallis & March, 2015), emphasising values of autonomy, sufficiency and care towards equitable human flourishing (D’Alisa et al., 2015; Parrique, 2019). Degrowth de-fetishises economic growth as a goal, whether capitalist or socialist in nature, requiring an economic transition to a paradigm beyond growth (Kallis, 2019). Structural change will be necessary as the current financial system depends on growth for its stability (Kallis, 2011).

These ideas are summarised in the principles of degrowth (Schmelzer et al., 2022):

i. Degrowth enables global ecological justice – it transforms and reduces material metabolism (production and consumption) for a way of life that is ecologically sustainable in the long term and globally just.

ii. Degrowth strengthens social justice and self-determination and strives for a good life for all under the conditions of this changed metabolism.

iii. Degrowth redesigns institutions and infrastructure so that they are not dependent on growth and continuous expansion for their functioning.

Degrowth is plausible. Scenarios demonstrate the theoretical feasibility of sufficiently reducing emissions, resource use and energy use while provisioning wellbeing for the projected global population in 2050 using existing technologies (Keyßer & Lenzen, 2021; Lenzen et al., 2022; Millward-Hopkins et al., 2020; Vélez-Henao & Pauliuk, 2023). Minimum energy needed for a universal 'decent living standard' could be 60 percent lower than present global demand, and up to 95 percent lower in affluent nations, requiring only double the renewable energy currently being supplied (Millward-Hopkins et al., 2020).

A key to unlocking this radical degree of change is to recognise not only the market and the state, but also households and the commons as realms for provisioning wellbeing within ecological constraints (Fanning et al., 2020; Gibson-Graham, 2008), necessitating a systemic reorganisation of productive forces (Chertkovskaya & Paulsson, 2021). The emerging vision of a degrowth-aligned enterprise is not like the traditional bounded entity, but more like a process engaged in co-provisioning, aiming for the highest ratio of wellbeing to ecological impact (Nesterova, 2020, 2022).

Earlier research (2009 to 2017) identified a number degrowth enterprise attributes, such as being ethical, deprioritising profit, avoiding product obsolescence, internalising externalities, business model innovation, sustainability leadership and triple bottom line reporting (Puhakka, 2018). Subsequently, scholars have added sufficiency, localisation, democratised decision making, serving essential needs, avoidance of excessive marketing, reduction of environmental impacts along the value chain, openness to sharing resources and making products that last and are repairable (Hankammer et al., 2021; Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018; Nesterova, 2020).

Degrowth-aligned start-ups will reach a right-size, then refrain from further quantitative growth by building resourcefulness, fostering sufficiency and emancipating the enterprise from growth drivers (Bocken & Short, 2016; Cyron & Zoellick, 2018; Edwards, 2021; Hankammer et al., 2021; Nesterova, 2020, 2021). They may seek opportunities for qualitative development through societal impact (scaling deep) and relationality (scaling with) (Colombo et al., 2023). Mergers and acquisitions or network-based growth may occur (Cyron & Zoellick, 2018) to achieve degrowth-aligned value creation (Froese et al., 2023) or eliminate harmful business activity (Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018). While production of some products and services will require critical scale (Nesterova & Buch-Hansen, 2023), large-scale enterprises may be generally incompatible with a degrowth society, possibly necessitating their decentralisation (Trainer, 2012).

While this may seem unappealing or irrational from a corporate standpoint, mounting societal concerns relating to the poly-crisis have heightened interest in degrowth (Cassidy, 2020; Parrique, 2023; Weisenthal & Alloway, 2023). The remainder of this chapter addresses how corporations can begin to comprehend and respond in alignment with degrowth.

2. Degrowth and corporations: state of the art

2.1. Why corporations are important to degrowth

Degrowth is a normative concept that critiques capitalism and imagines a post-growth future, but it cannot simply wish away the corporate sector. There must be a transitional process of unmaking capitalist corporations (Feola, 2019) that should not unduly destroy certain forms of value, and their remaking into different future forms.

Corporations are legal constructs underpinning for-profit businesses operating primarily for the financial gain of their owners (Hinton, 2021b). Locking-in capital through tradeable shares empowers corporate entities to pursue long term strategies without risk of liquidation (Dari-Mattiacci et al., 2017), driving real economy growth (Bravo-Biosca et al., 2016). Additionally, corporations can acquire and merge with other entities, providing further capacity to grow. This has led to the evolution of large-scale modern corporations (Dari-Mattiacci et al., 2017). The 2,000 largest corporations in the world account for US$231 trillion in assets, US$74 trillion in market capitalisation, US$50.8 trillion in sales and US$4.4 trillion in profits. Some firms have reached an extraordinary size. Technology businesses Apple, Microsoft and Alphabet have the largest market caps at US$2.7 trillion, US$2.3 trillion and US$1.3 trillion, respectively (Murphy & Tucker, 2023), retail giant Amazon has annual revenues exceeding US$500 billion (Amazon, 2023), while Walmart employs 2.1 million people (Walmart, 2023).

