

# Beyond the growth imperative and neoliberal doxa: Expanding alternative societal spaces through deliberative citizen forums on needs satisfaction

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## Abstract

Are there indications for the neoliberal hegemony in economy and society to come to an end? Are people already imagining a future within environmental limits and beyond the growth imperative? Theoretically, building upon Marx and Bourdieu, we reconstruct the ideological impact that capitalism, in general, and neoliberalism, in particular, has on the ways we think, feel and make sense of our environmental and social context. Empirically, we analyse qualitative data from eleven deliberative citizen forums on needs satisfaction that we carried out in 2020 in Sweden. Theoretical and empirical results point to a weakening of capitalist and, particularly, neoliberal ideology. In the forums, this became obvious in the discussions of critical issues such as space use, labour market-generated inequalities, societal norms regarding upward mobility and individual ideas about career and happiness. There is furthermore significant intersection between what researchers recommend in terms of “eco-social” policy measures to initiate transformational change and what citizens view as necessary in this respect. Since deliberative citizen forums can provide opportunities of critical reflection and imagining alternative ways of satisfying fundamental human needs in sustainable ways, they can play a valuable role in the more general effort of igniting “counterfire” (Bourdieu) to neoliberalism and developing postgrowth economies and societies.

**Keywords:** capitalism, neoliberalism, degrowth, alternative societal spaces, deliberative citizen forums, Sweden

## Introduction

Are there indications for the neoliberal hegemony in economy and society to come to an end? Are people already imagining a future within environmental limits and beyond the growth imperative? We approach these issues both theoretically and empirically. Theoretically, we examine the ideological impact that capitalism, in general, and neoliberalism, in particular, has on the ways we think, feel and make sense of our environmental and social context. Building upon Marx and Bourdieu, we analyse how economic categories and corresponding social relations of capitalist production and consumption relations are reflected in our consciousness, and also ask which particular features these ideological forms took in the neoliberal era. Furthermore, we assess some of the economic, social and ecological crisis factors that this order is confronted with. Referring to heterodox economics approaches, we discuss features of a post-neoliberal and postgrowth future as well as “eco-social” policy elements that researchers highlight to facilitate corresponding transformational change. Empirically, we complement this academic perspective with qualitative data from deliberative citizen forums on needs satisfaction in Sweden.

The article is structured as follows: We start from a consideration of the ideological impact of capitalism and neoliberalism and characterize the multidimensional character of its crisis; second, we briefly examine critical research agendas relevant for the formulation of post-neoliberal economics with a focus on contributions from degrowth/postgrowth and sustainable welfare circles, generally outlining a provisioning economy for the satisfaction of fundamental

human needs; and third, we present qualitative empirical results from eleven deliberative forums on needs satisfaction in Sweden. The discussion and conclusion sections reflect on the theoretical and political implications arising from the data interpretation.

### **The ideological impact of capitalism and neoliberalism**

Marx's *Critique of Political Economy* (Marx, 1990) demonstrates not only why any capitalist economy is structurally bound to expand but also how specifically capitalist economic categories and social relations are reflected in the actors' minds. The historically specific mode of transfer of surplus labour is hidden by a "stepladder of mystifications" (Koch, 2018), as a result of which capitalism appears as the natural and eternal way of organising "the" economy. The "topsy-turvy world" of the "trinitary form" (Marx, 2006, ch. 48), where wage labour contributes to societal wealth on the same footing and in functional harmony with profits and rents, is the structural, albeit hidden, background for the widespread idea that the provision of economic growth is beneficial to all, including to those who contribute to it through work. The corollary is the illusion that the more one works the greater will be one's share in societal wealth. Core societal values and orientations such as "achievement", "upward mobility" and "social position as the result of one's own work and merits", which are of crucial significance for hegemony, stability and maintenance of the growth paradigm, turn out to be socially valid forms of thought that result from the objective inversions inherent to the capitalist production and accumulation process.

