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**To Grow or not to Grow That is the Question:  
A Critical Assessment of Business Model Frameworks  
Beyond Growth**

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## **Abstract**

The objective of this research is to question the growth orthodoxy of the current economic system. To do so, this thesis makes use of an overarching vision within the planetary boundaries. Decisive growth factors are growth in material throughput, the profit maximization imperative, and our current understanding of prosperity. A business model framework beyond growth meets these growth factors on the organizational level. It synthesizes a review of existing frameworks from the degrowth, post-growth, sufficiency, and steady-state economy literature. The synthesized framework offers clear principles to assess and inspire organizations to act as change agents within the current economic system.

To my dad.

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## List of Abbreviations

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Definition</b>
BfS	Business for Sufficiency
BMBG	Business Model Beyond Growth
BM	Business Model
BMO	Business Model Ontology
CSX	Community Supported Everything
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
SNCs	Successful Non-Growing Companies
SSE	Steady-State Economy
PK	Premium Kollektiv
PSS	Product as a Service System

## Introduction

“The planet we live in is endowed with many kinds of valuable natural resources - including plants, animals, trees, fuels, lands, oceans, and atmosphere” (Seo, 2023, p. 5). Because we live on a planet gifted with resources available to our use, our social and economic system is built on the relationship of taking and giving from and to it. This relationship has been out of balance for quite some time now, and more and more research has evolved around it, looking at our current economic system to cure the problem from its apparent root (Daly, 1993; Jackson, 2009; Paech, 2016; Parrique, 2019). For economics, it is a central quest to establish the best way to ensure maximized welfare not only for the current society but for the current and societies to come, most likely the children and grandchildren of the leading actors of society today. This paper will look at the prospects of our economic system and organizations acting as change agents to illustrate how to reestablish an equilibrium between our culture and our planet.

The current ontology of the economy is that without growth, there will be a recession, and unemployment will be an inevitable consequence (Jackson, 2009). But with continuing growth, the planetary boundaries will be transgressed (Jackson, 2009). Alternative system theories try to answer this growth paradox of our social and economic system by prioritizing societal well-being and deviating from growth centrism (Victor, 2021). To endorse this, growth drivers are identified and critically reflected upon to generate concepts to counteract these. Drivers of growth can, inter alia, be the growth orthodoxy (Victor, 2021), profit maximization imperative (Nesterova, 2020), or our current understanding of prosperity (Jackson, 2009). Concepts suggesting counteracting growthism<sup>1</sup> are, among others, the steady-state economy, the sufficiency economy, and the degrowth or post-growth economy.

Although these system theories have found great attention in research and public debate, the main actors in such a system are scarcely regarded (Joutsenvirta, 2016; Nesterova, 2020). Rindova and Pontikes (2020) point out that organizations highly influence the markets and, therefore, the economic system overall. Identifying growth drivers and constraints and translating them to the organizational level has been practiced before (Jackson, 2009; Nesterova, 2020). Currently, only a few frameworks offer hands-on

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<sup>1</sup> *Growthism* is “the believe that growth is the costless, win-win solution to all problems” (Daly, 2019, p. 9).

insights into the business case and the role of organizations in such a system transformation. There are barely exhaustive guidelines that outline what steps organizations need to take, which principles to follow, and which constraints to alleviate to facilitate organizational behavior while recognizing the planetary boundaries within a capitalistic society. Due to the different perspectives taken in the existing frameworks (setting different foci on production, social, institutional, or economic aspects), they have not holistically been brought together even though they aim at similar goals and consist of similar criteria and principles for organizing. What these models could look like has not been answered sufficiently in either of the named system theories and is therefore consolidated in this paper (Bocken & Short, 2016; Hankammer & Kleer, 2018; Nesterova, 2020).

This paper intends to close the gap between these literature streams, closely connecting criticism of the growth orthodoxy (macroeconomic level) with organizational theory (organizational level) while simultaneously facing potential constraints and drivers fostering or hindering the envisioned future. The relevance of this intent is the envisioning of a real utopia. According to Gümüşay and Reinecke (2022), imagining the future helps to impact it. Different concepts alternative to growthism, like degrowth, post-growth, sufficiency, and steady-state visions, will be discussed. The literature review will distill the most applicable principles into a newly defined overarching vision within the planetary boundaries. This new vision aims to close the gaps between these concepts, combining relevant aspects. In the next step, drivers and constraints to the identified principles are critically discussed, resulting in one important driver: the change agency of organizations. This paper will focus on agency and its bottom-up levers to form social and environmental change in the market and the overall economic system without relying on the transformation to a new one. Different business model frameworks are combined to align organizational activities with the formulated overarching vision, broadening the view towards an inclusive, real-life-applicable notion of a business model beyond growth<sup>2</sup> (BMBG). This framework illustrates a business that aims to create social welfare for today and the future but has no obligation to grow or maximize profits.

The research question this work strives to answer is: *How can an integrative business model framework beyond growth (acting within the planetary boundaries) look like?*

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<sup>2</sup> *Beyond growth* is used as a deviation from the notion of growthism in this paper.

This thesis is not to be understood as a hand guide for businesses on managing a business beyond growth, even though it offers hands-on implications. It is instead a multi-perspective contribution to future studies regarding the organizational and management perspective, bridging it with ecological economics and sustainability sciences, namely sustainable production and consumption. It also aims to bridge the conversations of sufficiency, degrowth steady-state, and post-growth on the organizational level.

The presented work is a conceptual work, making use of the backcasting method. This method is used differently than traditionally by it providing a successive guideline and a red thread throughout the work. The methodology is introduced in the first building block of the thesis, followed by the six steps of backcasting, a literature review, findings, and discussion. Firstly, an overarching vision of a society within the planetary boundaries is created, followed by a map of drivers and constraints to this vision. The third step provides an overview of existing frameworks and compares them. A specification of a synthesized, integrative framework serves as a fourth step. In a fifth and sixth step, this will be contrasted with an exemplary business case to discuss the consistency and feasibility of the integrative framework and generate practical implications for business model innovation. The following part will elaborate on how these steps will be conducted.