The seminal report Limits to Growth (Meadows et al., 1972) warned that economic growth would meet resource limits by the mid-2000s. This was met with outrage by orthodox economists, who argued that economic growth could be reconciled with resource scarcity through technological advancements (Haq, 1972; Solow, 1974), giving licence to firms to invest in innovation-led growth. By the close of the 20th century, corporate entities were responsible for half of global trade, held 90 percent of patents and were comparable in size to national economies (Veldman & Willmott, 2013). However, technological advances have not decoupled economic growth from resource use or pollution, bringing capitalism and corporations under scrutiny for their role in the social and environmental crises (Hickel, 2022; Klein, 2014; Magdoff & Foster, 2011; Olin Wright, 2018; Porritt, 2012; Schmelzer et al., 2022). Consequently, views on the purpose of corporations have shifted from shareholder primacy (Friedman, 1970) to stakeholder theory, which posits that managers must also consider the interests of employees, customers, communities and the environment (Freeman, 2010). Notably, maximising shareholder value is a persistent priority even as views on purpose have changed. This can be traced to the widely perceived duty of directors to act in the best interests of the company, which renders corporate social responsibility (CSR) largely an exercise in protecting entity assets and reputation (Veldman & Willmott, 2013). This seems acceptable when growth is assumed to be synonymous with progress and prosperity (Roser, 2021).

The role capitalist corporations could play during a degrowth transition is unclear (Hankammer et al., 2021; Kallis, 2018). Profit-maximising companies, regardless of their industry, are perceived as impediments to the establishment of an environmentally efficient, equitable wellbeing provisioning system (Fanning et al., 2020). Hence, the literature on degrowth-oriented enterprise tends to assume a marketplace of not-for-profit entities, social enterprises, cooperatives, ethical banks, fair trade organisations, community land trusts, solidarity economy networks, credit unions, artisanal businesses and small family-owned businesses (Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018). Some scholars advocate for a comprehensive transition to not-for-profit business models and a not-for-profit economy (Hinton, 2020, 2021b). Others argue that degrowth-oriented businesses may still generate profits but it must not be their primary purpose, a key consideration being how profits are distributed and prioritised (Hankammer et al., 2021; Heikkinen, 2020; Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018; Wells, 2018).

Many degrowth advocates consider radical socio-ecological transformation unachievable through appeals to reform current economic organisations (Robra & Nesterova, 2023). They favour an “interstitial” strategy (Barlow et al., 2022, p. 58), constructing “a new world, not from the ashes of the old, but within the interstices of the old” (Olin Wright, 2018, p. 28). They fear degrowth is “highly susceptible to co-optation” by corporations, including potentially taking over the degrowth agenda, diluting radical demands and co-opting critical voices (Barlow et al., 2022, p. 390). Rightly so, since corporate sustainability practices exist to fit environmental and social concerns into capitalism, failing to contribute effectively to mitigating the issues (Ergene et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2013) or reshape corporate structures

(Wright & Nyberg, 2017). The motor manufacturing industry, for instance, frames electric vehicles (EVs) as a climate solution, avoiding questions of mobility justice and the potential for increased resource and energy demand through their mass uptake (Henderson, 2020).

Nevertheless, overlooking crucial partnerships for operationalising degrowth may impede it (Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018). Despite the risk of co-optation, fostering a symbiotic relationship between degrowth scholars and corporate actors could instigate some change that is replicable at scale, and may help garner mainstream support since individual corporate managers' networks of influence may reach beyond their organisations into social and political spaces (Wright & Nyberg, 2017). Collaboration seems feasible since companies fundamentally operate as human communities (Nesterova, 2023). Furthermore, reformist action shines a useful public spotlight on corporations and their negotiating processes (Pulver, 2023). Using hindsight wisdom to turn the corporate sustainability climate playbook to degrowth advantage, the degrowth advocacy community could unify behind driving corporate reform as part of a multi-faceted strategy.

2.2. Why degrowth is important to corporations

Belief in growth as "natural, necessary and desirable" (Kallis, 2018, p. 85) has created a non-negotiable paradigm (Macekura, 2020; Schmelzer, 2016; Schmelzer et al., 2022), enabling alternatives to growth to be easily dismissed as impossible to imagine (Chertkovskaya et al., 2019). This is a mirage. As scenarios increasingly show degrowth to be theoretically feasible and as empirical evidence continues to confirm that green growth is too little, too late, as outlined above, planned degrowth appears to be gaining popular and political support (Kallis et al., 2024; Parrique, 2023). It is becoming a plausible future, one of many to consider. The future can influence the present and the present can co-determine the future, so there are significant implications to which visions are included in, or excluded from, public discourse. The IPCC, for instance, successfully narrowed the corridor of political and business climate action to a narrow technical trajectory, squeezing out other potential pathways to sustainability (Beck & Oomen, 2021; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2015). Unfortunately, crisis mitigation, societal adaptation and business resilience are all weakened when alternative plausible futures are not explored for risks and opportunities. The IPCC now incorporates degrowth into its climate mitigation reporting (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022; Parrique, 2022).