The conversion of specifically social and economic categories into features of things and nature finds its continuation and completion in consumption and culture (Bourdieu, 1982). The cultural sphere is a site of symbolic struggles over the societal acceptability of lifestyles in which dominant classes manage to maintain a hierarchy of cultural forms that subjects all consumptive acts to the legitimate taste, that is, their own. This classification process is "objective" and effective insofar as it operates largely independent of the (manipulative) intentions of dominant groups, who are themselves subject to the distortion of social into natural forms. While members of the middle and working classes may eschew legitimate cultural practices, or regard them with suspicion and disdain, the position of the dominant class at the pinnacle of the cultural hierarchy normally goes unchallenged, because it appears to be built upon ease, casualness and natural superiority. What Hirsch (1976) called the competition for "positional goods" is mediated through a genuinely social logic that Bourdieu refers to as "distinction", perceived as natural differences. The naturalization of the specifically capitalist character of production and consumption relations is, hence, a general feature of all capitalist economies, yet perceived as rational interactions of autonomous market subjects (Bourdieu, 2005). Economic growth appears to be the ideal breeding ground for upward mobility and progress and in everyone's interest. With regard to production relations a strong work ethic seems to be a worthwhile and rational individual strategy, while in consumption growth guarantees the creation of ever new generations of consumer articles, which are the material basis for individual distinction.

In the neoliberal era, growth imperative, work ethic and consumption cult came to be especially accentuated (Herkommer, 2004). David Harvey (2009, pp. 19-23) recalls the rise to economic and political hegemony of what started as the Mont Pelerin Society named after the Swiss spa where the group originally met. Starting in the late 1940s, this exclusive group assembled non-mainstream political philosophers such as Friedrich von Hayek and Karl Popper and economists such as Ludwig van Mises and Milton Friedman. Beginning with the monetarist

reforms of the Chicago Boys in Chile in the 1970s and further developed in the “austerity” and “supply”-oriented programmes by the governments of Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the US, the neoliberal perspective successfully usurped previously predominating Keynesian views within economics and wider society. By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, its ideological impact had become so strong that Bourdieu et al. (2002, p. 182) likened the symbolic power of neoliberalism to that of the Catholic *doxa* of the Middle Ages: serving as *pensée unique* and providing natural solutions for all kinds of social and ecological issues.

However, the impact of corresponding think-tanks, which relentlessly preached and amplified the neoliberal perspective on policymakers, students (not only) of economics and the wider society could only become efficient and seemingly without alternative as there is a certain readiness for collaboration, or a degree of practical consent, on the part of those who are exposed to power and symbolical violence. Indeed, social structures such as the growth imperative and the neoliberal ideology are inscribed not only in the “ideas” and the “minds” of the dominated, in their mental representations, but also in their bodies, in their “schemes of perception and dispositions (to respect, admire, love, etc.), in other words, beliefs ...” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 171). Values at the heart of neoliberalism such as status, achievement and individual competition and the firm belief in “market solutions” for problems as different as poverty, health or climate change are profoundly inscribed in the ways we think and feel.

### **The multidimensional crisis of neoliberalism**

According to Bourdieu (1991), the normally strong association between social structure, habitus and practice breaks during a crisis. At this point, the chances of alternative ways of thinking and acting becoming hegemonic increase, facilitating the transformation of the economic, political and cultural structures of society as well as their corresponding symbolic systems. Crises can first take the form of a crisis *within* the *ancien régime*: the institutional structure of the old social order turns out to be flexible enough for the actors to enter new kinds of alliances (on welfare and social inclusion, for example), that is, without questioning its fundamental principles. Hence, the social order, including its corresponding values, habitus forms etc., is maintained on the basis of some gradual or incremental change (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010); second, crises can take the form of a crisis *of* the existing social order. Its institutional structure turns out to be no longer capable of giving a realistic future perspective to satisfying the needs, wishes, and future expectations of a majority of citizens. The historic specificity of social relations, which is normally taken for the natural order of things and goes largely unquestioned, becomes transparent, and the simple formula of societal reproduction according to “doxa” – structure-habitus-practice-structure – ceases to apply. The habitus stops generating social practice and is gradually replaced by other organization principles such as rational calculus and conscious action (Bourdieu, 2000; Koch, 2020a). However, as already Gramsci (1971) observed, while alternative discourses and heterodox social forces gain ground during a crisis of the social order so do those that opt for its authoritarian defence, which may include the marginalization or abolition of democratic institutions and civil rights. Crises are hence open situations that can be “sorted” in various directions.

Much evidence suggests that the neoliberal regulation of capitalism has resulted in a multidimensional crisis which is unlikely to be resolved under the present institutional arrangements (Buch-Hansen, 2018) and features at least four dimensions. First, while the negative economic and social consequences of the 2008 financial crisis are not yet overcome, a new financial crisis is already looming (IMF, 2016: 1). Political economists such

as Gordon (2016) take the associated massive levels of public and private debt as a strong “headwind” for the promotion of future material prosperity. Second, massive and growing inequality has resulted in a social crisis that leaves growing shares of the population in the rich countries unable to satisfy their basic needs (OECD, 2015), while the wealth of the richest household groups continues to surge. Third, climate emergency and environmental crisis (Gills and Morgan, 2020) undermine current and future living conditions for human beings and other species and threatens to end human civilization as we know it (IPBES, 2019). Finally, there is a crisis of political representation (Crouch, 2016), culminating in events such as Brexit and the elections of populist leaders in a range of Western democracies.

