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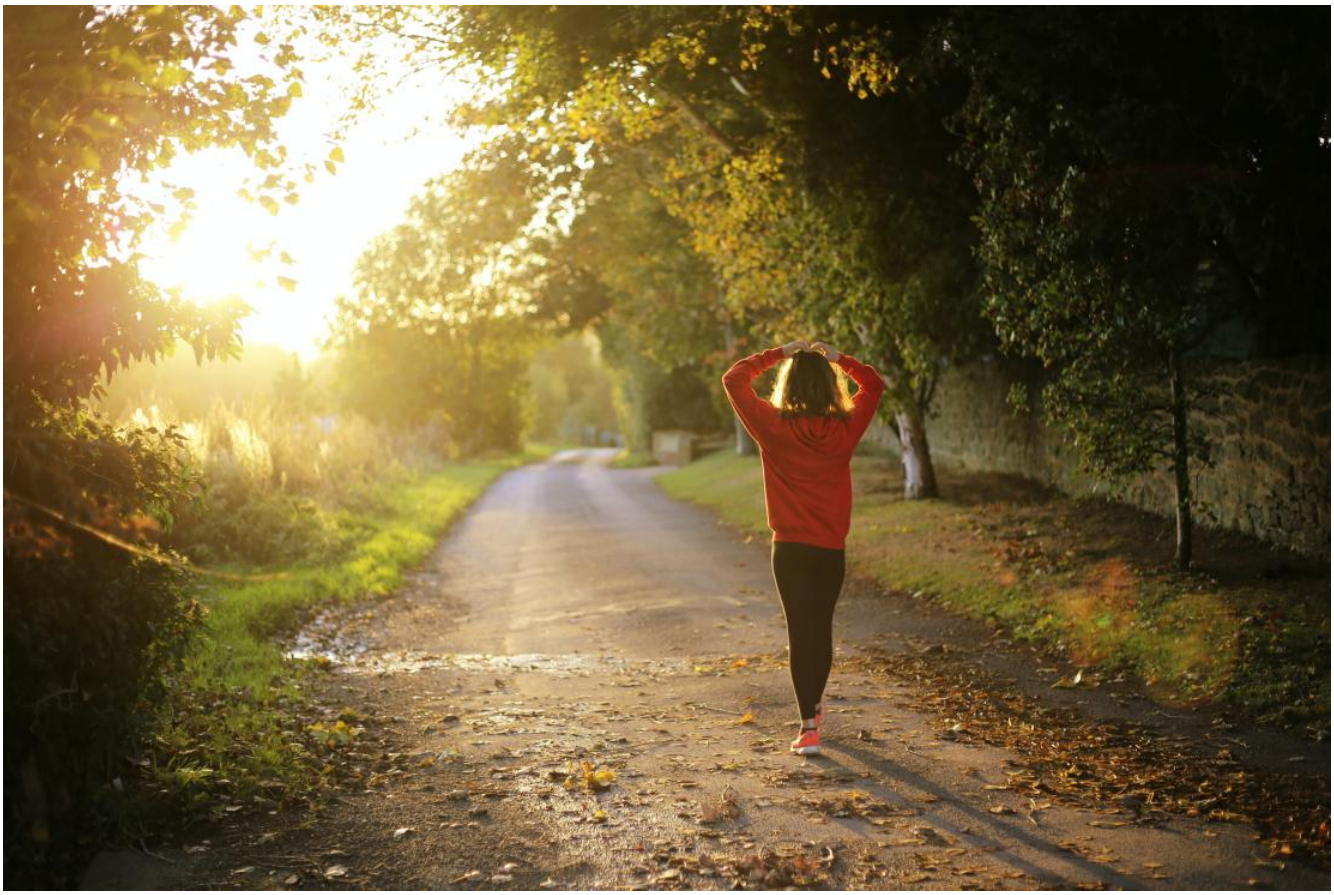

Once unthinkable, the prospect of society driven by wellbeing gains traction

As Europe embraces clean energy to fight climate change, a leading ecological economist argues for going beyond “green growth”.

11 May 2023 - By HORIZON STAFF

Almost 16 years ago, the EU held a conference devoted to an idea that was novel – even for many policy wonks – and far-reaching.

The notion was to redefine society’s goals by going beyond the standard measure of progress over the past 80 years: growth in gross domestic product, or GDP.

Now, the European Parliament is set to host another big conference devoted to the idea, which is gaining momentum. In its most ambitious form, the concept would fundamentally change how businesses operate, people work and governments regulate.

Among the speakers at the 15-17 May event is **Giorgos Kallis**, one of the world's leading researchers into ecological economics. Kallis goes as far as advocating a "degrowth" model to replace the one based on GDP, saying economies can – indeed must – prosper in a way that reduces inequality and improves wellbeing.

A Greek native and professor in Spain at the Institute of Environmental Science and Technology of the Autonomous University of Barcelona, Kallis is also co-heading a new EU-funded research project called "A Post-Growth Deal", or REAL. The six-year initiative aims to bring post-growth pathways closer to reality through new research, data and models.