## **Methodology**

The perspective of this research is characterized by a West-European cultural background, considering the neo-classical capitalistic norms, and reflects these. The drawn-upon literature is from English, German, and some from French discussions on ecological economy, sustainable production and consumption, and future research. The research makes use of a mixed method and is a conceptual work. This thesis applies the backcasting method amended by Anderson (2001) and Anderson, Bows, and Mander (2009) in a nonconventional way as guidance throughout the thesis. This methodology offers a way to backcast an envisioned future, formulating explicit steps toward it and testing its consistency and feasibility. The six steps of the backcasting method are: 1. Creating an overarching vision, 2. Analysis of past/present drivers and constraints, 3. Specification of desired future (characterizing relevant aspects), 4. Development of future scenarios (that could help achieve the vision), 5. Testing consistency of scenario, and 6. Testing feasibility of scenario. In this thesis, it translates into the following six steps. Firstly, a literature review for system theories *within the planetary boundaries* is

conducted. This review looks at the following concepts: *degrowth*, *post-growth*, *beyond growth*, or concepts discussing a critique of growth in some other way (the italic words have served as search terms). Out of the identified theories, an overarching vision is established. A literature review contemplates criticism by and of the regarded theories to identify drivers and constraints to the dimensions of the vision. In a third step, the state-of-the-art literature on business model frameworks within the overarching vision has been detected via forward- and backward snowballing (the terms *degrowth*, *beyond growth*, *sufficiency*, *post-growth*, *business model framework*, *BM framework for sustainability*, *organizations*, *companies*, and *business* served as search terms). The literature review and the subsequent categorization of principles follow a rather quantitative approach. A categorization of distinctive principles results in a fourth step in the specification of an integrative framework, the business model framework beyond growth (BMBG). In a fifth step, as part of the *discussion*, the consistency of the BMBG is illustrated via a case example. This discussion extends the quantitative categorization by qualitatively illustrating the principles and building a foundation for potential extensions to the model. The data for this contrast consists of a secondary data analysis based on previous research on the business and its website. Though this contrast of BMBG to the case example is not exhaustive, it is supposed to offer a reflection on theoretical and practical implications. Potentially missing principles are then deductively added as a suggestion. The feasibility testing of the framework takes place only sparsely as an outlook; it touches upon the sixth step of the backcasting method. An exhaustive testing would have exceeded the dimension of this thesis.

## **Alternative Economic Systems**

To start this thesis, a thought by Daly, an economist for a steady-state economy, will be introduced. He portrays our ecosystem as a closed and finite system that has no ability to expand, where matter and energy do not enter nor exit (Daly, 1993). Only the sun provides solar energy that enters and exits. Within this ecosystem lies a subsystem: our economy. This receives and emits matter and energy into the larger ecosystem. By transforming matter and energy into waste and giving it back to the environment, we transform low-entropy<sup>3</sup> matter and energy into high-entropy, damaging the larger system, which

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<sup>3</sup> Increasing entropy describes the linear direction of energy and matter from order to disorder.

nutrients us, hence harming our economy likewise (Daly, 1993). The fact that economic growth and material-based consumption are the main factors for this imbalance of sustainability and consumption is often neglected (Jackson, 2009). Since they are so deeply inherent in our current economy, questioning them compels us to question our belief system (Bocken & Short, 2016). A “*tertium non datur*: a third is not given” as Reichel (2017, p. 92) wrote, describes the conditions of the existence of this growth paradox. Research tries to face it by creating a *tertium*, an alternative solution to our current capitalistic system, which has largely been ignored in management, organizational, and entrepreneurship studies (Reichel & Seeberg, 2011). Some argue that technological innovation, green growth, efficiency, and absolute decoupling are the solutions to enable the economy to follow its business-as-usual mentality, relocating the solution development to uncertain variables, like innovation, which can hardly be predicted (Hickel & Kallis, 2020). The idea of growing economically, exalting the gross domestic product (GDP) will, according to Daly, lead humans to become “first pygmies, then Tom Thumbs, then big molecules, then pure spirits” (as cited in Jackson, 2009, p. 77). He claims it would be necessary to become angels to live from an exalted GDP (Jackson, 2009). The relationship between economic growth, sustainability, and societal welfare has been systematically and conceptually studied for over 50 years, aiming to discover a solution beyond this conventional idea of growth and success measurement. (Beckenbach et al., 2012). Research has implicated that economic activities bring forward the growth of quantity flows, for example, raw materials, emissions, or waste, which are the root of resource management issues and the underlying paradox (Seo, 2023). Critical alternatives to our current capitalistic growth system that do not focus on a business-as-usual solution are the steady-state economy, sufficiency economy, post-growth, and degrowth, which will be briefly outlined below. The selected theories build on the deviation or questioning of the necessity of constant growth. This creates a delineation of alternative ideas like green growth and circular economy, as well as decoupling since they embed only little deviation from our current growth ontology. The following section introduces the overarching theories.

### **State-of-the-Art Alternatives**

The delineated theories are shortly mentioned to offer a holistic understanding of existing ideas.

Green growth asserts that continued economic expansion is compatible with the ecology of our planet, as technological change and substitution allow us to decouple GDP growth from resource use and carbon emissions in absolute terms. Even though this is internationally accepted (e.g., policy-making for the SDGs (sustainable development goals)), the empirical evidence on resource use and carbon emissions does not support green growth theory (Hickel & Kallis, 2020; Jackson, 2009). According to Hickel and Kallis (2020), the success of absolute decoupling is lacking evidence, and even if it were helping to downscale carbon emissions, it is improbable to prevent global temperature from rising above 1.5°C.

A similar idea proposed by the circular economy focuses on closed live cycle loops of material usage and cradle-to-cradle principles (Braungart, McDonough & Bollinger, 2007). Even though it is, like green growth, an essential pillar for current policy-making, it builds harshly on the idea of efficient resource management and does not question growthism (Braungart et al., 2007; Parrique, 2019).

### ***Steady-State Economy***

Turning to alternative visions that include criticism of the growth paradigm, Daly's notion of the steady-state economy (SSE) from 1993 is introduced. The steady-state economy builds on the principle that the earth is evolving qualitatively rather than quantitatively (Daly, 1993), envisioning a "global equilibrium" where population and industrial capital would remain stable (Parrique, 2019, p. 174). Daly formulates his vision in an equation of scale: resource throughput = population x resource use/capita (Daly, 1993, p. 814). This scale must remain constant at a level that neither depletes resources beyond planetary limitations nor exceeds its absorptive capacity (Daly, 1993). The concept of circularity is included as well (Kerschner, 2010). His focus on development beyond material growth summarizes his notion of development in "knowledge, organization, technical efficiency, and wisdom" (Daly, 1993, p. 814). The top-down ideals of the vision, which, compared to the degrowth movement (grassroots movement), are somewhat hierarchical and undemocratic, are criticized (Kerschner, 2010).

### ***Degrowth***

Inherent in its name, degrowth focuses on de-growing in materialistic terms, focusing on relational/spiritual development (Parrique, 2019). Due to its diverse, multidimensional history, different definitions exist. Schneider, Kallis, and Martinez-Alier (2010) provide the most prominent definition, long after the birth of degrowth in 1986 by Nicolas

Georgescu-Roegen (Kerschner, 2010; Parrique, 2019). Degrowth is understood as “an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long-term” (Schneider et al., 2010, p. 511). To depower one common prejudice, sustainable degrowth does not imply that degrowth should persist indefinitely. It should be considered an imminent step towards a worldwide equitable Steady-State Economy (Kerschner, 2010). “*Political Economy of Degrowth*” by Parrique (2019) provides a meticulous analysis of the history of degrowth, from Spain to Quebec, terminologies, and micro- and macroeconomic implications. To integrate three core values according to Parrique’s findings, he names autonomy, sufficiency, and care for a degrowth economy (Parrique, 2019). Jackson (2009) designates three macroeconomic dimensions that play a crucial role: i) structural evolution towards service economy, ii) ecological investments, and iii) working politics as stabilizing.