Whether the crisis of the neoliberal economic and social order will eventually be overcome via a social-ecological transformation is far from certain. This is because the crumbling of an established social order has historically only rarely led to its replacement by heterodox thought and practice. More often than not, a crisis resulted in a new kind of orthodoxy where dominant interests are defended by replacing democratic rule by authoritarian rule and the use of force. To ignite the societal “counterfire” (Bourdieu, 2003) from below to prevent authoritarian crisis “solutions” from the top-down, it will be necessary to forge ideas for both single ecological and social policies and their synergy in the short and long-term, involving bottom-up civil society mobilization. To achieve a maximum in societal support for such policies, Gough (2017) suggests a “dual strategy”, combining the codified knowledge of various sorts of researchers with the practical knowledge of citizens. Applying this strategy, we briefly review some relevant heterodox and post-neoliberal variants of economics (“codified” knowledge) and then present insights from deliberative citizen forums on an alternative economy and society in Sweden (“practical” knowledge).

### **Towards a political economy of a post-neoliberal and postgrowth era**

There is a range of new beginnings united in the attempt to provide heterodox economics that consider the environment systematically in postgrowth contexts (Koch and Buch-Hansen, 2020). Approaches such as that of “diverse” and/or “local” economies by Gibson-Graham (2006; 2008), ecofeminism (Mies, 1998; Salleh, 2017) and the emerging “political economy of degrowth” (Chertkovskaya et al., 2019) are oriented at the totality of economic activity, that is, including those activities that are currently not or only marginally tied to the production of monetary value and economic growth and instead promote values such as “care, cooperation, mutual aid, solidarity, conviviality, autonomy” (Chertkovskaya et al., 2019, p. 4). Also Koch and Buch-Hansen (2020) point out that a political economy in keeping with the times should start from an analysis of how various economic categories and forms of work became structurally valued, undervalued and combined in the present economic outlook (Castree, 1999). Studies on how different economic activities are linked to corresponding principles of domination – particularly those of class, gender and ethnicity – and how the latter intersect in particular conjunctures and social positions should be intensified. This could facilitate the identification of openings for alternative economies to be upscaled from niches to centres, including re-interpretations of the institutional forms central to capitalist regulation. On top of alternative understandings of work and money, these institutional forms include the firm (Nesterova, 2020; Hinton, 2021) and the state (Koch, 2020b).

In general, there is agreement in growth-critical circles that in order not to break planetary boundaries, economic and social policies would need to be redesigned away from an orientation at economic growth and exchange value towards a provision of use values

suitable to meet basic human needs (Koch and Mont, 2016; Fullbrook and Morgan, 2019). Needs are being met in economically, culturally and ecologically different ways (Max-Neef, 1991; Guillén-Royo, 2015). Not only are maximum and minimum levels of need satisfaction empirically identifiable, human needs approaches resonate also well with ecological economics, emphasizing the imperative for human societies to operate in a space between planetary or upper and sufficiency or lower development levels. Especially degrowth and sustainable welfare research (Büchs and Koch, 2017 and 2019) is increasingly oriented towards identifying political measures that could help bring Western matter and energy throughputs in production and consumption patterns below the level of critical planetary limits and above the sufficiency level required to meet people's basic needs (Koch, 2021). As a corollary, the economy as a whole would be conceptualized as subsystem of the planetary and social systems and grasped as "provisioning system" (Fanning et al., 2020) for sustainable need satisfiers.

In relation to planetary or "upper" boundaries, economic and fiscal policies would not anymore take the relatively unproblematic form of redistributions of growing tax takes (as in the postwar period), but involve controversial decisions targeted at the power resources and material interests of the rich and influential, for example, in the form of caps on wealth and/or income (Buch-Hansen and Koch, 2019). In relation to the sufficiency or lower boundary, proponents have suggested the introduction of a universal and unconditional basic income (Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017), the expansion/introduction of universal basic services (Coote and Percy, 2020), a voucher system (Bohnenberger, 2020) or a combination of the three. Concrete national shapes of these policies are likely to reflect path dependencies such as welfare regime affiliation and may, if properly integrated, take the form of a sustainable virtuous policy circle (Hirvilammi, 2020).

