Degrowth Philanthropy

PhiLab

Context

Over the past decade, Canadian philanthropy has taken meaningful steps to address social inequality and environmental crises. Foundations have shifted toward community-led funding, experimented with impact and "green" investing, and created funds for racialized and Indigenous communities. These initiatives signal a desire for transformation. Yet much of the sector remains anchored in growthism—the belief that social progress depends on continuous economic growth. This mindset shapes how foundations invest endowments, measure impact, manage risk, govern institutions, and design grantmaking strategies. Paradoxically, many scholars and practitioners argue that growthism fuels the very social and ecological crises philanthropy seeks to resolve.

Our research responds to this challenge by addressing the following question:

How can justice-oriented Canadian foundations move beyond growth-dependent models and embrace post-growth approaches that prioritize collective well-being within planetary limits?

Research Goals

Theorize the relationship between institutional philanthropy and growthism, revealing tensions and paradoxes in managing philanthropic capital from a post-growth perspective.

Document existing philanthropic practices that align with post-growth principles, even if they are not labeled as such.

Imagine what a large-scale post-growth philanthropic sector could look like, drawing on past experiments, current practices, and emerging visions.

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Key Concepts

Growthism: The belief that social progress requires continuous economic expansion, perpetual capital accumulation, and ever-increasing financial returns.

Degrowth: The intentional downscaling of production and consumption to be democratically organized in ways that reduce ecological footprints while ensuring equity and wellbeing.

Post-growth Society: A society that does not pursue GDP growth as an objective, and which is able to meet human needs in an equitable way without growth while staying within its fair share of planetary boundaries.

Social Justice Philanthropy: A diverse set of grantmaking approaches aimed at confronting the structural roots of social, racial, economic, and environmental injustice, by foregrounding power-sharing, community-led decision-making, and the pursuit of long-term systemic change.

Further Reading

- Abraham, Y. M. (2019). Guérir du mal de l'infini. Produire moins, partager plus, décider ensemble. Écosociété (Éditions).
- Hickel, J. (2020). Less is more: How degrowth will save the world. Random House.
- Jackson, T. (2016). Prosperity without growth: Foundations for the economy of tomorrow. Routledge.
- Kallis, G. (2018). Degrowth (Vol. 7). Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda publishing.
- Kallis, G. (2011). In defence of degrowth. Ecological economics, 70(5), 873-880.

Framework for a Paradigm Shift

Growth Paradigm	Degrowth Praxis	Degrowth Paradigm
Foundations as Capital Accumulators • Grow and protect large endowments. • Rely on the expansion of financial markets.	**Dismantle philanthropic permanence by giving up control of wealth and power.**	**Foundations as Capital Decumulators** • Redistribute and spend-down endowments. • Divest from financial markets.
Foundations as Growth Agents • Create, stabilize, and legitimize markets. • Support growth and manage its social and environmental fallout.	**Implement flexible, unconditional funding that prioritizes grassroots empowerment and collective experimentation.**	**Foundations as Solidarity vehicles** • Ally with communities and organizations on the forefront of the degrowth movement.
Foundations as Ideological Promoters • Promote markets and innovation -not politics or collective action - as solutions to societal problems.	**Advocate cultural and systemic shifts by backing policies that promote less production, more sharing, sufficiency and care.**	**Foundations as Growth Objectors** • Leverage resources and influence to advance organizational and regulatory policies that challenge growthism.