--- 4th week of December ---
Fifth Edition

EXPLOR2ING CENTURY

Approaches of sustainable initiatives and degrowth in Hungary

AWARENESS AND COMMUNITIES

Sziasztok,

We are Tom, Enora and Perrine, three students in Sciences Po Rennes and currently trainees at Cargonomia, a social cooperative in Budapest.

We are currently facing an ecological crisis raising, among others issues, political, social and economical questions. The current system is calling for indefinite growth whereas the planet has boundaries and limited ressources. So, when we asked ourselves about sustainable solutions and alternatives, degrowth catched our attention. Then we would like to learn from people who theorize about degrowth, put it into practice, but also from those who engage in ways that degrowth is likely to support.

This series of weekly papers are aimed to discover different fields of degrowth by interviewing people more or less related to it. Today, for the fifth edition of *EXPLOR2ING : Approaches of sustainable initiatives and degrowth in Hungary*, we are talking about raising awareness and communities with Edina VADOVICS, co-founder and member of GreenDependent.

EDINA VADOVICS - GREENDEPENDENT

How would you present yourself?

I am a member of GreenDependent*. It is a small and non-profit research and action organization whose mission is to research and promote sustainable lifestyles. We find it very important to have a connection between research and action, so information exchange, communication, and changes can be faster. We work with different stakeholders: households, communities, and because this isn't enough for change, we work with municipalities and sometimes even companies.

I have been working for GreenDependent for more than 15 years. We started it up in 2005 first as an association. Then, for various projects we needed to start a non-profit Ltd and that is GreenDependent Institute. These two organizations work closely together and their missions are the same. The differences are mostly in their activities. With the association, we mostly do community work and voluntary projects where we don't have a contract and funded project. The Institute is more like an expert organization and we are doing big European projects, and where we sometimes also agree to work with a very selected number of companies based on rather strict criteria.

Personally, I have a background in education, environmental sciences, policies and environmental management. I personally find it very important as well to not just do research or action but combine these two and try to be active in different areas because that's how change happens faster and perhaps more actively.

What is your perception of current events related to the ecological crisis and especially illustrated by the last IPCC (UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) report?

In general it's a really challenging issue because it's not just an ecological crisis but also a social crisis. Basically we would need to change the whole system and how we evaluate well-being, happiness, and development because as a society we seem to have been on the wrong path.

We are focusing too much on material progress and GDP as wrong indicators that only measure monetary progress and negative things. For example, when we have a flood, we have to invest a lot of money and it's a positive thing for the GDP.

I think we are already in a hugely difficult situation and we are facing a lot of challenges as a society so it is a bit difficult to start action. That's why we try, at GreenDependent, to be active at the theoretical level, to come up with new theoretical models and imaginaries for the future, and also try to be active at the local level because that's where change comes from. We have to work with people and communities and make these assumptions more conscious. People often don't even realize that they have the power to change things. We can actually do a lot in our everyday life as citizens and voters as well, so we try to help this consciousness and awareness at the local level.

How do your studies in education influence your work now at GreenDependent?

Actually we have several colleagues who have a background in education as well. We have a very multi-talented group. Education is really important in our work because we have learnt about sociology, psychology, how to work with people effectively, what kind of group development methods to use, etc. I think this gives us an extra-understanding of how to work more effectively with individuals, communities and even organizations like municipalities or companies.

HUNGARIAN ECOLOGICAL ISSUES

Why did you choose to base GreenDependent in Gödöllő and not in Budapest?

There are various reasons for this. First of all, we wanted to live close to our workplace so we could avoid traveling a lot and, then, have a sustainable lifestyle. Also, lots of things in Hungary are centralized in the capital and there are many organizations similar to ours there. We need organizations like GreenDependent all over the country. Moreover, Gödöllő is actually a very forward-thinking place. There are a lot of community and sustainable initiatives here. So we thought it would be a nice place for us so we can connect to other projects like art, craft, education, etc... For example, Zsámboki Biokert was originally based in Gödöllő.

