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Growing Pains Won't Go Away: The Trouble with Sustainable Development

The light turns green, and dozens of cyclists pour through the intersection—wave after wave of everyday people, dressed in everyday attire, making their routine trips to and from work. This is rush hour in Copenhagen, Denmark—one of the so-called greenest cities in Europe, and a place that some consider the Mecca of sustainable transportation. This is no accident. Through a concerted effort over the past few decades, Copenhagen has increased bike ridership to a point where few places in the world can compete, save perhaps the Netherlands. Cycling accounts for 28% of all the trips to, from, and within the city, and an astounding 49% of commutes to and from work and school.¹ But as wonderful and progressive as this might seem, it serves only to hide the ugly truth: Copenhagen is not a sustainable city, and it is not making progress towards becoming one. And if Copenhagen isn't sustainable, what city is?



¹ City Of Copenhagen, 2019. "The Bicycle Account 2018"

Cycling is one of the primary modes of transportation in Copenhagen, but it hasn't replaced car traffic. (Image courtesy of Dr. Louise through Bikecopenhagen.dk)

I happened upon an interesting statistic recently: between 2002 and 2008 the percentage of car-owning households in Copenhagen increased from 44% to 50%, and road traffic volumes also grew noticeably.² More recently, traffic growth has stabilized, but car ownership continues to increase—a problem, considering that a significant part of a car's environmental impact comes from its production.³ It's hard not to wonder: why, in a city so motivated to promote cycling, is this happening? Shouldn't car ownership and use be decreasing? According to Karl Krähmer, a sustainability scholar and research fellow at the university of Turin, Italy, the answer lies in Copenhagen's obsession with urban and economic growth.

Growth, and its relationship to sustainability in particular, has long been a topic of debate in academic circles. One early and influential study took place in the 1970s, when a group of researchers at MIT examined the possibility for sustained growth using a computer model. Their results, published in 1972 as the book *The Limits to Growth*, showed that continued expansion of resource consumption would lead to global disaster sometime in the mid-21st century. The model didn't even account for climate change. Since then, the contrary relationship between growth and sustainability has been somewhat obscured. The 1987 Brundtland Report from the UN's World Commission on Environment and Development proposed and popularized the concept of "sustainable development" or "green growth," which claims that economic growth does not always equate to increased resource consumption, and that the two can be "decoupled"

² Næss et. al., 2011. "On their road to sustainability?"

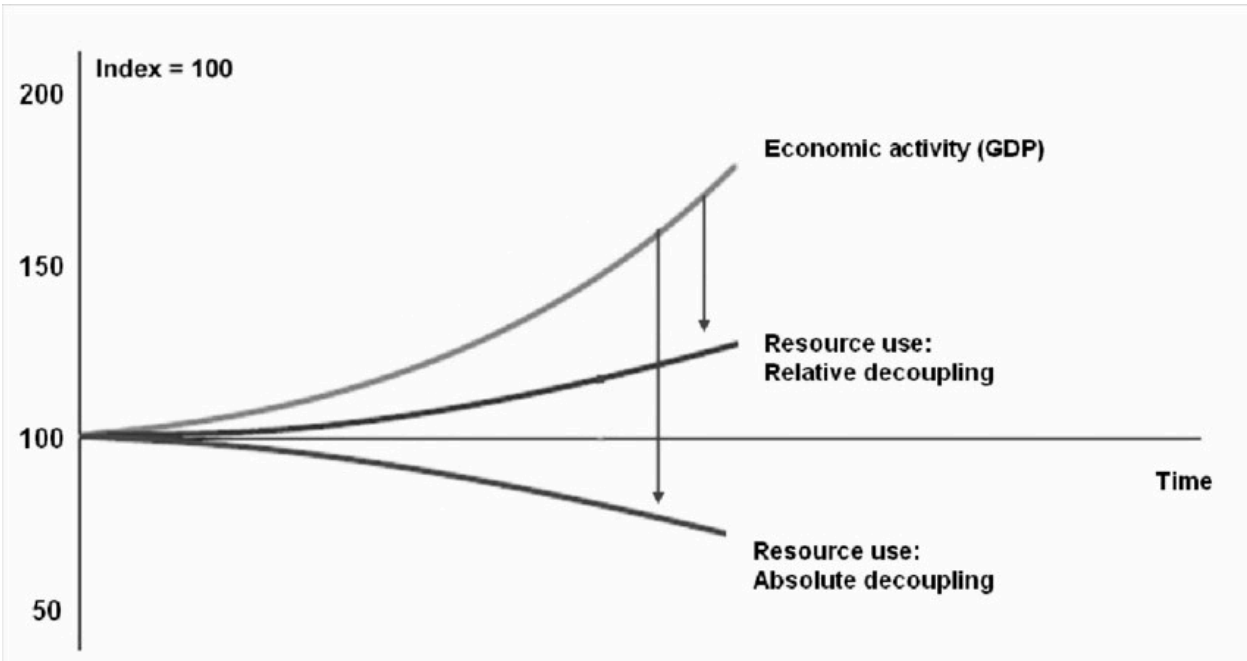
³ Krähmer, 2021. "Are green cities sustainable?"