Firms discerning the plausibility of degrowth could secure degrowth-aligned advantages. Resilience in the form of future adaptability to degrowth could be achieved through building optionality into long term business strategy (Datta & Kutzewski, 2023; Wilkins, 2022). This might include exploring software and hardware solutions aligned with a potential future decentralisation or localisation strategy. Degrowth marketplace advantages, such as winning prosumer loyalty and displacing less-desirable alternatives, could transpire through institutional learning gained through pioneering a corporate position on degrowth, advocating for degrowth or formulating a degrowth strategy. Triodos Bank's advocacy for discourse on a post-growth economy demonstrates proactive engagement (Triodos Investment Management, 2023). As degrowth becomes more accepted, ideas around value creation will shift. Whereas conventional value creation centres on maximising returns and targeting impacts to satisfy investor demands, degrowth-oriented value creation focuses on problem solving for stakeholders through organisational activities, the evaluation of which is inherently subjective and shaped by context (Froese et al., 2023).

2.3. What should corporations expect of degrowth?

2.3.1. A degrowth transformation of industry

During degrowth, substantial transformations are anticipated at industry level (Chertkovskaya & Paulsson, 2021; Nesterova, 2020), involving selective expansion and contraction in economic activity, accompanied by deep socioeconomic changes and policy reforms (Keyßer & Lenzen, 2021; Schmelzer et al., 2022).

Activities poised for expansion encompass industries of "care and craft and creativity" (Jackson, 2023), public and active modes of mobility, equitable distribution of renewable energy, advancement of wellbeing technologies, such as heat pumps and digital connectivity, education, healthcare and regenerative food production (Nesterova, 2020). Innovation is imperative for enhancing efficiency, sufficiency and equity in provisioning systems (Hickel, 2023) but it must be untangled from the growth imperative (Pansera & Fressoli, 2021) and driven by genuine need, serving as a means to living well (Bobulescu & Fritscheova, 2021). Industries where innovation will remain vital include production of modern medicines, steel, high technology, global logistics, global communications, rail networks and storage and grid distribution of renewable energy. The need for defence spending during degrowth is an emerging topic of debate (Antonov et al., 2024). These various areas of expansion, scale and innovation in degrowth are avenues for a just transition (Schmelzer & Hofferberth, 2023).

On the flip side, degrowth poses a direct challenge to industries engaged in environmentally detrimental and socially less-essential forms of production (Hickel, 2023). It specifically calls for the expedited shutdown of the fossil fuel sector, potentially through state expropriation and subsequent dismantling, and for moratoria on new large infrastructure projects that are resource-intensive, such as airports, motorways, hydro-power dams, industrial warehouses, mega-malls and industrial agriculture (Schmelzer et al., 2022). Other affected industries would include private space travel, yachts and jets, large residences, luxury cruises, fast fashion, SUVs, industrial-scale beef production and commercial air travel (Hickel, 2023). Several industries would be substantially curtailed, including plastics production, advertising and finance (Schmelzer & Hofferberth, 2023).

2.3.2. Degrowth policy impacts

The degrowth literature emphasises policy (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022) and the degrowth scholarly community is increasingly engaging with policymakers, exemplified by the Beyond Growth 2023 Conference at the European Parliament (European Parliament Directorate General for Parliamentary Research Services, 2023). Numerous degrowth policy proposals would directly impact business. These include advertising limits, bans on planned obsolescence, right-to-repair, universal basic income, work-sharing, reduced working hours, enhanced social security, improved access to non-monetised goods and services, job guarantees with a living income, maximum income limits and declining caps on resource and energy use (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Hickel, 2023; Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018). Some policies are already in place. For example, France introduced a law banning planned obsolescence in 2015. Technology firm Apple has already been fined and is under investigation for a second time (Dinwoodie, 2022; Kayali, 2020). A trial of the four-day work week in the UK became permanent at a significant number of participating companies (Stewart, 2023). Some policy proposals, such as universal basic income, face political objection even after successful trials in multiple locations (Taylor, 2022), indicating that the range and timing of adoption of degrowth-related policies could differ markedly by political context.

2.3.3. The transitioning corporation

Degrowth is an innovation to the capitalist growth regime (Vandeventer et al., 2019) and is the most far-reaching and radical of sustainability transitions (Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018). How can it be integrated into a typical, mainstream, profit-maximising corporate entity and, from there, initiate transformative change within the organisation and out to the systemic regime?