Horizon Magazine spoke to Kallis about his work on growth and the evolution of societies.

Professor Giorgos Kallis

How and why did you become interested in the notion of "degrowth"?

Studying different environmental problems, from water scarcity in the Mediterranean and California to global climate change or forest fires in Europe, I came to realise that there is a common cause to all these problems: the unquenchable thirst of the economy to grow – bigger and bigger, without limit.

After working for 20 years on sustainable development, I realised that squaring unlimited growth with sustainability is impossible and we have to face it sooner rather than later. Degrowth was a word that

resonated well with this realisation.

What explains the REAL project's timing and what will it tackle mainly?

Europe is at a crossroads. Inflation is coupled with stagnation and, at the same time, the clock for the climate bomb is ticking and is past midnight.

In our project we are asking uncomfortable questions about how Europe could – and should – manage without growth and we are eager to see where these questions lead us.

For example, we want to see what combinations of social and economic policies can help Europe prosper without growth. And we want to understand how we can reorganise provisioning systems – that is, systems of energy, food or housing provision – to satisfy human needs with a fraction of the resources they currently require.

Can "green growth" deliver enough or is more ambitious degrowth needed?

Most likely, no, green growth can't. But we don't want to spill more blood in a heated debate over whether green growth, or what has been called in academic jargon "absolute decoupling" of GDP and environmental impact, is possible or not.

No matter where one stands on the question of green growth versus degrowth, I want to think that we all agree that there is a lot of uncertainty and that there is a chance – high in our view, low in the view of others – that degrowth is both necessary and in a way inevitable.

But are policymakers ready to ditch the pursuit of economic growth?

No, they aren't ready. Few of us are ready to do the changes we need to do to move beyond the current model.

But the current model is breaking down on its own. Within these conditions of instability, new challenges will emerge and new social movements will rise up to press for change. We want to think that the science and models we will be establishing will provide good frameworks for asking the right questions and finding useful answers.

In a degrowth society, how would business activity and employment change?

That's the type of question we want to ask in projects like ours. We have only some provisional answers regarding employment, with policy proposals like work-sharing or a job guarantee, and some initial thinking and dialogues with businesses.

We need much more research in starting to model the changes in skills or employment patterns or organisational models that would emerge and be stable in post-growth paths.

What would the impact of degrowth be on social justice?

The impacts of recessions are always regressive, as the wealthy find ways to exert their power during crises at the expense of the poor.

What we call degrowth is by definition – our definition – a transition that is socially just. It involves massive redistribution, direct through wealth and income taxes or social ownership of means of production and indirect by social programmes like universal basic income or services, a job guarantee and working-hour reductions.

What nations lead on degrowth and how can vested interests be overcome?

It's safe to say there is no nation leading the way and there are only a few political parties making very shy and careful moves in the directions we are researching.

We want to explore what sort of social movements and mobilisations are strengthening these tendencies and what obstacles they are facing by vested interests. I am sorry I don't already have good answers, but if I did there would be no need for our research. I prefer to give answers based on science and not conviction – and

on the question of post-growth politics there is very little science.

What are the global implications of degrowth and what if Europe went it alone?

There is virtually no research right now on the geopolitics of post-growth and this is something we want to change.

Of course, it is very difficult to study something that does not exist – post-growth politics or desire to move in this way in any European country – and one risks here being very speculative.

We hope that, together with strong political scientists and international relations scholars, we can start developing convincing answers on, say, whether a big power like Europe can go it alone and under what conditions.

My hunch is that, yes, it can. But my understanding of geopolitics is very naïve and I want to think that, through six years of research and friction with people who know more, we will come up with more informed hypotheses.

How should research and innovation for decarbonsation be funded?

Innovation can be funded like everything else: by the government paying for it and supporting the social infrastructures necessary for our survival.

Research and knowledge are vital for any society and they will be even more so in a degrowth society where, as a species, we will no longer be able to buy our way out cheaply courtesy of fossil fuels. Instead, we will have to be inventive and find new, resource-light ways to enjoy ourselves and live well with one another.

Research and innovation not only in hard science but also in arts and humanities would be vital for building such a convivial society.

Beyond Growth

The European Parliament is hosting a 15-17 May conference entitled “Beyond Growth” and the EU is funding a new research project on the matter.

Both initiatives are propelled by growing environmental threats such as global warming, greater awareness of limits to natural resources and louder warnings about social inequality.

The conference in Brussels will feature top economic, environmental and social-affairs officials and experts from Europe and elsewhere, challenging participants to think in very different ways about the progress and wealth of nations. It follows a November 2007 EU conference called “Beyond GDP” that helped put the subject in the spotlight.

The new European research project is called “A Post-Growth Deal”, or REAL, and is the biggest so far to be financed by the EU in the field. The European Research Council is providing €9.9 million over six years to the initiative, which will be coordinated from Spain by the Autonomous University of Barcelona.

Watch the video

More info