### ***Sufficiency Economy***

Sufficiency suggests reducing consumption for affluent social groups, who, without a loss of well-being, can improve the well-being of less affluent regions by providing resource availability and carbon allowances (Niessen & Bocken, 2021). Sufficiency has already found great implementation on the national level in Thailand, where the Thai King Rama IX promoted a sufficiency philosophy of moderation, reasonableness, and resilience (Kantabutra & Punnakitikashem, 2020). Not only is sufficiency discussed as a policy matter or economically feasible idea, but it brings forward a decisive characteristic, the social perspective, discussing sufficient and qualitative consumption (Bocken & Short, 2016; Freudenreich & Schaltegger, 2020; Hankammer, 2021). The sufficiency debate is often closely connected to the degrowth debate and vice versa. On the organizational level, it is rather a subsystem of degrowth (Hankammer, 2021; Lorek & Fuchs, 2013).

### ***Post-growth***

Post-growth is a concept that questions the growth paradigm but focuses on growth beyond GDP (Fioramonti, 2017; Parrique, 2019; Strunz & Schindler, 2018). Often the term is used summarizing concepts deviating the growth orthodoxy. In this study it is used as a concept, similar to degrowth but not as an overall description of post growth thought schools. The post-growth theory argues there are alternative ways to measure progress and well-being that go beyond pure monetary economic indicators (Fioramonti, 2017). It proposes shifting the focus from endless GDP growth to addressing issues such as

inequality, social capital, environmental sustainability, and subjective well-being (Fioramonti, 2017; Strunz & Schindler, 2018). Post-growth differentiates from degrowth in one critical aspect, namely in the redefinition of growth focusing on a deviation from progress measurement (alternatives to the GDP) instead of reducing economic activity (Parrique, 2019). Parrique (2019) argues that post-growth combines the steady-state economy and the degrowth debate.

### **Creating an Overarching Vision**

In the next step of the backcasting method, an overarching vision develops around growth-driving principles. This vision evolved from the above-introduced thought schools, distilling three dimensions, which are closely intertwined and read as follows.

#### ***A New Understanding of Growth***

Materialistic growth is finite, and therefore, resource management is accordingly. Growth shifts from materialistic consumption and production towards a spiritual/relational development of humans towards a circular use of resources within the closed system of our planetary boundaries (Parrique, 2019). The SSE and degrowth debate often omit Neo-Malthusian according to Kerschner (2010); therefore, it needs to find a concrete inclusion in this overarching vision, considering just resource management. Whether the economy itself still grows is dependent on the hemisphere (developing - vs. affluent regions & overall population size), the resource efficiency (absolute decoupling, efficiency), and physical depletion quotas<sup>4</sup> (Jackson, 2009; Kerschner, 2010; Niessen & Bocken, 2021). Another solution from resource management is the optimal economic growth rate, similar to the optimal growth of population size (Koopmans, 1963). According to Koopman (1963), it aims to strike a balance between economic development, ecological sustainability, and social well-being.

Therefore, one aspect of the overarching vision must be sustainable product design and production for efficiency, sufficient resource management, and circularity. The aspect of circularity is inspired by the Cradle-to-Cradle discussion and finds repeated mention in the overarching theories (Daly, 1993; Jackson, 2009; Parrique, 2019).

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<sup>4</sup> To explain the latter, physical depletion quotas come from resource management discussions and intend to ensure the sustainable use of resources by setting limits on the amount of the resource that can be extracted or consumed within a given time (Kerschner, 2010). The concept revolves around understanding the carrying capacity of the planet, which is the amount that can be harvested or consumed without degrading the resource or its ecosystem, hence overexploitation and loss of biodiversity are prevented (Daly, 1993; Kerschner, 2010).

Summarizing the following upcoming principles seem crucial: an optimal growth/non-growth rate within the planetary boundaries (Kerschner, 2010; Koopmans, 1963; Parrique, 2019), production and product design according to circularity and sufficiency (Braungart et al., 2007) and resource efficiency (Jackson, 2009).

### ***Deviation from Profit Maximization Imperative***

Since the capitalistic market logic forces most organizations to increase returns and profit to serve their shareholders, the second dimension of this vision is the profit maximization derivative (PMD) (Hankammer, 2021). There is an intimate link between profit maximization and economic growth (Johanisova, Crabtree & Franková 2013). Therefore, this second dimension is obligatory to follow the first dimension of *a new understanding of growth*. This does not imply that organizations may or should not raise profits anymore. It evolves around the idea of bringing money back to being a “means to an end” again and not only an end in itself, which is also discussed in the degrowth debate (Parrique, 2019, p. 644). Instead, the focus of money lies on how profits are generated, whether from a service provision or materialistic resource consumption. Hinton supports the idea by stating that markets not focusing on profit allow post-growth organizations to flourish in ways that “for-profit markets do not” (Hinton, 2021, p. 4). Not-for-profit emphasizes the possibility of organizations creating social welfare if freed from the profit maximization imperative (Nesterova, 2020). A subsystem of this dimension is the questioning of consumption, satisfying needs rather than creating wants, and the extinction of aggressive marketing. Therefore, we need to define a new business model ontology.

### ***Redefining Prosperity***

A new definition of economic prosperity and values is introduced as a third and less graspable dimension. This task will be addressed through the institutional lens, meaning the embeddedness of social rules that guide, enable, and constrain actors’ behavior in an institution (Hodgson, 2004). Though this evaluation does not aim to introduce a new definition of prosperity, Jackson, who meticulously elaborates upon it in his book “*Prosperity Without Growth*”, depicts a rough idea. The work explains prosperity as the “ability to flourish: physically, psychologically and socially” (Jackson, 2009, p. 86). Human improvement should be understood as decoupled from economic growth (Victor, 2021), fostering spiritual and relational development as mentioned in degrowth and the SSE (Daly, 1993; Parrique, 2019). This underlines the importance of deviating from material growth towards developing intellectual property and technical efficiency to find

social status (Jackson, 2009). The social logic of consumerism is driving material consumption and production viciously further (Jackson, 2009). Based on the usage by Jackson (2009, p. 10), the social logic of consumerism describes the notion that our social system is built on “a circularity of novelty and fright” to guarantee social status via the consumption of material products. Consumerism has an inherent paradox, enabling its culture to stay alive “by failing to satisfy” (Jackson, 2009, p. 112). This goes along with the value focus of Western societies (Jackson, 2009). In ecological economy, Goddard et al. (2019, p. 8) speak of a required escape from the logic of economistic values “underpinning every dimension of life and nature”. According to Cleveland (2002), the value system of economies today might often be described as utilitarianism, which completely ignores spiritual aspects of flourishing and human life. Rather, a renewed public consciousness of sustainability, equity, and care should result in creative, sustainable solutions (Goddard et al., 2019). In Buddhistic cultures, self-reflexivity towards one’s own needs brings the economy to a state where massive marketing and need insinuations are not prevailing, but customers receive products and services they substantially need (Ehrnström-Fuentes & Biese, 2023). Neo-classical economic values (utilitarianism) need reevaluation, moving towards a value system of cooperation & collaboration (individual & collective freedom), “autonomy” and “care” (Parrique, 2019, p. 252).