Irrespective of the degree of academic sophistication of such proposals, these will only reach critical amounts of societal support, if they do not overburden people's experiences and future expectations (Koch, 2020a). One way of avoiding this – and expanding societal spaces where neoliberalism and the growth imperative ceases to occupy people's minds and bodies – is to co-imagine alternative economies and co-develop policies bringing about transformational change via deliberative citizen forums (Lindellee et al., 2021). As we argue next, these provide opportunities for mutual learning between researchers, activists and citizenry.

### **Deliberative forums on needs satisfaction – background and method**

Deliberative citizen forums are one of the popular methods employed in an attempt to create collaborative and constructive arenas where new ideas for sustainable futures can be borne out (Jolibert et al., 2014; Smith, 2012). Not only scholars interested in action research, but also local and regional municipalities as well as non-government organizations have employed various models of deliberative forums in recent years. The aim of the eleven citizen forums conducted in Sweden during 2020 was to collect policy proposals anchored in the practical knowledge of citizens on sustainable needs satisfaction. In total 84 individuals participated either in person or digitally in discussions about how we satisfy our fundamental needs today, and how this could be done in more sustainable ways. We used Max-Neef's Human Scale Development (HSD) methodology (Max-Neef, 1991; Guillén-Royo, 2015; Temesgen, 2021) in order to address nine fundamental human needs (subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, idleness, creation, identity, freedom) with a

focus on four policy areas with central significance for the participants' daily life: housing, transport, food, and work.

A core idea of Max-Neef's Human Scale Development as a framework for drawing visions of transformational change is the distinction between fundamental human needs, which are understood as universal across time and space, and needs "satisfiers", which differ depending on specific historic, social and cultural contexts. Forum participants discussed "positive" (or "utopian") and "negative" needs satisfiers respectively, and then deliberated on "bridging" satisfiers oriented at actions and measures to achieve the utopian future from the status quo. Needs satisfiers may range from characteristics, attitudes, actions, norms, institutions, policies, physical environment or infrastructures and be operationalized at different scales (at individual and/or collective but also local, national or transnational levels). Furthermore, "synergetic" satisfiers denote needs satisfiers that can fulfil multiple needs at the same time, operating as a sort of catalyst for organic chains of change. Lastly, Max Neef also identified so called "pseudo" satisfiers that at best temporarily satisfy our needs in the short time and actually threaten or undermine long-term needs satisfaction. Hence, this terminology aptly conceptualizes the possibilities/potentials that can be mobilized in envisioning postgrowth transition processes on the one hand, and the pitfalls and vicious cycles that may impede transformational change, on the other hand.

Table 1. Needs-matrix by Max-Neef (1991) [slightly modified and contextualized by authors]

	<b>Being</b> Physical and mental mind-set - Individual or collective	<b>Having</b> Social structures, policies, norms and attitudes	<b>Doing</b> Individual or collective actions	<b>Interacting</b> Physical places and the social environment
<b>Nutrition and health</b>				
<b>Protection and support</b>				
<b>Proximity and love</b>				
<b>Understanding and knowledge</b>				
<b>Participation</b>				
<b>Idleness and rest</b>				
<b>Creating</b>				
<b>Identity and affiliation</b>				
<b>Freedom and independence</b>				

From each deliberative forum conducted, the resulting data material consist chiefly of the needs-matrices, notes taken during the meetings, and video files recording the meeting. Table 1 is the needs-matrix proposed by Max-Neef (1991) and modified by our research team. The exact wording of the nine fundamental needs is slightly different from the original work, as some precision and additional information was needed during the translation into Swedish. In the final version, filled-in matrices about positive, negative, and synergetic



satisfiers were written down and were colour-coded for clearer identification of each type of satisfier.