The first aim of corporate degrowth is to eliminate growth drivers and profit maximising behaviour. Institutional dimensions to consider in reorienting a corporate organisation to degrowth are relationship-to-profit, legal form, governance structure, strategy and size and geographical scope (Hinton, 2021a). As previously mentioned, a degrowth economy deprioritises profit, but it could still be a means to pro-social and pro-environmental reinvestment (Nesterova, 2020). Moreover, the transitionary nature of degrowth must allow for current structural limitations. Profit is necessary in the current capitalist system to address interest repayments. Therefore, firms with a for-profit status should not feel dissuaded from adopting degrowth attributes or from advocating for degrowth, yet should still expect continuing critique as part of the degrowth transformation.

The global outdoor clothing company Patagonia, for instance, has adopted several degrowth attributes, including avoiding incorporation, embedding an environmental purpose in perpetuity and encouraging sufficiency. Rather than floating the business, its original owners transferred their voting stock to a purpose trust and their non-voting stock to an environmental not-for-profit (Chouinard, 2022).

Nevertheless, governance has hardly changed as the original owners govern the purpose trust (Hinton, 2023). Moreover, the not-for-profit purpose is served by a for-profit operating business that sells fashion clothing to the affluent (Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018; Paumgarten, 2016). It also produces some goods using labour paid at less than a living wage, although the company is striving to close this gap (*Living Wage - Patagonia*, n.d.). Patagonia encourages sufficiency through its repair and used clothing initiatives, but the effective rate at which the business may be overcoming growth drivers is unclear. The company's reporting transparency is relatively good but could improve to meet higher standards being set by peers (Simpliciano et al., 2022).

Degrowth scholars and advocates working on the challenge of bringing degrowth into corporations need to find entry points for their work that are highly leverageable, putting knowledge that is persuasive and directly applicable to operations and strategy into the hands of inside changemakers. As degrowth is best achieved through experimentation (Khmara & Kronenberg, 2020), this points to intrapreneurs as key actors. Intrapreneurs (entrepreneurs within a firm) are employees who identify and exploit innovative ideas, leveraging small capacities to develop larger changes, generating corporate renewal (Fischer, 2011; Heinze & Weber, 2016). They are important to an organisation's sustainability (Aparicio et al., 2020; Ashal et al., 2023), building organisational resilience and value creation (Hernández-Perlines et al., 2022) and showing how business and social values can be aligned (Frederick, 2018).

The remainder of this chapter examines existing research for its alignment to degrowth intrapreneurship in corporate contexts.

3. Corporate-degrowth intrapreneurship

Engagement of insurgent professionals has been suggested as a strategic step for incorporating degrowth into urban planning (Kaika et al., 2023). The similar notion of engaging degrowth intrapreneurs in corporations has scarcely been explored in the literature, yet offers a promising opportunity to contribute research that can cultivate degrowth competencies and stimulate transformative action within corporate entities. Rare examples include the Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management's *25th Anniversary Special Issue* editorial, which focuses on the supply chain function as an intrapreneur within the larger organisation and argues for ambitious and novel 'business-not-as-usual' approaches to supply chain research, including degrowth, for the transformation of business (Knight et al., 2022). Edwards (2021) sees intrapreneurialism as important for firms with socio-cultural growth strategies (in contrast to quantitative expansion strategies). Francovich (2021) suggests intrapreneurial approaches for teaching sustainable practices in businesses to meet consumer-driven degrowth.

Presented below are the method and findings of the classification of identified degrowth business literature, using common corporate functions as a conceptual organising structure. This is followed by a discussion around stimulating a research agenda for building the concept of degrowth intrapreneurship in corporate entities.

3.1. Method

A database search was conducted to retrieve degrowth business literature up to mid-2023. An organising structure was developed based on core corporate functional management topics and papers were classified according to this structure. The literature within each classification was reviewed to establish the range of research of potential interest to the corporate intrapreneur in each functional area.

3.2. Findings

3.2.1. Retrieval

The title, abstract and keywords of documents within Scopus, a prominent bibliographic database, were searched for the terms 'degrowth' or 'de-growth',[2] yielding 1,331 literature items (after excluding 17 irrelevant papers on biological degrowth). The distribution of publication dates reveals expansion in research on degrowth. In 2009, fewer than 10 items were published, whereas in 2022, this surged to over 200. The literature is dispersed across more than 150 publications; however, Ecological Economics journal and the Journal of Cleaner Production have been consistent contributors, publishing 96 and 85 degrowth-related papers, respectively.

Within the identified degrowth literature, 511 items were categorised under the heading of 'business and economics',[3] and these were taken to represent degrowth business literature. This area has seen intermittent growth. Fewer than 20 papers were published annually until 2011. Subsequently, there was a gradual increase to approximately 40 papers per year until 2017. Interest surged then faded, with 84 papers in 2018, 73 papers in 2021 and 62 papers in 2022. Items were also categorised under other headings, including environmental science, social science, engineering, energy, humanities, agricultural science and more. The most frequent keywords were degrowth, economic growth, sustainable development, sustainability,

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[2] This approach excludes relevant items found exclusively elsewhere, as well as items about degrowth that do not contain the English terms. Additionally, it disregards items that use alternative terms, such as post-growth, that can have distinct meanings from degrowth.