Another perspective, barely touched upon by the alternative thought schools, is to consider non-human life. Nature/non-humans should not only be seen as a service provider but as a variable that needs guarding for its own wealth, warranting a “well-being in coexistence” (Bonnedahl & Heikkurinen, 2018, p. 8).

### **Drivers and Constraints**

According to the backcasting method, this section will introduce constraints and drivers (solutions) of the past and the present that hinder or foster factors carved out in the overarching vision. A potential driver will be introduced to each constraint, respectively. The drivers will not be considered comprehensively and do not demand a complete argument. It is instead a depiction of existing discussions and critiques.

### ***Unemployment***

*A new understanding of growth* is quite menacing to our current economic system, capitalism. Since the core values of capitalism seem to be growth and profit

maximization, which are both disputed by the overarching vision, multiple constraints exist. One of the most stated criticisms of post-growth logics is unemployment due to a compulsory recession (Van den Berg & Antal, 2014; Victor, 2010). Jackson (2009) tries to alleviate this argument by blaming the system failure of capitalism. Strategies that prevail in the post-growth literature have evolved to counteract the constraint of unemployment. A working time reduction, shared working hours, and the structural shift from high to low-productivity sectors like education, volunteer work, or nursing might be implemented to halt unemployment (Jackson, 2009; Paech, 2016; Strunz & Schindler, 2018; Van den Berg & Antal, 2014). These suggestions have found positive echoes in the degrowth and post-growth debate and might, therefore, translate into a driver of preventing unemployment. Other more radical options have also been discussed, like introducing a citizen's income (Jackson, 2009).

### ***Resource Management***

If the economy stops growing, not only will jobs be lost, but a decrease in production might decrease the availability of products fulfilling our basic needs like food and shelter (Jackson, 2009). This might end in high inequality and suffering by less powerful nations (Jackson, 2009). A clear definition of resource management needs to be established to offer organizations a scope of moving space and to manage socially equitable wealth creation and resource consumption (Seo, 2023). This includes clear regulations for resource use & distribution, emission scopes, and physical depletion quotas, as mentioned before (Jackson, 2009; Kerschner, 2010). If institutions do not provide these, it is hard for organizations to act within the planetary boundaries, survive in the market, and satisfy customers' needs.

### ***Business Model Ontology***

Turning towards the organizational level, the *deviation from the profit maximization imperative*, we are confronted with the neoclassical theory, which has shaped the organizational logic for over 70 years, shaping the understanding of business success solely in monetary returns to shareholders via profit increases (Stubbs & Cocklin, 2008; Upward & Jones, 2016). Upward and Jones (2016) argue that profit-oriented BMs impede sustainability for many organizations. Hankammer (2021) even questions whether business models and degrowth are compatible concepts in a capitalistic society.

These deeply rooted assumptions shape organizations in a normative way (Spicer & Sewell, 2010). They manifest in the current business model ontology (BMO), initially

termed by Osterwalder, who describes organizations as profit-normative with weak sustainability preferences (Upward & Jones, 2016). The ontology for Strong Sustainability Business Models (SSBMO), in its core, inclusive of the BMO, challenges the abovementioned. Additional factors omitted by the BMO, like social, ecological, long-term, cultural, and relational aspects of operating a business, are introduced and included (Upward & Jones, 2016). Out of this ontology, many new, alternative BM frameworks have evolved. The new BM ontology should also dismantle the normative idea of the growth orthodoxy as well as the imperative to maximize profit, which is, according to Reichel, rather culturally induced than economically necessary (Reichel, 2017). The minimum condition organizations should provide is the ability “to pay off all capital costs ... thus having an economic profit of zero” (Reichel, 2017, p. 2). Moving beyond this is called excess profit, which is in itself neutral. As soon as it is the origin of environmental pollution and social exploitation, it becomes problematic and should not be rewarded by shareholders' interests. Today, some firms already see right-sizing profits as a valuable tool to deviate from the profit maximization narrative (Liesen et al., 2015).

### ***Lack of Case Examples***

Without case examples, organizations are missing real utopias for envisioning a deviation from the profit and growth paradigm (Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022). The case studies by Ehrnström-Fuentes and Biese (2023) perfectly exemplify this. An interviewee from an organization following an alternative way of economizing noted that “...it is a bit scary. Your economy and everything is so different that there is a need to have some sort of collective where you feel coherence, the feeling of being part of a pattern” (Ehrnström-Fuentes & Biese, 2023, p. 1755). This power of pioneering and leadership mirrors the research of Gümüşay & Reinecke (2022), who claim that envisioning an alternative future (seeing examples of how organizations can work differently) is necessary to be able to act upon it (Tiba, Van Rijnsoever & Hekkert, 2020). Organizations inherit a duality in the sustainability transition. They are subject to transformative changes and likewise can be leaders for sustainability transitions in the economy and society (Schaltegger et al., 2023). Rindova and Pontikes (2020) agree that organizations act as catalysts for change by exerting different forms of agency that shape markets over time. In conclusion, organizations inherit a transformative power and, hence, are critical drivers for markets beyond material growth and can use organizational logic to shape organizational change towards sustainability (Schweiger & Kump, 2018).

### ***Investments***

Another constraint, not elaborated upon often, may be a necessary change in investment culture. Capital reaches organizations that grow fast and offer promising returns (Burlingham, 2016; Jackson, 2009). Especially for entrepreneurs, the pressure from investors is high since increasing production decreases the price per unit, and amortization and innovation costs can be paid off (Beckenbach et al., 2012). Jackson (2009) does not defuse this critique but argues that for investments to be ecologically sustainable, the return cannot be as high and will be over a more extended time as we are used to. This raises the question of a new ontology of investors, which needs to enable the *deviation from the profit imperative* for investment motivation. Instead of only investing for high returns, investors might support organizations that seek right-sizing profits and maximize social and environmental welfare (Jackson, 2009).

### ***Revenue Models and Sustainable Consumption***

A sub-constraint of the *deviation from profit maximization imperative* is the paradox of growth and sustainable consumption. If organizations question consumption, they most likely must reduce production throughput. This is the case until they produce products or services that foster sustainable consumption<sup>5</sup> and - consumption patterns. Alternative revenue models already exist, superseding revenue models that rely on unsustainable consumption. Their implementation (e.g., product as service systems (PSS)) offers showcase examples, illustrating what is possible and offering a hands-on guideline for imitators (Tiba et al., 2020).