In general and from your experience, how do Hungarian people perceive climate change, the current ecological and social crisis? Are environmental issues priorities for Hungarians in rural areas?

That's a difficult question, I think there is more and more awareness about environmental and ecological issues in general. However, I think a lot of people believe that to deal with environmental issues is something for the richer part of the society. When you are poor or in a socially deprived situation, you first have to deal with that. This is even a problem at policy and decision making level, we should find solutions that are environmentally and socially sustainable.
We have a certain growing awareness but another big issue is that most of the people don't think in systems. In Hungary, a lot of people in rural areas, especially in the poorer part of Hungary, are burning rubber for example. This is really environmentally harmful and it's bad for their health as well.
But at the decision making level this is also a problem, they don't think in systems and as a result solutions only focus on one aspect of the change, and can end up even being harmful for others (e.g giving lignite to energy poor households).

"However, I think a lot of people believe that to deal with environmental issues is something for the richer part of the society."

Why did you choose bottom-up approaches?

Even before starting GreenDependent, we really believed in communities and that change can come from communities. One of the first projects of GreenDependent was a European Union project, called "Changing Behavior"* about how to change behavior of individuals towards a more effective ecological awareness. The research results pointed to work with communities because they help you to question today's norms and provide a context for change and support. It's easier to get out of social norms and avoid the mainstream in a group of people. This is why we place a really big effort on building communities and helping people make them sustainable.
Even if we work with municipalities for energy consumption for example, we create small groups first and try to make people from different departments work together.

By looking at all your projects, we had the feeling that you were really involved in European projects, so what does GreenDependent do regarding the situation between Hungary and the European Union?

We are really upset that our government seems to be against the European Union. We admit that there are negative things about it as well, but we are really glad to be part of this bigger community. We think that knowledge exchange and funding from the EU are really important if we want changes to happen. Actually GreenDependent probably wouldn't have survived last few "Covid" years without EU funding. The EU is also a lifeline for us for the hope and support we get from working with link-minded people in European projects. They are acting like groups and communities for us as well and we can develop our ideas and find the people to work together with.

Is the Hungarian government blocking or obstructing you or your projects?

Currently, there are simply no sources of funding whereas we used to have some. For example, for the "Small Footprint" project, we got funding from the Hungarian Government (which distributed money from the European Union). It was aimed for households and communities from all over the country. But in the last 8-10 years, these funding sources have dried out... or you need to have connections to get them we don't have, and don't even wish to have funding that way.
Also, because we are a nonprofit green NGO, SO we are undesirable. Finally, several of our colleagues went to Central European University of Budapest, which again is a negative thing in some circles in Hungary.
However, in our work we are trying to be neutral and not take political sides. So we are working with municipalities that are allies of the government and municipalities that are not. We try to work with everyone and focus on the subject matter.

What do you think about policies and governmental decisions which promote changes from individuals rather than addressing structural changes and constraints?

Individual behavior change isn't enough and we need policies, infrastructure and structure changes as well. We are doing different things to help this: first, we try to involve not just households or communities, but other stakeholders in projects related to events. For example, we had this CIMULACT project, which was a European citizen consultation and in Hungary we managed to have really good discussions between companies, citizens, NGOs,...
We would like to see this happen on a larger scale and for this be part of the regular decision making process. We can't do all of this on our own, so we are partnering with other organizations in Hungary and in the EU. Even if there isn't a lot of room to see changes, we aren't giving up. We are trying to stay active in our town and at the national level.
For instance, we had this EnergyNeighbourhoods project with households, communities and E.ON (the big energy company which is funding us). Thus, sometimes, a company is getting involved and is providing some energy infrastructure. It's a very slow process but we are seeing some positive signs.

CREATING AND WORKING ON COMMUNITIES

We understood that we can find the relevance and the effectiveness of infusing change through communities. Could you define what is for you a community?