[3] This approach excludes potentially relevant items not designated under this category.

economics, ecological economics, environmental economics, climate change, green growth, post-growth, circular economy, environmental justice, political economy, capitalism and ecology.

3.2.2. Organising structure and classification

A key objective was to interrogate the degrowth business literature from a range of corporate functional management perspectives. A set of common corporate functions provided an organising structure based on business and pedagogical data from eight reputable sources, shown in Table 1, comprising the core curriculum subjects of five leading business schools and the business capability services of three prominent consulting firms.

Table 1: Business school core curriculum subjects and consulting firm business capability services

Source Organisation	Core Curriculum Subjects / Business Capability Services
Harvard Business School **(Harvard Business Publishing Education, n.d.)**	Entrepreneurship, financial accounting, operations management, strategy, finance, marketing and organisational behaviour
INSEAD MBA **(INSEAD, n.d.)**	Financial accounting, organisational behaviour, financial markets and valuation, prices and markets, uncertainty, data and judgement, strategy, corporate financial policy, managing customer value, managerial accounting, process and operations management, leadership communications, macroeconomics and business and society
Nyenrode Business University fulltime MBA **(Nyenrode One-Year Full-Time MBA in Amsterdam, n.d.)**	Strategy, accounting, analytical business tools, operations and process management, big data analytics, corporate financial management, marketing strategy, human resource management, strategic financial management, value chain optimisation, innovation and digitalisation, organisational leadership and talent management and circular economy and sustainable development

National University of Singapore MBA **(NUS Business School, n.d.)**	Corporate strategy, financial management, financial accounting, managerial economics, marketing management, managerial operations and analytics and leading with impact
Melbourne Business School fulltime MBA **(Melbourne Business School, n.d.)**	Leadership, data analysis, managing people, managerial economics, innovation, managerial ethics and the business environment, financial accounting, finance, operations and business strategy
McKinsey & Company **(Global Management Consulting | McKinsey & Company, n.d.)**	Growth, marketing and sales, implementation, M&A, digital operation, people and organisational performance, risk and resilience, strategy and corporate finance, sustainability, transformation
Bain and Company **(Bain & Company, n.d.)**	Customer experience, ESG, innovation, M&A, operations, people and organisation, private equity, sales and marketing, strategy, technology and digital, transformation
Boston Consulting Group **(Strategic Management Consulting | Boston Consulting Group, n.d.)**	AI, business and organisational purpose, business resilience, business transformation, climate change and sustainability, corporate finance and strategy, cost management, customer insights, digital technology and data, diversity, equity and inclusion, innovation strategy and delivery, international business, M&A, transactions and PMI, manufacturing, marketing and sales, operations, organisation strategy, people strategy, prising and revenue management, risk management and compliance, social impact, zero-based budgeting

Subjects and capabilities were grouped like-with-like, producing a list of 12 corporate functional topics (in alphabetical order): advanced analytics, corporate finance, digital, innovation, marketing, mergers and acquisitions, operations, organisation, human resources, strategy, business sustainability, transformation. Search terms relating to each functional topic were extracted from Table 1, supplemented with words and phrases found through searching relevant web articles within the three consulting firms' websites. For each functional topic, associated search terms (separated by OR) were applied to the title, abstract and keywords[4] of the 511 degrowth business documents. Results are shown in Table 2 in descending number of items found. Functional topics with fewer than ten literature items (advanced

[4] This approach excludes potentially relevant items in the literature in which search terms were not included in the item's title, abstract and keywords.

analytics, mergers and acquisitions, organisation and transformation) were not investigated further.

Table 2: Number of items in the degrowth business literature relating to corporate functional topics

Functional Topic	Search Terms	Items
Strategy	Strategy, business strategy, corporate strategy, purpose, strategic planning, value creation	86
Innovation	Business model innovation, corporate venturing, product innovation, engineering, entrepreneur	23
Human Resources	People, human resources, coaching, future of work, leadership, learning and development, talent, recruitment, diversity and inclusion, gender equality, gender parity, racial equality, supplier diversity	16
Corporate Finance	Finance, corporate finance, private equity, debt, inflation	16
Operations	Operations, capital project management, digital supply chain, shared services, operational excellence, procurement, supply chain management, value chain, budgeting, managerial economics	15
Marketing	Marketing, sales, customer experience, customer data, customer demand, customer journey, customer loyalty, brand management, digital marketing, e-commerce, personalization, sales channel strategy, revenue management, B2B, B2C	14
Digital	Digital, agile, AI, data	14
Business Sustainability	ESG, CSR, responsible business, ethical business, sustainability strategy, sustainable finance, sustainable investing, sustainable operations, climate change, impact, business resilience	10

3.2.3. Review

The literature within each classification was reviewed to establish the range of research of potential interest to a corporate intrapreneur working in each functional area.