The goal of the citizen forums was to serve as a venue for creating alternative ideas for needs satisfaction that are ecologically and socially sustainable. The idea was not to recruit participants in order to maximize representativeness of certain social groups in a given geographical area; rather, we made practical decisions as to who could participate in the forums by considering that (i) it is easier for participants to deliberate freely when working with already established groups and social relations with each other, and that (ii) it is a hugely demanding task to participate in a whole-day workshop which is by no means feasible to all social groups. Although we deliberately did not collect any demographic or educational backgrounds of the participants, it is safe to say that many of our forum participants were highly educated urban dwellers with relatively flexible jobs and with some experiences of having been involved in community organizations of various kinds, such as community development and the green transition movement. Some exceptions include our forums held with teenagers participating in a community education program, a social enterprise based in a “minority”/“marginalized” neighbourhood, and with a local community organization for people without employment. Of the eleven forums, four did not have any established group members as participants but consisted of individual volunteers who responded to our open, on-line recruitment. These meetings were characterized by a wider range of occupational groups as well as geographic areas being represented by the participants. The number of participants varied between as few as four in one meeting to 18, but mostly between five to seven people. From the research team we had one moderator, one taking notes, and two assistants who were filling in the needs-matrix generated from the discussions. Each meeting lasted about seven hours, including a lunch break.

As we launched our deliberative forums at the very beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the majority of our discussions had to be held in a digital format (via Zoom). It was however not only the format of the forums that was affected by the pandemic. As an exogenous factor affecting many fundamental aspects of our daily lives, the crisis of the existing order spurred by the ongoing pandemic provided an extraordinary chance for critical reflections and openings for challenging ideas.

Next we introduce some of the prominent themes and policy proposals that were discussed during our forums. These resulted in a master-matrix consisting of around 1,600 unique entries of “needs-satisfiers” that can be systematized and categorized in numerous ways depending on a given research question. For this special issue, we have selected the themes and policy proposals that are most relevant for imagining postgrowth and post-neoliberal economics and present these with short illustrative quotes taken from our meeting notes. The themes include the following: “Questioning the growth imperative”; “call for the sufficiency principle”; “decommodification”; and “revitalizing communities and democracy”.

## **Imagining post-neoliberal and postgrowth economics and society**

### ***Questioning the growth imperative***

One prominent theme of our deliberative forums was the critique of the growth imperative of our time. Participants acknowledged the sheer fact that we cannot afford the unlimited pursuit of an economy geared at endlessly expanding matter and energy throughput and at the

expense of the earth's ecological boundaries, while social minimum standards are not being met. Especially during the discussions about how we sustain ourselves and how food is produced and distributed around the world, the growth imperative (and the food industry as a part of it) was often identified as lying behind many of today's structural problems. It was argued to sustain a system based on the profit motive and short-term economic interests rather than the long-term need for sustainable nutrition.

*"We know that we need to move away from the big, industrial agriculture. But towards that direction there is not much change going on in both regulations and in policy work. The market fundamentalism is a real obstacle for small-scale farmers trying out new ways of producing our food."*

*"We need to distinguish abstract, economic interests from our actual needs and balance the profit-making activities with local needs."*

As alternative models of economy, participants proposed more locally organized units for production and distribution of goods and services, within a bounded space and with a limited number of people engaged in such communities. More concretely, local currencies or vouchers that could be utilized to vitalize local economies based on the needs of residents were proposed, as well as community infrastructures enabling the sharing of goods and services.

Another critical argument against the growth imperative was articulated by multiple participants in discussing our working lives. Especially when the needs such as "proximity and love", "idleness and rest", and "identify and affiliation" were discussed, participants talked about the ways in which the overarching economic growth-imperative at the system level affects not only our working lives but also our capabilities of self-perception and understanding.

*"We need protection against the brutal growth-fixated society, its hysterical consumption culture, exploitation of materials and resources, do-not-look-back mentality, and the message that you are not enough as who you are now, but you need to become something else - all of which leading to a brain-washing effect for many of us."*

*"The society is built on the assumption that we are not supposed to be idle. Through the career ladder, status and salary differences we are taught to become something else than ourselves, we are not good enough as we are now. It creates dissatisfaction leading to careless consumption and we do not reflect on what kinds of social conditions we live with and reinforce."*

Still other aspects that came up in the forums in relation to the growth imperative had to do with the consequences that such a lifestyle (i.e., focusing on upward mobility and achievement/merits valued in the market economy only) brings about:

*"Adults that are utterly obsessed with saving time have no time for jokes or unnecessary stuff, no time for conversation with each other. We give our life to something else. We are supposed to be in production of something all the time. A neighbor who comes by and wants to talk is perceived as a stress*



*factor. I don't like to be 'effective', but I try to be all the time, at the expense of social relations."*

As concrete policies aiming at a better-balanced working life as well as harnessing excessive consumption behaviors, participants proposed the following: introducing advertisement free-zones in public spaces; reducing working weeks/hours; rewarding employees with more vacation days instead of monetary remuneration.