We don't just work with one definition but you can infuse it in a loose way. Community can be like people coming together for one purpose, to change something or to participate in something. Most of the time, people just don't participate with communities they already have, but they build a group for the project. We hope that the project helps them to turn the group into a new community becoming agents of local change. Sometimes it does happen, but you cannot force this.
There can be many types of communities like virtual ones, face to face ones when you live close to each other. I don't think it really matters in the end. What matters is that you have a group of like-minded people and you can work towards something positive. That's how I would define a community, but it's just one definition.
For example, in Gödöllő, the town in which we are based, we started a local carbon club with the Changing Behavior project. It was a half a year pilot project but people wanted to stay together, so we have it now for ten years in our town. It has become a community place based for leading a climate-friendly lifestyle and starting more systemic, local change.

"We hope that the project helps them to turn the group into a new community becoming agents of local change."

Do you have particular methodologies or common guidance for your projects?

Yes, we actually have two of these. One is what we call a "small footprint lifestyle" approach. For us, isn't just an environmental footprint but also a social one. Like the Doughnut economics, this small-footprint living is inside the doughnut. It's socially and environmentally sustainable and that is what it offers guiding principles.

We are trying to bring people and communities within the Doughnut.
The other methodology is a behavioral and practice change theory that is group-based. We create groups to provide context and support for change and we also try to make social conscious norms to challenge people. Basically, we are trying to empower people to change things, make new norms and to challenge past habits to be able to change them.
We focus on social norms and abilities of people to change the infrastructural and institutional system they are in. This is a mix of behavioral change and social practice change theory.

"We create groups to provide context and support for change but we also try to make social conscious norms to challenge people to work more easily."

Do you have a psychological, sociological approach to help find the best ways to motivate people to change? How can new behaviors and mentalities be embedded and remain as long-lasting habits?

Yes, this is why we create groups and communities. It has been shown by research that they help create long-lasting habits. We also have longer programs so that the change can become a routine and be part of your life. Then, when you do it everyday, we start thinking about a bigger system. Very often, we start with little actions (such as reducing the room temperature or reducing the number of clothing washes) and then people start to think about what they buy, where they shop, how much they buy...
This is why we always have community events at the end of programs so that they can see that it's not just an alternative green hippie thing but more people doing this together. This is also why we have not just one way to communicate and tools, but a lot of different methods. We give them tips, individual consultations, group consultations, community events, feedback processes, online calculators, ... We also ask people to evaluate their own situation, like strength and weakness about energy for example, and then to create goals for themselves. We aren't forcing them, they come up with their goals and then we discuss it together like we give them a context, general principles, global aims... If it's their own goals then it stays longer.

DEGROWTH AND COMMUNITIES

In the CONVERGE project*, a few years ago, you worked on sustainable development. Are you still supporting this idea?

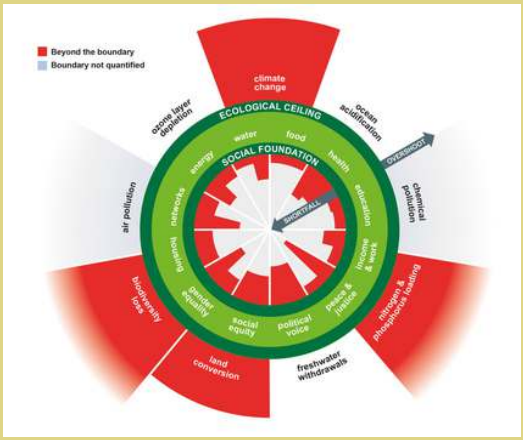
Yes, that's another idea we are supporting. Converging is a bit like the Doughnut Economy, we need to converge towards this ecologically and socially sustainable space. At the moment, we have a project called EnergyPROSPECTS project*, which is an energy citizenship all over Europe. GreenDependent is leading this case-study work. We want to use these CONVERGE project principles in the analysis of the cases and study how far cases of energy citizenship integrate environmental and social principles.