Degrowth for strategy intrapreneurs (86 items)

Nearly one fifth of the literature touches on strategy, demonstrating a strong conviction among degrowth scholars that organisations must take a top-down approach to departing from business-as-usual. Several papers stand out for their explicit focus on aligning business strategy with degrowth principles. These include identifying patterns of organisational value creation aligned with degrowth (Froese et al., 2023), developing a comprehensive framework to understand how businesses can align with post-growth trajectories (Hinton, 2021a) and rethinking business development in post-growth contexts (Cyron & Zoellick, 2018). A relatively well-covered area is circular economy, including a framework to guide integration of technological improvements with long-term sustainability goals (Huppes & Ishikawa, 2009), compatibility and conflicts between circular economy and degrowth principles (Schröder et al., 2019), design criteria for renewable energy technology aligned with circular economy (Ralph, 2021), a typology for the discourse surrounding circularity (Calisto Friant et al., 2020), circular economy's potential to decouple resource use from economic growth (Kopnina, 2022) and critically assessing the bioeconomy concept (Ramcilovic-Suominen et al., 2022). Some papers are industry specific, ranging from housing and construction (Anson, 2018), urban and regional planning (Xue, 2014, 2018) and organic agriculture (de Molina Navarro, 2015) to fashion consumption (Joyner Armstrong et al., 2016). A number of papers focus on degrowth in tourism, highlighting case studies on degrowth dynamics in tourism (Andriotis, 2021), online resistance to tourism (Wegerer & Nadegger, 2023), carbon mitigation approaches in tourism (Sun et al., 2020) and the role of tour operators in degrowth-oriented tourism (Panzer-Krause, 2021).

Degrowth for innovation intrapreneurs (23 items)

Innovation plays a pivotal role in constructing positive visions of a prosperous degrowth transition (Kallis, 2011; Pollex & Lenschow, 2018). Alternative visions like degrowth need to be proactively incorporated into the innovation discourse (Samerski, 2018; Strand et al., 2018). An interesting idea is biosphere entrepreneurship, prioritising sustainability over profit maximisation (Frederick, 2018). Another idea is economic valuation of water usage in mining to incentivise companies to adopt technologies that reduce water usage and align with degrowth principles (Laguela & Flores, 2017). A paper on re-localising production-consumption networks in the global textile industry (Smith et al., 2022) reflects the wider need for deep, structural transformations within industries and the value of rethinking business models and practices.

Degrowth for human resources intrapreneurs (16 items)

Human resources management (HRM) practices, such as workforce training and development, will need to adapt to support degrowth (Gaffard, 2021). Changes in labour market dynamics should be expected if basic income policies are implemented (Fouksman & Klein, 2019). Meanwhile, the reorganisation of care in a degrowth transition would influence HRM policies and practices related to work-life balance and gender equality (Dengler & Lang, 2022). A degrowth-enabled decolonial feminist approach would challenge existing systems of power, influencing HRM practices related to diversity, inclusion and equitable treatment in business (Abazeri, 2022).

Degrowth for corporate finance intrapreneurs (16 items)

Persistent inflationary pressures arising from climate change highlight the relevance of environmental factors to corporate finance considerations (Semenova, 2023), while a macroeconomic model that integrates climate change and private debt emphasises the importance of proactive climate policies to avoid financial instability (Bovari et al., 2018). The importance of public investments, industrial policies, socialising the energy sector and expanding the welfare state are all examined in a comparison of the Green New Deal and degrowth as strategies for addressing climate change and decarbonising the energy system (Mastini et al., 2021). In another paper, three tools are proposed to manage degrowth: a system for sharing benefits from scarce fossil fuels, new business financing methods and debt-free regional and local currencies (Douthwaite, 2012). Several writers discuss the challenges posed by the end of economic growth, such as the need to address issues like unemployment, debt and poverty (Klitgaard & Krall, 2012) and money-growth relationships in a stationary or degrowth economy (Cahen-Fourot & Lavoie, 2016). Meanwhile, an analysis of measures employed by Central Banks during periods of deflation and contraction sheds light on quantitative and qualitative easing (Moro Visconti & Quirici, 2015).

Degrowth for operations intrapreneurs (15 items)

Several of the strategy focused papers reappear in this category. Conceptualising degrowth within a sustainability transition framework can guide business operations toward a degrowth orientation, as can self-assessing operational alignment with degrowth principles (Hankammer et al., 2021; Khmara & Kronenberg, 2020). Companies are encouraged to prioritise adoption of technologies and sufficiency-based business models that reduce resource consumption and waste generation (Ralph, 2021). Recognising the pivotal role of individual agency emphasises the importance of fostering a culture that encourages sustainable choices among employees, and can also facilitate a shift toward a degrowth-oriented business model (Nesterova, 2021). Meanwhile, research in the textile and fashion industry has identified several key social aspects relevant to business model innovations (Beyer & Arnold, 2022). Furthermore, businesses can adopt needs- and people-centred approaches, addressing income inequality and promoting sustainable consumption (Schor & Jorgenson, 2019), while integration of local currencies into business operations promotes alternative livelihoods, eco-localisation and community-building, contributing to sustainable and resilient local economies (Dittmer, 2013).