### ***Social Logic of Consumerism***

As mentioned before, the social logic of consumerism is another constraint towards sustainable consumption. Without variety and novelty, offered to consumers by often aggressive marketing, need suggestions and social conformance, humans lose their social status and prestige (Bocken & Short, 2016; Ehrnström-Fuentes & Biese, 2023; Jackson, 2009). Consumers seek a continuous increase of performance guaranteed to them by technological innovation. This drives innovation into an obligation to grow to fulfill marketing-based “wants” rather than actual needs (Bocken & Short, 2016, p. 59). To name one lever against overconsumption from the consumer perspective, “alternative

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<sup>5</sup> *Sustainable consumption* is used in this thesis as consumption that enables “wellbeing in coexistence” (Bonnedahl & Heikkurinen, 2018, p. 8).

hedonism” suggests leaving conventional markets and, therefore, traditional hedonism behind, turning towards hedonism of non-material kinds (Jackson, 2009, p. 88). Jackson (2009), on the other hand, draws policy-making into responsibility to create incentives to diminish the social logic of consumerism. Paech (2016) supports the role of the government and criticizes subsidies that flow into the wrong areas. He claims the subsidy system and financial taxes require revision and reorganization to benefit other sectors like education, social services, and the health system (Paech, 2016).

### ***Success Measurement***

A less graspable constraint is the current multitude of values and normative worth, shaping our success measurement. Capitalism is understood as an omnipotent power that “takes away strength from other initiatives” (Houtbeckers, 2018, p. 260) and is solely assessed by monetary values, leaving out different perspectives of prosperity (Jackson, 2009). The GDP, as paradoxically also prescribed by its ‘creator’ Simon Kuznets, is neither sufficient in accounting for the success or wealth of a nation nor to account for economic actions, needless to say, for sustainable factors (Jackson, 2009; Victor, 2010). The degrowth debate assumes that despite GDP decreasing, quality of life can still improve (Mastini, Kallis, and Hickel, 2021). Valuable alternatives already exist which could form an extension to the GDP. One example, among others, is the Index of Sustainable and Economic Welfare (ISEW), which extends the GDP by the omitted factors of inequality, unpaid labor, natural resource depletion, or the emergence of environmental problems (Van den Berg & Antal, 2014). It could function as a driver to acknowledge the activities that gain smaller profits but take great care to prevent, for example, natural resource depletion. It is crucial to highlight that the ISEW is not exhaustively reflected in this paper. One limitation of ISEW, for example, is that it does not account for leisure time, therefore omitting a key factor for happiness (Van den Berg & Antal, 2014). Other alternatives to GDP are the sustainable or green(ed) GDP (Van den Berg & Antal, 2014).

## **Business Model Frameworks**

The previous section detected that organizations play a significant role in influencing the market, hence the economy, as change agents. Therefore, this section attempts to transmit the overarching vision to the microeconomic level, the business case. A selection of state-

of-the-art BM frameworks within the scope of the overarching vision will be introduced. The selection process is supposed to have detected all relevant frameworks.

### **State-of-the-Art**

To make the selection process transparent, frameworks that have been in the closer selection but were missing the explicitness of the “profit maximization deviation” and clear principles or are the basis for other included frameworks are mentioned. The following have been omitted: Bocken, Short, Rana and Evans (2014) (basis), Bocken & Short (2016) (basis), Freudenreich & Schaltegger (2020) (too broad), Hankammer & Kleer (2018) (no PMD), Kunze & Becker (2015) (no PMD), Stubbs & Cocklin (2008) (only two case studies), Reichel (2017) (too broad) and Wells (2016) (no PMD). After introducing each, a comparison will present an overview of single principles from the respective frameworks.

### ***Social Enterprises***

As a rather overarching framework, Johanisova et al. concern themselves with social enterprises in their study from 2013. They make an essential contribution to integrating social enterprises in the degrowth debate. Houtbeckers (2018, p. 257) confirms this inclusion by framing “social enterprises as beyond growth organizing in the diverse economy”. Social enterprises are cooperative movements, insurance societies, various non-profit organizations, and foundations that serve the community's needs and the public interest instead of profit maximization (Johanisova et al., 2013). The core focus lies on democratic governance and the *deviation from the profit maximization imperative*. Product/-ion factors are not touched upon (Houtbeckers, 2018; Johanisova et al., 2013).

### ***Successful Non-Growing Companies***

Liesen et al. (2015) focus on the terminology of successful non-growing companies (SNCs), therefore circumventing the terminology post-growth or similar. In their case study, they look at companies from German-speaking countries that decided not to grow but focus on value creation and right-sizing profits. Some even deny pursuing growth in profits and reject the sales growth imperative. Instead, they aim to increase the quality of products, work, and life (Liesen et al., 2015). As a result of the case study, they categorize their principles within management strategies, internal company processes, and financial indicators. Companies focus on market-related components and follow niche positioning, service provision, and cost reduction in efficiency.

### ***Degrowth in Business***

Khmara and Kronenberg (2018) established a broader, simplified framework based upon the “SNCs” by Liesen et al. (2015), “small giants” by Burlingham (2016), and the “sufficiency-driven BM” by Bocken and Short (2016). The distilled findings generally focus on an alternative understanding of businesses for solving environmental and social problems and deviating from the profit focus. They form a framework comprising value principles and social movements, portraying a committed vision for alternative economizing. Content about production and recourse management is given only minorly and not too explicit.

### ***Community Supported Agriculture/ Everything***

Bloemmen, Bobulescu, Le and Vitari (2015) formulated a BM framework for Community Supported Agriculture. Though this belongs to a different discussion than the post-growth debate, they base their elaboration on the founding father of degrowth, Georgescu-Roegen, fulfilling the criteria of the overarching vision. This concept is also being referred to by other degrowth researchers. The Community Supported Everything (CSX) approach (very similar to the one for agriculture) focuses on searching quality versus quantity and offering a lifestyle of integrating social and natural behavior into businesses (Bloemmen et al., 2015). Profits are seen as a means to an end (Bloemmen et al., 2015).

### ***Degrowth Business Model***

Nesterova (2020) contributes an essential and holistic research on degrowth BM. In the work, an explicit framework for a degrowth economy is based on the research of Johanisova et al. (2013), Khmara & Kronenberg (2018), and Wells (2016).

She divides the distilled principles into three main categories: the environment, people & non-humans, and the deviation from the “profit maximization imperative” (Nesterova, 2020, p. 4). The work’s suggestions explicitly emphasize the deviation from the profit maximization imperative and argue that this imperative hinders organizations from following and supporting the degrowth movement. Alongside this focus, the work offers clear guidelines for production/product design and explicitly includes the consideration of non-human life. Therefore, the framework is a crucial pillar for this thesis.

### ***State-of-the-Art Framework***

Hankammer (2018) bases his research upon the work of Bloemmen et al. 2015, Nesterova 2020, Houtbeckers 2018, Johanisova et al. 2013, Khmara and Kronenberg 2018, Liesen et al., 2015, and others that haven't been included in this selection. In his synthesized framework, different versions of corporate success, based on social and environmental values like collaboration, are mentioned to foster a new form of organizing according to the degrowth principles (Hankammer, 2021). The framework not only functions as a BM, focusing on production and product design, but also as a degrowth and sufficiency ambassador, promoting the principle to generate societal acceptance of these visions (Hankammer, 2021).