### ***Calls for the sufficiency principle***

Another relevant theme for imagining post-neoliberal and postgrowth economies in our deliberative forums was focused on the sufficiency principle. Participants critically questioned the ways in which we put upward mobility at the centre of our occupational lives, and pointed out that this contributes nothing to help satisfy some of our fundamental needs such as participation, creation, or freedom. Contemporary ethics and norms around our working life were also questioned in discussing our need for idleness. Many argued that the consumption culture goes hand in hand with our cultural practice to prioritize wage-labour, at times excessively, at the expense of other types of work – care, especially – in which we are currently engaged in without remuneration and despite the fact that the latter may have greater satisfaction potential in relation to needs such as participation, creation, identity and freedom.

*"We have to change the idea that everyone has to be high-performing in all aspects. We have to slow down. Everyone, with the capacity that today is perceived to be deviant, should rather be the standard that we work together with."*

The proposition that we need to slow down and accept limits was also highlighted as a precondition to actually recognize our genuine needs rather than artificially manufactured and promoted wants by commercial interests.

*"We live in a capitalist society where there is no limit to our growing wants. We need to take breaks to have time to reflect on what our actual needs are."*

This line of reasoning was elaborated also in relation to the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, in that the current crisis could open up for an opportunity where we could understand, appreciate and finally apply the sufficiency principle.

*"Many sectors that facilitate unnecessary consumption may disappear. We've got a chance to reflect over our fundamental needs and learned that we could satisfy many of them with a reduced level of activities, speed, and material use."*

Furthermore, discussions around the sufficiency principle included a questioning of the acceleration of communication technology and its focus on speed. As a concrete example, several participants raised a doubt as to the need for the introduction of 5G mobile network.

*"A message from a tele-company X is that we need to have 5G network if we are to succeed with the climate transition – but what does that even mean? We do not question the materialistic view when we are promised that we can*

*save time and our daily life becomes easier and more convenient. It is an ongoing myth-building about automatization at the expense of close relations with others.”*

Some concrete policy proposals that were mentioned and motivated from the perspective of the sufficiency principle include the following: forbidding advertisement in public spaces, limiting the use of electricity, limiting living space per person, reducing working hours/days, introducing maximum income and concentration of wealth.

When it comes to the idea of maximum income, arguments presented were about re-commoning excessive private profits/assets in order for a broader population to benefit from basic needs satisfaction. The need for tackling inequalities was also argued from the perspective of social cohesion.

*“Today you can hoard money without any limits but this affects our identity and feelings of social belonging and community. Social cohesion does demand a certain level of economic equality.”*

Another argument for limiting wealth accumulation was that wealth concentration and private ownership of public infrastructure such as collective transportation or housing prohibit many people from satisfying their fundamental need for protection. The sufficiency principle was also mentioned in discussing the last need in our needs-matrix, freedom.

*“Acceptance of the limits we have might be a good way to feel actually free.”*

### ***Decommodification***

Decommodification was yet another frequently highlighted theme. One participant described money as a pseudo needs satisfier for everything in a capitalist economy, illustrating the extent to which almost all aspects of our lives have become commodified – with the consequence that many of our fundamental needs are currently mediated through monetary transactions. Many participants critically reflected on how commercialization and commodification of the ways in which we satisfy our needs prohibit relation building as well as any sense of belonging.

*“We rely on purchased services rather than on interpersonal relations that could be in support for ourselves. I offer my frail elderly neighbours to buy food but they’d rather choose paid-services. We stop interacting with each other when we can buy transactions that we need for our survival. My affluence isolates me! We are very much dependent on technologies, institutions, and the market - but not so much on other people.”*

Universal basic income was proposed by numerous forum participants, especially in contexts where our needs for participation, protection and support, freedom as well as idleness were discussed. The proponents stressed the ways in which guaranteeing a basic level of sustenance for all could positively change our society, not only in the meaning of guaranteeing basic need satisfaction but also in enabling an environment that encourages the realization of the full potentials of individuals.

*“There is a very strong paradigm and norms revolving around wage-labour and career, which can be an obstacle for many people to be integrated, to participate, to feel secure and to act in democratic ways in our society. Introducing basic income requires shifts in our mentality.”*

Decommodification was furthermore taken up in relation to providing non-commercial alternatives. When discussing the need for participation, many forum participants called for an expansion of non-commercial, communal meeting spaces as well as cultural activities, which do not exclude people without money, as important preconditions for creating engaging and vibrant local communities.