Do you think that sustainable development is enough or should we take a new path, such as a degrowth one?

Actually, in this CONVERGE project, we had a degrowth perspective, we just didn't call it "degrowth", but the basic ideas are very similar. The mainstream understanding of sustainable development isn't enough I think. At GreenDepent and in this CONVERGE Project, we chose the strong sustainability development perspective to stay within the limits. We find perhaps more understandable the Doughnut Economy principle for the more general society, but clearly the outer circle of the Doughnut represents the environmental limits we have to stay within. We are communicating quite strongly on that. When we started, the EnergyNeighbourhoods project was to make people come into the limits of the circle. So we were helping them to contract and degrow their energy consumption.
So definitely it's not the mainstream understanding of sustainable development. We are just not always calling it degrowth.

"So definitely it's not the mainstream understanding of sustainable development. We are just not always calling it degrowth."

Theory and diagram first developed by **Kate RAWORTH**, an economist at the University of Oxford, in her 2012 Oxfam paper "A Safe ans Just Space for Humanity", and elaborated then in her 2017 book "Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist".



*"Think of it as a **compass for human prosperity** in the 21st century, with the aim of **meeting the needs of all people within the means of the living planet**. The Doughnut consists of two concentric rings: a social foundation, to ensure that no one is left falling short on life's essentials, and an ecological ceiling, to ensure that humanity does not collectively overshoot the planetary boundaries that protect Earth's life-supporting systems. Between these two sets of boundaries lies a doughnut-shaped space that is both ecologically safe and socially just: a space in which humanity can thrive."* Doughnut Economics Action Lab, DEAL Community : *https://doughnuteconomics.org/about-doughnut-economics*

Could the word "degrowth" obstruct the communication of what it promotes in itself?

Yes, sometimes I think that when people first hear it, it can create rejection. It takes a lot of explanation to make them understand that it's related to materials use and consumption, and at the same time it can actually mean personal and well-being growth. We generally don't use this word, this is why we found this Doughnut thing a bit more communication friendly. Even with E.ON, the oil company, at an event, we went quite clear that we needed to degrowth. We are trying to connect these different kinds of thinking to show people that they are following the same principles, just not taking the same road. We are part of the degrowth community, it's just about the name.

"So it takes a lot of explanation to make them understand that it's related to materials use and consumption and at the same time it can actually mean personal and well-being growth.."

Are communities taking this intermediate level between individuals and the global society which are ruled by market conditions?

This is quite a big issue that people don't realize they have this power. In the UK, they realize it more with the Extinction Rebellion and the Insulate Britain movement*. In Hungary, because of this communist past and now the effort of the Fidecsz government, civil society isn't so strong and people don't feel that they can make change happen.
For example, we were planting trees on the street in front of our houses.
But a lot of people were stopping and saying « oh you cannot plant trees here ». In fact, we had the right to do it. This shows that people often just accept how things are. We have to bring this power to them and make them realize that they have the right to change things.

Communities can be ways to fight against the social conventions and norms. But is it easy to make a small footprint way of life attractive, when you are living in a country with this specific historical path?

Actually, more than 10 years ago, with the Small Footprint project, we realized that we had to help people to see that a lot of actions that they were already doing in the countryside were part of this small footprint lifestyle (having a garden, reusing the water for washing up, watering some plants or using it in the toilets, or even, sharing cars, buying second hand clothes...). They just didn't think that these things were sustainable.
Most of the time, they are doing this for economic reasons. So we made them see that they were part of this sustainable and small footprint lifestyle and we told them that all of this was green and good things to do. Even if you are poor, sustainable living isn't just for the rich people, indeed you are already doing it.

It's not about having a completely new lifestyle, you just have to examine your current lifestyle and see which parts are already sustainable and which aren't. That's why I think that small footprint living or even degrowth can be made attractive, we just have to be clever in the way we are communicating.

