

## Unraveling Institutional Myths: Entrepreneurial Towards Degrowth

In this paper, we explore how entrepreneurs challenge the institutional myth of growth by embracing degrowth in their ventures. Growth is often regarded as an unquestionable societal good, deeply embedded in academic discourses and legitimized by economic models that promote continuous expansion (Schmelzer, 2015). Within entrepreneurship, this growth imperative manifests in the belief that successful entrepreneurs drive economic growth through innovation and expansion (Schumpeter, 1934). However, we argue that growth functions as an institutional myth—an ideal that is widely accepted, rationalized, but rarely questioned (Amis, Mair, & Munir, 2020). Despite increasing awareness of the environmental and social costs of continuous growth, it remains deeply entrenched in both theory and practice.

Degrowth offers a counter-narrative, advocating for a deliberate downscaling of production and consumption to enhance ecological health and societal well-being (Schneider, Kallis, & Martinez-Alier, 2010). Yet, the question remains: can entrepreneurship, traditionally synonymous with growth, be reimagined to serve a degrowth agenda? How can individual entrepreneurs challenge the pervasive growth myth while creating viable ventures? This paper addresses this gap by examining how entrepreneurs use degrowth principles to reshape their business models and challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions of growth. Specifically, we ask: how do entrepreneurs challenge the institutional myth of growth, and what processes enable them to enact degrowth in practice?

To answer this, we conducted an inductive, qualitative study involving 50 entrepreneurs and members of post-growth organizations, alongside observational data. Our findings reveal that entrepreneurs must first engage in significant self-work to disentangle their identities from the myth of growth. Drawing on institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) and effectuation theory (Sarasvathy, 2001), we show that this process is not merely about changing business practices but about redefining personal and professional identities. Entrepreneurs must first develop cognitive and embodied reflexivity to recognize how deeply growth ideals are ingrained in their sense of self.

The first form of this self-work is awareness work, where entrepreneurs become conscious of how growth has influenced their values and behaviors. This extends Lawrence and Phillips' (2019) call for more attention to reflexivity in institutional work by showing how personal identity transformation is essential in challenging societal myths. Entrepreneurs in our study recount moments of introspection where they question the necessity of growth and recognize the dissonance between their values and the prevailing growth narrative. This awareness work is critical because it sets the foundation for more disruptive forms of self-work.

Disruptive self-work, the second form, involves actively rejecting the behaviors and assumptions tied to the growth myth. Entrepreneurs must redefine success, moving away from traditional metrics like profit maximization and scalability toward values such as sufficiency and sustainability. This expands upon the concept of institutional contradictions (Seo & Creed, 2002), demonstrating that the process of disentangling from institutional myths requires a fundamental rethinking of what constitutes success. By cultivating "enoughness", these entrepreneurs resist the

pervasive narrative that more is always better, challenging the growth myth on both personal and business levels.

Beyond self-work, we introduce the concept of effectuating work, which builds on Sarasvathy's (2001) effectuation theory. While Sarasvathy shows how entrepreneurs create markets in the absence of predictive models, we extend this to the societal level, where entrepreneurs build ventures that do not aim for growth but instead focus on sufficiency and ecological sustainability. Entrepreneurs engaged in effectuating work are not merely reacting to market opportunities; they are actively designing business models that challenge the very foundations of the current economic system. This work contributes to entrepreneurship literature by offering a novel mode of entrepreneurial action—one that prioritizes ecological and social well-being over growth.

The contributions of this paper significantly enhance prior work in institutional theory and entrepreneurship. While existing studies on institutional work focus on collective actors or large-scale movements to challenge societal myths (e.g., Wijen & Ansari, 2007), we highlight the role of individual entrepreneurs in driving change from the ground up. By centering the processes of self-work and effectuating work, this research provides a new lens through which to view how institutional myths can be disrupted on a micro-level. We extend Lawrence and Suddaby's (2006) theory of institutional work by showing that the work of challenging societal myths like growth requires a personal transformation—something not previously emphasized in the literature. Moreover, we advance Sarasvathy's (2001) effectuation theory by demonstrating how it can be applied beyond market creation to the construction of alternative social imaginaries that reject growth as a fundamental principle.

For sustainability scholarship, the implications are profound. Our findings offer a detailed account of how degrowth can be enacted through entrepreneurship, challenging the conventional wisdom that entrepreneurship must be tied to economic expansion. This research shows how entrepreneurs can play a pivotal role in advancing sustainability by creating ventures that operate within ecological limits and prioritize well-being over profit. The study provides a clear pathway for how businesses can not only survive but thrive in a degrowth-oriented economy, offering a concrete alternative to the dominant growth narrative.

In conclusion, this paper demonstrates that challenging the institutional myth of growth requires both personal and professional transformation. Entrepreneurs who engage in degrowth not only reject the pervasive growth myth but also reimagine entrepreneurship itself as a force for sustainability. By engaging in self-work and effectuating work, these entrepreneurs provide a real-world model for how degrowth can be practically implemented, contributing to ongoing discussions in institutional theory, entrepreneurship, and sustainability.