Degrowth for marketing intrapreneurs (14 items)

Social marketing, traditionally aimed at modifying harmful consumer behaviours, now includes promoting degrowth as a means to preserve the planet (Kotler, 2022). Macro marketers can also play a role, facilitating an understanding of systemic industry issues crucial to sustainability (Benton, 2022). It is noted that consumers often struggle to determine the sincerity of retailers' CSR policies (Lavorata, 2022). Degrowth-aligned products must genuinely enhance wellbeing, requiring designers to consider holistic impacts (D'Anna & Cascini, 2016)]. Degrowth also entails slowing down product obsolescence and building up equality (Monserand, 2022). A fashion detox by students highlights the challenges of sustainable consumption (Joyner Armstrong et al., 2016). Another study explores sustainable degrowth in beer production, highlighting the value of niche markets like gluten-free beer (Harasym & Podeszwa, 2015). Meanwhile, a focus on the principles of degrowth within tourism could help create a better living space for locals (Gajdošíková, 2023) and a study on World Heritage Sites underscores the importance of sustainable tourism (Hosseini et al., 2021).

Degrowth for digital intrapreneurs (14 items)

A recurring theme is the pivotal role of technology in shaping the trajectory of degrowth. The Fourth Industrial Revolution, encompassing technologies like AI, biotechnology and 3D printing, might enable decoupling, but poses risks for biosecurity and cybersecurity, while AI in a neoliberal context could exacerbate existing sustainability challenges. A focus on degrowth, redistribution and technological deceleration might be more sustainable in the long run (Albert, 2019; Pueyo, 2018). On the other hand, blockchain could support redistributive and regenerative economies (Howson, 2021), while distributed production, combining digital commons with local manufacturing technologies, may align with degrowth principles (Kostakis et al., 2018). Smart City technologies may be compatible with alternative post-capitalist urban transformations (March, 2018). Concerns about the potential disconnection from nature, resource allocation and authoritarian governance linked to digital technologies raise the need for detailed socio-technological imaginaries aligned with degrowth principles (Pansera et al., 2019).

Degrowth for business sustainability intrapreneurs (10 items)

A remarkably small number of papers were found to directly address business sustainability management. Tensions exist between firm growth and sustainability perspectives, including degrowth (Salimath & Chandna, 2021). Papers mention a number of sectors, including energy, tourism and food. Energy scenarios for Finland include business-as-usual, green growth and degrowth (Rikkonen et al., 2021). CSR-certified tour operators may be able to contribute to degrowth-oriented tourism (Panzer-Krause, 2021). Meanwhile, degrowth, diversity and decentralisation in modern agriculture and food production are argued to be important in redefining farming success (Kumar, 2023).

3.3. Discussion

The indicative classification of the degrowth business literature across corporate functional perspectives reveals numerous innovative explorations, but overall a paucity of actionable insights and the absence of a strategic research framework for incorporating degrowth into corporate practices and strategies with a view to largescale reform. Stark oversight of this lens within degrowth academia may signal a lack of confidence within the degrowth movement in a reformist strategic approach.

Nurturing corporate-degrowth intrapreneurs – people who champion degrowth values and experiment with their application within corporate environments – represents an untapped lever for change. A collaboratively-designed corporate-degrowth research agenda could accelerate degrowth value creation, initiate corporate reform and catalyse support for degrowth in the mainstream. Table 3 provides a structured approach to exploring facets of corporate transformation towards degrowth through a corporate functional lens.

Theoretical logics within sustainability and corporations are incompatible (Hahn et al., 2015), stressing an urgent need for a normative perspective on corporate transformation (Robra & Nesterova, 2023). Therefore, a crucial consideration in a corporate-degrowth research agenda is the tension between whose language and whose aspiration is stated in any research question. Potential questions from corporate-degrowth intrapreneurs might be stated using language that is meaningful to degrowth but focused on conventional corporate aspirations. An example could be: 'How does degrowth align with firms' overall strategic goals, including profitability?' This question co-opts degrowth into corporations. Sustainability should not be made to fit around the business case (Robra & Nesterova, 2023). Table 3 therefore has two columns, the first framed around corporate aspirations for experimenting with degrowth, the second framed around degrowth aspirations for reforming corporations toward degrowth. The example question could be reframed through a degrowth lens as: 'How are the principles of degrowth integrated into organisational strategies to move them away from profit-centric goals?'.