"Most of the time, they are doing this for economic reasons and we told them that all of this was green and was a good thing to do."

Does it mean that we should expect, in the future, a society structured only around communities? What about the scale issues? What are the limits of the communities?

Yes there are limits to communities, it depends on how big they are. There is a need for exchanges and cooperation between communities and the State so it can provide a good infrastructure and context for communities to coexist.

Do we need the State at some point?

I have a really specific point of view on this. At this moment and for the immediate future, yes. In a longer timeframe, it depends on how self-governing communities can become. If we achieve a good level of consciousness and self-governance, maybe we don't need the State. At the moment, we aren't there for sure.

In our everyday life, we are « colonized » by growth. Can communities create a space where we are free not to hear about growth?

This is very difficult because people bring this colonization into communities as well. So you have to work quite a long time to be free of this kind of thinking and mindsets, it's almost unconsciously part of how people behave and think everyday. I think communities can be these spaces, but it's really not easy. You can see the struggles of eco-villages, these kinds of self-independence communities or even self-sufficient households. Most of them are struggling these days because it's very difficult to become free of this kind of « colonization» in a society that is still "colonized".

So, I think there is hope but we have to work to create these places and to keep reminding ourselves what we want to avoid.

What would you like the world to look like in 50 years?

I would like the world to be more communities based with more community supported agriculture networks, more activities locally in streets and local districts, more bartering and exchange (of skills, tools, etc.), more interaction and having fun together (street festivals, clubs, music on street corners, etc.). I would like it to be more community based decision making (in settlements of every size, community budgeting, plannings, etc.) and with community based learning.

I would also like it to be low-tech wherever possible. I don't really support the smart house, self-driving cars and buses, and all of this highly technology based concept of living.
But, technology is useful as far as it helps us to be more autonomous and self-sufficient. For example housing could be more efficient, include more natural materials, with less individual living spaces and be more shared.

I also envisage more community-based living with more shared spaces in addition to individual living quarters, and a lot of more green space, including for parks, but also gardens, orchards, etc. I would like them to be more integrated into settlements and everyday life.

As for work, it would be great to have shorter working days/weeks. This may not be realistic given that I think jobs should be more diverse, meaning that one person should not just do one thing, but several things (for example a teacher should also engage in farming, a researcher engaging in cleaning etc.). So jobs would be more distributed and less clear-cut than today.

REVIEW OF INTERVIEW AND ANALYSIS

The exchange with Edina VADOVICS made possible to question local initiatives and communities in theory and in practice. Here are some concluding remarks and analysis on this week's topic.

Expectations :

- We wanted to know the concrete actions and projects that GreenDependent is carrying and has carried out.
- We were curious about factors and conditions that enable an association to operate in Hungary despite the inherent limitations of the Hungarian political system and context.
- We desired to question the feasibility, efficiency and sustainability of working with and in local communities.
- We were interested in Edina Vadovics personal journey, her researches and involvements.

Remarks :

- Global learnings regarding awareness and communities -

- The bottom-up approach is more about the setting up of groups of people and communities that seek to act at their scale, rather than individual and unrelated behaviours. Communities are places to question mainstream norms, experiment new ones by establishing new long-term habits.
- Communication is one of the main issues in working with numerous and various stakeholders. We need many tools to raise awareness and involve citizens (individual consultations, tips, community events, feedback processes ....)
- Many Hungarian unhabitants in the countryside already have "degrowth behaviours" that should be recognised in line with degrowth, and this should be valued
- We discovered two main methodologies to institute change : the small footprint lifestyle and the behavioral and practice change in groups.