### ***Postgrowth Business Model***

Hinton published a rather exhaustive framework built on the work of Bocken & Short (2016), Hankammer & Kleer (2018), Johanisova et al. (2013), Laloux (2014), Nesterova (2020), and others from the post-growth literature. The work focuses on the relationship to profit of these frameworks and will, therefore, be a crucial framework in the categorization. Hinton (2021) summarizes the identified principles in five dimensions: relationship-to-profit, incorporation structure, governance structure, strategy, and size and geographical scope. The evolved framework takes a rather holistic approach, including the value, product, production, accounting, sufficiency, consideration of non-human life, employees, and stakeholder perspective (Hinton, 2021). The study pioneered in including legal forms (incorporation structure), summarizing the tendency to generally move from publicly traded shareholder companies towards cooperative structures (Hinton, 2021). As a more permanent but highly influential dimension, Hinton (2021) puts the relationship to profit as the foundation of a hierarchy for the five dimensions.

### ***Business for Sufficiency Framework***

Niessen and Bocken established a framework in 2021 that builds upon the two previously described frameworks (Hankammer, 2021; Hinton, 2021) and other works from the sufficiency discussion. Instead of focusing on the categorization of the other frameworks, they rely on the waste hierarchy: refuse, reduce, rethink, and the four lessens: less clutter, less speed, less distance, and less market (Niessen & Bocken, 2021). The distilled business for sufficiency framework (BfS) consists of elements built around the principles of sufficiency economy and circularity, highly focusing on product design and education on sufficiency (Niessen & Bocken, 2021).

### ***Social Enterprises for Degrowth***

Parrique (2019) argues that firms should adhere to three main characteristics according to the degrowth perspective. Firstly, firms should prioritize being not-for-profit, focusing on generating revenue through the sale of goods or services, but not making profit their primary goal. Instead, businesses should have a mission-driven approach with a socio-ecological aim (Parrique, 2019). Secondly, firms should strive to be small in power, size, and scale, allowing democratic management, preventing monopolies, abusive power, and detachment from socio-ecological considerations. Lastly, most firms should be collectively owned as cooperatives, ensuring a fair distribution of ownership and governance (Parrique, 2019). This cooperative model offers numerous advantages such as equity, democracy, cooperation, autonomy, conviviality, labor-intensive practices, and enhanced performance (Parrique, 2019, p. 541)

### **Comparison**

Table 1 outlines a compilation of identified principles from the frameworks illustrated above. These principles are classified into three overarching categories (product, strategy, and structure) and subcategories, inspired by the “form of the firm” by Baecker (2006), to generate an organized overview. The *form of the firm* consists of product (here “design”), technology (here “production”), business, work, corporate culture (here “philosophy”) and communication (Baecker, 2006). Some principles have been summarized into one principle or mentioned several times, depending on the fit of the categorization, though this accounts only for a few. The matrix below shows the frequency of the principles mentioned according to the personal categorization of the writer; a detailed elaboration can be found in the appendix (Table 1a).

TABLE 1

## Overview of Existing Frameworks

	PRINCIPLES	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
PRODUCT	<b>DESIGN</b>									
	Circularity		X			X		X	X	X
	Repairability		X	X		X		X	X	X
	Frugality		X	X		X		X	X	X
	Quality		X	X	X					X
	Durability		X	X		X		X	X	X
	Sufficiency		X			X	X	X	X	X
	<b>PRODUCTION</b>									
	Renewable energy use		X					X	X	X
	Local		X				X	X	X	X
	Regional		X	X		X			X	X
	Efficiency		X	X		X		X	X	
	Technology						X			
	STRATEGY	<b>BUSINESS</b>								
<b>REVENUE MODELS</b>										
Share, repair, lease				X		X	X	X	X	X
Product as a Service				X				X	X	
Second Hand								X	X	
<b>MARKET STRATEGY</b>										
Customer relationship				X				X		
Size			X		X	X		X		
Positioning				X						
<b>WORK</b>										
Work environment				X		X	X	X		X
<b>PHILOSOPHY</b>										
Collaboration			X		X		X	X		X
Cooperation					X		X			X
Deviation from productivism							X			
Consideration of non-human life					X	X		X		
Conviviality					X			X		
Other values		X	X		X	X	X	X		X
Profit maximisation derivative										
Money= means to an end			X	X	X			X	X	X
Shift in success measurement							X	X		
Degrowth and profit deviation		X	X	X	X	X			X	
<b>COMMUNICATION</b>										
<b>MARKETING</b>										
Moderating consumption						X			X	
No aggressive marketing						X				
<b>EDUCATION</b>										
Sufficiency/degrowth							X		X	
Consumption									X	
Knowledge sharing							X	X	X	X
STRUCTURE	Democratic ownership	X				X	X	X		X
	Democratic decision making	X	X			X	X	X		X
	Community embeddedness			X	X	X	X	X		X
	Cooperation				X	X				X

*Explanatory note.* Literature: 1. Johanisova et al., 2013; 2. Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018; 3. Liesen et al., 2015; 4. Bloemmen et al., 2015 5. Nesterova, 2020; 6. Hankammer, 2021; 7. Hinton, 2021; 8. Niessen & Bocken, 2021; 9. Parrique, 2019

Deriving from the introduced state-of-the-art research, the above-depicted matrix helps identify insights. Certain principles, like a shift in values, deviation from growth and profit orthodoxy, community embeddedness, profit as a means to an end, and overarchingly sustainable production and product design like localization, efficiency, and circularity factors, are widely endorsed and mentioned. Principles mentioned only once are still considered since the frequency of occurrence does not necessarily indicate their importance. Even though each framework places a different focus, most of the principles have shared principles, and especially the values named are often similar, like conviviality, cooperation, community embeddedness, relational goods, joie de vivre, and others. Principles only mentioned sparsely are the consideration of non-humans, no-aggressive marketing, and principles regarding the market strategy.

## **Creating a Business Model Framework Beyond Growth**

To redefine the purpose and activities of a business within the overarching vision, this thesis will now look at its dimensions solely on the organizational level. The principles from the above-described frameworks have been redefined, newly categorized, originally transferred, or left out to formulate an integrative/synthesized Business Model Beyond Growth framework (BMBG).

The evolving integrative framework primarily focuses on the new understanding of growth since this highly forms organizational size and scope, activity, and structure (Hinton, 2021). Hence, it can most easily influence change, according to Hinton (2021). The profit maximization derivative, as an elementary focus shift with a strong influence on other factors, should be the second most important, though it is a more permanent variable and thus hard to change (Hinton, 2021). The redefinition of prosperity as a rather societal transformation offers only little implications for the business case and asks for a value shift overall.

### **A New Understanding of Growth**

Elaborating on a new understanding of growth, the subcategories of production & product design, business (e.g., revenue models and market strategy), philosophy, and structure will be examined. Organizations striving for an alternative understanding of growth should contemplate their resource management. Regarding the product, the product design principle should be circularity, as it is commonly discussed, subsuming

repairability, frugality, quality, and durability (Braungart et al., 2007). Following Niessen and Bocken, frugality as a design aspect, including “less clutter,” should be a key factor for product design to enable repairability and durability (Braungart et al., 2007; Niessen & Bocken, 2021, p. 1095). Sufficiency is mentioned separately since it not only focuses on *how* the product is designed but also whether it is even desirable and just to produce it (Parrique, 2019). According to Parrique (2019), sufficiency cares for resource distribution, touching upon the strategies of physical depletion quotas or similar, as mentioned in *drivers and constraints*. In the production process, organizations should care for proximity of their production as well as the resource extraction (Parrique, 2019). Another aspect is the often-mentioned efficiency regarding (renewable) energy use, which, as a by-product, enables companies to cut costs (Liesen et al., 2015). Another aspect of production, though only included in the framework of Nesterova, should be a “simplified technology” and the democratization of it so more people can work efficiently and sustainably (Nesterova, 2020, p. 5).