from one another, thereby avoiding ecological disaster. This belief has become the baseline for the vast majority of modern sustainability initiatives, including in Copenhagen. Unfortunately, it is a myth.

Absolute decoupling (where growth continues even as ecological impacts decline) has rarely been observed empirically. Where it does seem to have occurred, according to research in 2019 and 2020, it can usually be explained by the process of externalization—wherein negative impacts are moved to another place (often a poorer country) instead of actually reduced.^{4,5} Far more common and believable is the occurrence of relative decoupling, where gains in efficiency make it possible to achieve the same amount of new growth with less additional resource use, though the total environmental impact still increases. This is what's happening in Copenhagen. The percentage of bicycle trips may be increasing, but because of growth in the population and urban land area, that doesn't mean the total number of car trips is decreasing. And the problem goes well beyond cars. One of the primary sustainability goals in many cities is to improve the energy efficiency of buildings, an idea which falls victim to the same issue of relative decoupling: any one-time gains in efficiency will be counteracted by the additional energy demands from new construction.

⁴ Hickel and Kallis, 2020. "Is green growth possible?"

⁵ Parrique et. al., 2019. "Decoupling debunked"



The problem with growth: absolute decoupling is likely impossible, and relative decoupling still leads to increased resource use. (Image courtesy of Carlos Tapia through researchgate.net)

It is clear that in order to achieve true sustainability Copenhagen—and the rest of the world—must abandon the quest for continued growth. But that’s far from a bad thing; indeed, proponents of degrowth thinking maintain that growth is not only unsustainable but simply undesirable.⁶ For example, why would anyone want to spend multiple hours a day driving to and from work, only to spend the money they earn on maintaining their car? Why would anyone want to work forty-plus hours each week at a meaningless job anyway? In a 1930 essay, John Maynard Keynes—the father of laissez faire capitalist economics, no less—predicted that by the time his grandchildren grew up technology would have advanced such that they’d only have to work fifteen hours a week.⁷ Yet even now, for some people in the United States, that fifteen

⁶ Liegey and Nelson, 2020. “Exploring Degrowth: A Critical Guide”

⁷ Keynes, 1932. “Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren (1930)”

hours only yields about \$110. Where did we go wrong?

Moving beyond a growth-oriented mindset opens up many opportunities for positive change. Economies can be relocalized, communities reinvigorated, and working hours reduced, leaving more time for friends, family, and personal pursuits. Fresh, local food can be made available to everyone. And yes, car traffic can and should be reduced, leading to cleaner air, quieter communities, and safer public spaces. Continued growth is not an option, there is no question of that, but a good life for everyone is still well within our grasp.

Sources

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