- Edina Vadovics's opinion and what we want to highlight -

- Edina Vadovics highlighted two points on the perception of environmental issues by Hungarian people. They often believe that it is only for the richest. Furthermore, citizens and decision makers aren't thinking in systems.
- The term degrowth can have a repulsive effect. That's why GreenDependent usually uses other concepts such as the Doughnut economic model, strong sustainability, or the concept of "Contraction and Convergence". However, GreenDependent is not rejecting degrowth principles. In fact through their projects they are implementing degrowth ideas and feel part of the degrowth community.
- Greendependent shows a desire for change not to be limited to Budapest.
- According to Edina Vadovics, changing behaviour should not be imposed. It should be the result of working with and for citizens.

New questions / challenges :

- How can these type of organization be extended to other medium-sized towns in Hungary?
- Could we imagine these projects without European funds ? Can communities be fully independent and self-financing ?
- When does the State step in to support and participate into the transition process?

APPENDIX

GreenDependent: https://greendependent.org/-
Zsámboki Biokert Website : https://en.zsambokibiokert.hu/

Projects :

"Changing Behaviour" Project:

- "European project that is funded by the EU 7th Framework Programme (Energy theme).: https://greendependent.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=58%3Achanging-behaviour-szokasaink-megvaltoztatasa&catid=25%3Afuto&Itemid=68&lang=en

"Small Footprint" Project:

- "The overall objective was to improve the climate and energy awareness of Hungarian households and families and to popularize and promote low-carbon lifestyles. This project was the continuation of our "Large family – small footprint" programme of 2009-2010." :https://greendependent.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=150&Itemid=84&lang=en

CIMULACT Project :

- CIMULACT (Horizon 2020) : "CIMULACT had as a main objective to add to the relevance and accountability of European research and innovation – Horizon 2020 as well as national - by engaging citizens and stakeholders in co-creation of research agendas based on real and validated societal visions, needs and demands." : https://intezet.greendependent.org/en/node/225

EnergyNeighbourhoods Project :

- E.ON EnergyNeighbourhoods: " The EnergyNeighbourhoods programme and methodology aims to reveal that enormous results can be achieved both in terms of saving energy and money through changing our behaviour.": https://intezet.greendependent.org/en/node/480

EnergyPROSPECTS Project :

- "EnergyPROSPECTS (PROactive Strategies and Policies for Energy Citizenship Transformation) works with a critical understanding of energy citizenship that is grounded in state-of-the-art SSH insights".https://intezet.greendependent.org/en/energyprospects_en and the project website https://www.energyprospects.eu/

Converge Project :

- EU research consortium project "Rethinking globalisation in the light of Contraction and CONVERGEnce" (CONVERGE) : " In this research project, nine international partner institutions were tasked with 're-thinking globalization' through the concept of "Contraction and Convergence" by applying this idea beyond its original application as a carbon reduction framework.https://intezet.greendependent.org/en/node/121

Resources :

"What is Insulate Britain and what does it want?", BBC, 17/11/2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-58916326

Heiskanen, E et al, "Low-carbon communities as a context for individual behavioural change", *Energy Policy*, 2009: http://www.klimaklub.greendependent.org/kutatasi_eredmenyek/LowCarbonCommunities.pdf

Vadovics, E, Fahy, F, Goggins, G. (eds.) (2019) The ENERGISE Project Summary Handbook : Involving Households in Energy Change. ENERGISE - European Network for Research, Good Practice and Innovation for Sustainable Energy, Deliverable No.7.13,pp4-5,10-15:http://www.energise-project.eu/sites/default/files/content/ENERGISE_D7.13-ProjectSummaryonline_final%20spreads.pdf

Vadovics, E., & Wittmayer, J.M. (Eds.). (2017). *Social Innovation and Sustainable Consumption: Research and Action for Societal Transformation* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315201559

Vadovics E, Milton S. and the CONVERGE Project Team, 2013. Case Studies ('initiatives) Illustrating Contraction and Convergence, Equity within Limits in Theory and Practice, Background Paper to complement CONVERGE Deliverable 33. GreenDependent Institute, Hungary.
: https://intezet.greendependent.org/documents/CONVERGE_BackgroundPaper_ebook_EquityWithinLimits_doublepage.pdf