On the strategic level, organizations can consider alternative revenue models like share, repair, lease, secondhand, or product service systems (PSS)<sup>6</sup>. These revenue models might dissolve the paradox of sustainable consumption and growth since they offer a sustainable way of consuming if no new resources are introduced in the resource loop. Since PSS includes the models of sharing, leasing, and repairing, they will be subcategorized under it. In the literature of BM frameworks, relatively little light illuminates alternative revenue models. This might be due to few real-life examples of alternative ways of cash flows and, therefore, missing evaluation possibilities. The PSS and secondhand models tend to be more extensively discussed in recent research, that is, by Hinton (2021) and Nesterova (2020).

The market strategy will not be highly elaborated on in this framework. Some companies, included in the SNCs by Liesen et al. (2015), seek niche positioning since this extinguishes the obligation to grow fast and compete vigorously, which leads us to the company's size, often mentioned as relatively small and steady at a certain size. These two market strategies should only be seen as an observation, not as a critical principle for a business beyond growth. The organization's structure should include democratic governance, meaning democratic ownership (Johanisova et al., 2013), and decision-

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<sup>6</sup> An elaboration on its actual sustainability can be found in the article “*Clarifying the concept of product-service system*” by Mont from 2002

making, bringing more stakeholders to the table (Hinton, 2021). An essential but not obvious aspect seems to be community embeddedness, which most research names. This goes hand in hand with the already mentioned proximity and is often highly established in cooperatives (see Bloemmen et al., 2015).

As for philosophy, organizations should inherit values that include ideas beyond growth. These can be cooperation and collaboration principles, deviating from competition and egoism (Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018), autonomy and care (Parrique, 2019), or even the deviation from productivism thinking via a decrease in productivity (Nesterova, 2020).

### **Deviation from Profit Maximization Imperative**

The second dimension, translated to the business case, includes the following principles: PMD and Communication (Marketing). The key idea is that organizations mustn't maximize profits but seek right-sizing profits (Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018; Liesen et al., 2015). They can focus their activity on social well-being (Nesterova, 2020) or repurpose it for the environment (Hankammer, 2021) and measure success differently. As Nesterova (2020) puts it, organizations should deviate from *the profit maximization imperative*. Some even explicitly decide not to generate excess profit or grow (Hinton, 2021). As already mentioned by Bloemmen et al. (2015) and Parrique (2019), money should become a means to an end again.

Another part of the strategy is *communication*, meaning the *organization's marketing strategy*, which should refrain from aggressive marketing (Nesterova, 2020) and the creation of wants and sales (Niessen & Bocken, 2021). An overarching, implicit goal of this is to moderate consumption.

### **Redefining Prosperity**

Though it is a societal task to redefine prosperity, this work will look at it from a business perspective. Businesses should reflect on their created working environment, their philosophy, and education about this philosophy. Education as part of the communication strategy should include the promotion of sufficiency principles, of product and service design for sustainability, and the explicit communication of internal and external values (Hankammer & Kleer, 2018). As for the working environment, organizations should encourage values of collaboration and cooperation between their employees (Hinton, 2021). This could be underpinned by the worshiping and fostering of human potential (Hinton, 2021; Nesterova, 2020) or a limitation to wage differences (Liesen et al., 2015).

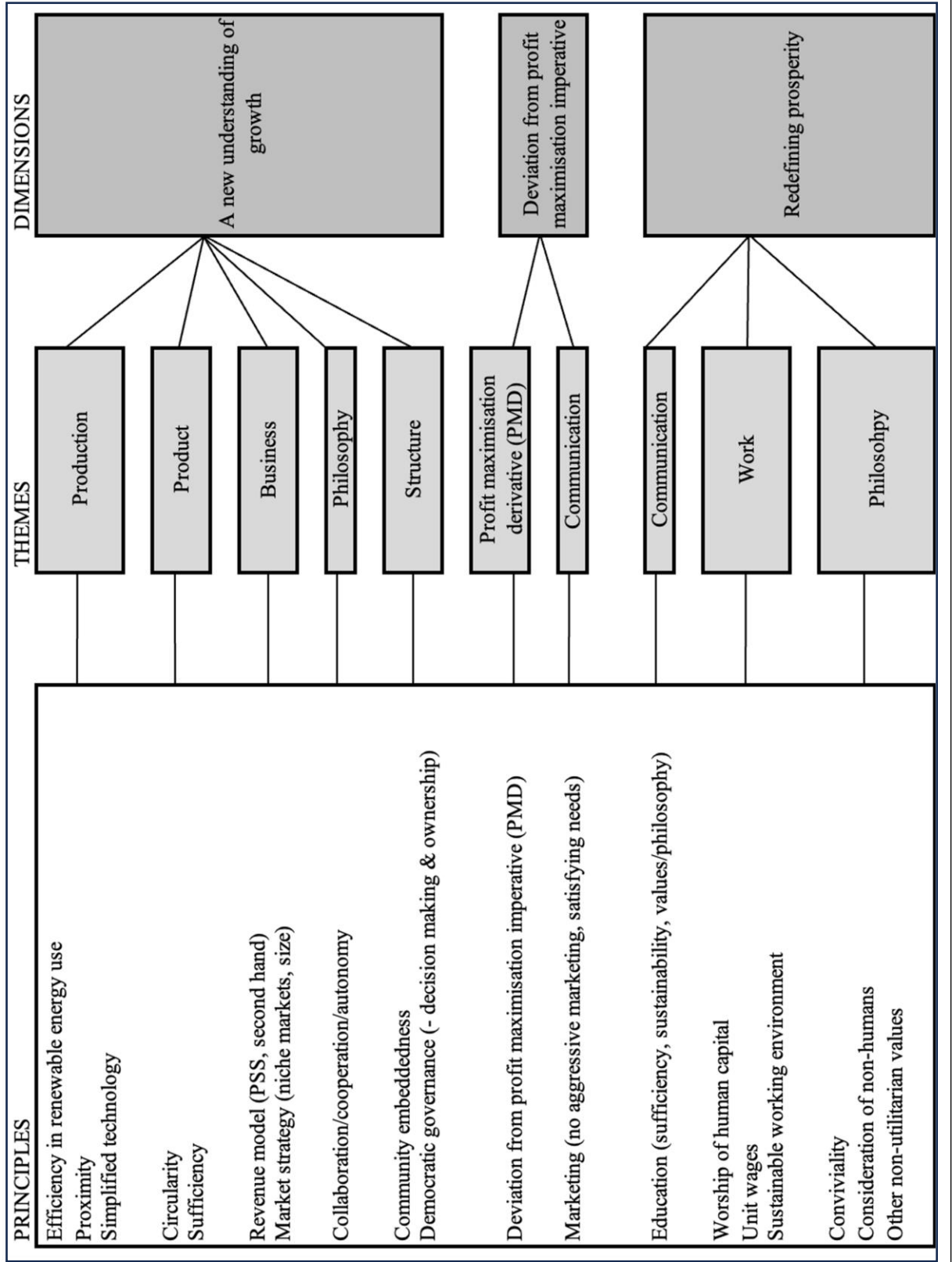
A key aspect is improving the work-life balance of employees (Hankammer, 2021). Eventually, philosophy should mirror a value shift towards social justice, conviviality, reflexivity on one's own activity, relational goods, sympathy, and others (Bloemmen et al., 2015; Hinton, 2021; Parrique, 2019). The shift in values should be defined as somewhat open toward values that go beyond utilitarian values and support social and environmental justice.