*“Commercial logics steer how we design our public spaces, including the online platforms that are becoming ever more important. We need to redesign our physical spaces for more interactions with each other, rather than excluding people.”*

The list of areas in relation to which forum participants called for decommodification and de-privatization is much longer and includes healthcare, schools, public transportation, housing, and financial services (where interest-free loans were mentioned especially often).

### ***Revitalizing communities and democracy***

One unexpected (as we initially focused on food, housing, transport and work) yet reoccurring theme throughout our deliberative forums was centred around democracy, or rather “democratizing democracy”. Numerous participants emphasized the role of education in democratization, not only in schools but also throughout one’s entire life course. Many called for educational efforts focusing on our role as democratic citizens and active political subjects, which could lead to vibrant and critical practices of collective reflection, deliberation, and have an impact on transformation processes towards sustainable societies. The argument was presented as a caution against the belief that change processes towards a postgrowth society can be managed in a top-down manner only; instead, for this to happen it was argued that broader bottom-up mobilizations and collective actions were necessary prerequisites.

*“We’ve been indoctrinated through our school system that the society always becomes better, that economic growth is important, and that it is important that we survive and outperform others in the global competition. But what we need is more collective actions and being a part of meaningful communities, not more individualism and self-realization. We need good institutions, but also people near us that could support each other, breaking up with anonymity and isolation.”*

While stressing the importance of encouraging citizen participation at local levels and, specifically, in deliberative and collaborative forms, some concrete ideas for facilitating such citizen involvement included: one-year sabbatical for being engaged in community organizations (“free-year”); local vouchers as compensation for engaging in voluntary work (e.g., bus cards, gift cards at local stores); and allowing the unemployed receiving benefits to engage in voluntary work without being penalized.

Structural inequalities were once again identified as significant obstacles for achieving critical amounts of a sense of belonging and social cohesion, which many participants viewed as a precondition for widened citizen participation.

*“Ever intensifying power and wealth concentration that a minority owns most of our resources and wealth - it challenges democracy. A more democratic society means less difference between individuals.”*

Furthermore, variants of deliberative processes were advocated as an important complement for the current institutions of representative democracy. As hands-on proposals, participants mentioned food gatherings in neighbourhoods, infrastructures for sharing economy, and community gardening as well as collective forms of housing, where people can interact more closely, including across generations. This line of discussion may be understood as a counter-argument against the neoliberal ideology and its tendency to responsabilize individuals for structural problems.

Last but not least, many participants reflected on the difficulties in engaging with socio-economically weaker groups and ethnic minority communities.

*“There are many people who do not feel welcome because they don’t have formal education, because of lack of social and communication skills, etc. Learning to do democracy takes time. Hope for the newer generation, learning to accept that people are different, but still equal. It has to be learned and it takes time!”*

People advocated for a widening of the participatory basis for deliberative forums by promoting more active cooperation between grassroot movements and local authorities, for instance by encouraging long-term funding for local community initiatives (as opposed to short-term funding only granted to “novel” projects) and by introducing participatory budgeting.

## **Discussion**

For the design of post-neoliberal and postgrowth economies and societies, the four themes highlighted in our deliberative forums on needs satisfaction constitute crucial pillars. First, the forum participants articulated rather fundamental critiques of the growth imperative. This applies not only to the destructive environmental and social impacts of growth but also its tendency towards undermining society’s potential for need satisfaction and self-reflective understanding. Second, the concept of sufficiency was put forward as adequate steering principle of our matter and energy use as well as the ways in which we think about our working life, work-life balance and the speed in which we live and work. In addition, forum participants expected that slowing down and downscaling may also bring about clarity in our mind, helping us to distinguish what our genuine needs are from manufactured/artificial wants. Third, decommodification was put forward as a necessary change, not least in allowing us more thriving social relations that are to a lesser extent mediated through monetary transactions, but also in guaranteeing access to essential services and participatory opportunities for all. Lastly, the forum participants stressed the importance of revitalizing communities and democratic processes by encouraging participatory practices and by educating civic identities. This was seen as crucial to bring about critical amounts of bottom-

up mobilization for social-ecological change, perhaps complemented by top-down political strategies and transitional efforts. A list of negative and positive needs satisfiers as arising from the deliberative forums can be found in Table 2.