Table 3: Some corporate-degrowth intrapreneurship research questions

Functional Topic	Corporate-framed Questions	Degrowth-framed Questions
Strategy	How does degrowth align with corporate strategic goals, including profitability?	How are the principles of degrowth integrated into corporate strategies to move away from profit-centric goals?
	What strategies are deployed to maintain competitiveness in a degrowth transition?	How does a shift towards degrowth influence a firm's stance on competition, expansion and exit strategies?
Innovation	How does degrowth align with firms' R&D and product development plans and processes?	How does degrowth influence ethical considerations in design, materials sourcing and production processes?
	What are the innovation opportunities of degrowth (e.g. products with timeless design) and the risks (e.g. competitive dynamics in a degrowth market)?	How does a transition towards degrowth foster innovation that prioritises long-lasting products, timeless design and environmental sustainability?
Human Resources	What are the human resource risks associated with a degrowth transition (e.g. workforce dynamics, talent shortages)?	How are companies preparing their workforce and communities for a just transition during degrowth?
	What are the implications for firm culture in employing people who are educated in or are passionate about degrowth?	What policies and programs encourage employees to embrace degrowth principles (e.g. flexible work arrangements)?
Corporate Finance	How does degrowth align with firms' financial commitments?	How does degrowth impact capital structure and financing? What alternative funding options exist?
	How do shareholders respond to firms that commit to degrowth?	How are firms moving beyond traditional financial measures to prioritise ecological and social wellbeing?
Operations	How does degrowth align with firms' operational goals?	How does adoption of degrowth affect production processes, supply chains and sourcing?
	What are the operational risks of degrowth, such as changes, disruptions and costs?	How does degrowth affect inventory and production capacity?
Marketing	What evidence exists that consumers are adopting a degrowth mindset?	How does a commitment to degrowth influence a firm's customer base, encouraging mindful consumption and reducing overall demand?
	How is degrowth incorporated into business marketing in ways that resonate with consumers?	How can marketing strategies be reoriented to reflect degrowth principles, focusing on transparency, authenticity and communication of non-materialistic values?

Digital	What digital tools and platforms are supporting a degrowth transition?	How can data-driven strategies anticipate shifts in consumer preferences that align with degrowth values, moving beyond conventional market-driven approaches ?
	What data driven opportunities exist for promoting degrowth initiatives?	How are data analytics used to monitor and measure the strength of degrowth initiatives?
Business Sustainability	How does degrowth affect corporate sustainability reporting?	How is degrowth transforming CSR and ESG strategies, goals, policies and practices?
	What training and development are needed to bring degrowth into CSR and ESG practices?	How are firms collaborating and partnering with other organisations with shared degrowth values on sustainability initiatives and programs?

Posing mutually beneficial research questions requires development of a corporate-degrowth dialogue and creation of welcoming forums enabling co-mingling of degrowth researchers and corporate intrapreneurs to help address the goals of both; that is, without losing the integrity of degrowth or the applicability to the corporate context. This is necessary to get buy-in from the CFO and other executive decision makers (Sæbjørnsen, 2023) to begin to transition away from growth drivers and capital accumulation (Robra & Nesterova, 2023).

With regard to empirical data, researchers should not be stymied by a belief that corporations must exhibit significant degrowth characteristics to merit attention. There should be a greater focus on studying degrowth-related experimentation, particularly within larger firms, even if experiments appear to be unsuccessful – such is the nature of intrapreneurialism. Investigating the barriers to transition is just as crucial as studying the factors contributing to success.

4. Conclusion

This chapter has questioned the efficacy of corporate sustainability and explored a reformist strategy of corporate degrowth as part of a transition to a future socio-ecological economy. Degrowth intrapreneurship offers a promising avenue for initiating corporate reform. Scholar-practitioner collaboration is vital to building a suitable research agenda to germinate degrowth in corporations while reducing risks of co-optation.

4.1. Further research

There is significant potential for further novel research and theory building through combining degrowth, as a new sustainability lens, and modern management studies. Stakeholder theory and CSR have provided corporate practitioners with frameworks to address sustainability issues (Dmytriyev et al., 2021). Many firms have sought to integrate sustainability imperatives into profit maximization to create shared value, reinforcing economic growth (Ergene et al., 2021). Degrowth is a countermovement to growth to create new forms of value and distribute them fairly (Froese et al., 2023). Developing a degrowth theory of management and gaining an understanding of how this relates to stakeholder theory and CSR is important to enabling the more radical corporate transition that degrowth entails (Ergene et al., 2021). Meanwhile, Drucker emphasized the need for businesses to align with the reality of the marketplace (Drucker, 2003). However, in the context of degrowth, the concept of the for-profit enterprise as the most economically efficient provider of goods and services is being replaced by the concept of realms (households, the state, the commons and enterprise) within a socio-ecologically efficient provisioning system. The development of a theory of provisioning in degrowth is a fundamental research question and may help resolve the stalemate between corporate and sustainability ontologies by offering a bridge from the former to the latter.

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