**Table 2.** List of negative and positive needs-satisfiers relevant for post-neoliberal and postgrowth economics

Negative needs-satisfiers	Positive needs-satisfiers
Growth-imperative Commercial interests steering production and distribution of essential goods and services Prioritizing upward mobility Status and salary difference Global inequalities Limitless wealth accumulation Dominance of/reliance on market-mediated services leading to social isolation Commercial logics and market fundamentalism creating artificial needs and demands Privatization of core infrastructure such as healthcare, school, transportation, housing, financial services, etc. Over-emphasis of theoretical knowledge, excessive professionalization Over-emphasis on wage-work at the expense of other types of work leading to fulfilment of needs such as participation, creation, identity, freedom Excessive consumption Over-emphasis on technological advancement and acceleration of speed, automation	Sufficiency principle Locally organized units for production and distribution of goods and services Local currency or voucher Community infrastructure Advertisement-free zones Learning to be idle, slow down to recognize our genuine needs Reduced working hours/days Non-monetary compensation for productivity gains/performances Maximum income Basic income Balance between practically-oriented education and theoretical knowledge Life-long learning opportunity for all of civic identity, of democracy Participatory budgeting Sabbatical year for community engagement Local infrastructure for social support and sharing economy Long-term funding for community initiatives Limiting use of electricity, living space, etc.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we went in search of indications for a crumbling of the neoliberal domination of economics and wider society. Theoretically, we highlighted the enormous ideological impact that capitalism, in general, and neoliberalism, in particular, has on our dispositions, that is, the ways we make sense of, feel and perceive our environmental and social context. With the help of Marx and Bourdieu, we demonstrated that the historically specific economic categories and social relations of capitalism tend to be perceived as features of things, natural and just: contemporary nature-society relations appear to follow from the web of life and patterns of inequality and one's position in the social structure from own work efforts or different degrees of achievement. The neoliberal era accentuated this general ideological effect of capitalist production and consumption relations with its political and medial celebration of market forces and solutions, regarded as per se superior to regulatory alternatives such as commons or the state and applicable to virtually all imaginable problems. Indeed, in its heyday, neoliberalism achieved the status of *doxa*: an undisputable point of view

(“There is no alternative”) that came to dominate a range of societal fields also beyond the economy, especially articulated in the public sector.

We subsequently addressed the most relevant economic, social, ecological and political crisis dimensions of the neoliberal order, referred to heterodox economics approaches, which open up for a post-neoliberal and postgrowth future, and mentioned some of the “eco-social” policy elements that researchers often highlight as potentially facilitating corresponding transformational change. In an application of Ian Gough’s “dual strategy” we empirically complemented this sort of “codified” knowledge with qualitative data or “practical” knowledge from deliberative citizen forums on needs satisfaction in Sweden. Such forums provide an alternative social space, where a new script can be written about a more socially and ecologically sustainable society. Participants made use of this opportunity when considering the ways and contexts of current and alternative needs satisfaction.

The focus on human needs was also the lens through which participants reflected on the current economic system. They did this by assessing its social and ecological impacts from the perspective of their own experiences of working lives, social relations, and self-understanding. We take much of the results of our forum data for indications of, at the very least, a weakening of capitalist and, particularly, neoliberal ideology, since many participants actually questioned some of the most deep-seated imperatives and norms of contemporary economy and society. To some extent, this reflects ruptures of the seemingly natural, unchangeable and unquestioned links between social structures, habitus and practice. This became especially perceivable in the discussions of critical issues such as space use, labour market-generated inequalities, societal norms regarding upward mobility, individual career ideas or concepts of happiness. Many, but not all, of the suggested policy measures to bring about corresponding transformational change based on the participants’ practical knowledge in fact echoed the “codified” ones put forward by researchers (see Table 2).

Our results indicate that deliberative forums engaging researchers and citizens can help draw attention to, reflect and act upon the opportunities that an “objective” crisis of the economic and social structure may present. Again, with considerable overlap to academic debates on the topic, our forum discussants addressed a range of parallel and intertwined crises dimensions as they manifest in their own day-to-day life. Many participants referred to the social crisis (due to increasing inequalities), the climate and environmental crisis and the crisis of political representation. However, faced with the challenge of initiating large-scale social-ecological transformations in the short-term, it is evident that deliberative citizen forums by themselves are unlikely to bring about the required caliber and speed of change. There is also a risk that this means of co-imagining future scenarios attracts and is anchored in a small fraction of populations only, hence remaining isolated bubbles. Yet if complemented with other measures of expanding alternative spaces, the opportunities of critical reflection and imagining alternative ways of satisfying fundamental human needs in sustainable ways that citizen forums provide may well turn out to be valuable in the more general effort of igniting “counterfire” to neoliberalism and developing postgrowth economies and societies.

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