Hand in hand with the deviation from utilitarian values comes the importance of considering *non-humans*. Following utilitarianism, non-humans are often only regarded as natural assets in the form of ecosystem services (Nesterova, 2020). Instead, they need to find recognition in the value of their existence itself. A significant focus on non-humans is missing in the existing frameworks, and only Bloemmen et al. (2015) and Nesterova (2020) (and Hinton (2021), who bases her research on Nesterova) find themselves to name it explicitly. This is an important principle hardly represented in the literature, hence finding its mentioning here.

Table 1 depicts the BMBG framework in its three dimensions and subcategories.

**FIGURE 1**

*Business Model Framework Beyond Growth (BMBG) (Source: Own Illustration)*



## Discussion

According to the backcasting methodology, the BMBG framework indicates practical implications in the form of clear principles as an impulse for organizations intending to move towards a society within the overarching vision. Only little insights were found regarding the consistency and feasibility of the discussed framework. Hence, the synthesis results will be critically reflected upon and illustrated with the empirical highlight of the case example *Premium Kollektiv* (PK). The purpose of this exercise is to test the framework's consistency and feasibility according to the fifth and sixth steps of the backcasting method by successively looking at each principle.

### Consistency Testing

*Premium Kollektiv*, a beverage company from Hamburg in Northern Germany, has been selected due to its explicit naming of generating “no profit” and already existing research on them as a degrowth example (Fischermann, 2020; Grün, 2016; Premium Kollektiv, 2024; Schubring et al., 2013). PK is a sole proprietor; however, all important decisions regarding the business are made within the collective (Grün, 2016).

The collective comprises approximately 1,700 individuals with voting rights, including customers, suppliers, and consumers (Fischermann, 2020). As a result of the literature review, the detected grassroots structure of PK (2024) shows a correlation with the BMBG's principles of democratic decision-making. It shows that democratic governance, even though not legally implemented, can function in the currently capitalistic system. As for their size (market strategy), they, as a small company, do not post explicit goals to grow or not to. The pure statistics<sup>7</sup> of PK account for a growing company in terms of throughput and turnover. Considering that PK's (2024) principle is not to generate excess profit but to redistribute it directly into a decreased bottle price (a discount for the next year), it is interesting that they are still growing in size. This shows that the deviation from the *profit maximization imperative* does not necessarily hinder a company from growing in throughput but seems relatively independent of it. Does PK's growth indicate an unsustainable business that does not think beyond growth? As discussed before, a company providing necessities that are not subject to the creation of

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<sup>7</sup> From their foundation in 2001 onwards, they grew from 1 to 1700 members, 10 self-employed workers and 30 speakers. Their turnover accounts for 475.000€ in 2013 and 700.000€ in 2019 (Beha, 2019; Fischermann, 2020; Grün, 2016; Gutscher & Rismansanj, 2014; Premium Kollektiv, 2017)

wants but satisfy “real” needs should be able to grow as long as it is sustainable. The question of industry and supply differences arises. Like the cases from Liesen et al. (2015), PK (2024) positions itself in a niche market, offering regional fairtrade cola and beer. This might suggest that current businesses beyond growth are relatively small and niche-positioned. On the other hand, the question arises if large-sized companies could follow the principles of the BMBG or if size is a restricting criterion.

As for its products, PK (2024) highly values sustainability and proximity as crucial terms, relying on vegan, fairly traded, and biologically produced goods, supporting local partnerships in Germany and Brazil (proximity), and compensating for Co2 emissions if they can't be prevented by renewable energies (efficiency in (renewable) energy use) (Grün, 2016). Whether their products follow circularity principles is not told on their website, but since their bottles are part of the returnable deposit system, they at least follow circularity in the packaging (Premium Kollektiv, 2024). The company produces as much as its customer demand requires and keeps close feedback loops with its consumers, following a sufficient product design. Since their products cannot be shared, leased, or repaired, they cannot follow the PSS revenue model nor offer secondhand. This exposes a weak spot of the framework, not elaborating on alternative revenue models applicable to other industries.

As for Premium Kollektiv's philosophy, they follow a rather community-based work and decision flow. They waive contracts with producers and consumers (Premium Kollektiv, 2024). Their partnerships build on honesty and oblige everyone to take care on equal footing. They introduced an anti-quantity discount, renouncing quantity discounts for large companies, but an anti-quantity discount for smaller companies to support their economizing (Premium Kollektiv, 2024). This collaborative value focus comes with open sourcing of their BM philosophy and knowledge, acting cooperatively with interested companies (Schubring et al., 2013).

Regarding the marketing strategy, PK eliminates advertising, logos, or pictures (Premium Kollektiv, 2024). Their bottles' etiquettes only picture the beverages' ingredients, leaving out any aggressive marketing, creating wants, or offering sales. This diminishes the effect of the social logic of consumerism from the organizational perspective, enabling consumers to deviate from the identification with material goods as their social status. Organizations might debilitate this previously termed constraint and uncover an organizational lever that could significantly impact the social logic of consumerism.

Turning towards the dimension of redefining prosperity, PK generates high autonomy, as included in the BMBG framework (see Figure 1), since they have no investors nor have taken credits to deplete/minimize the connected pressure (Bozsoki, Buschmann, Posse & Schubring, 2013). This factor named by PK has not been explicitly mentioned in the BMBG framework. As discussed in the *drivers and constraints* part, investments must find a new narrative, investing for purpose rather than returns. A change in investment culture should find discussion to be an additional principle, though the organization's role in this culture shift might not be the proper perspective. Instead, should the agency of investors be looked at. PK also grants autonomy to their customers by not taking an interest in debts since they believe that people have valid reasons for not being able to free debts at the moment (Premium Kollektiv, 2024).

No explicit statements regarding success management or prosperity assessments have been stated, though their sufficiency mentality (in production) shows a dedication to fostering prosperity not in maximization of money or materials but in community (grassroots values) and knowledge development (Jackson, 2009, p. 88; Premium Kollektiv, 2024). Regarding the work environment, PK worships its employees by including everyone in decision-making, paying unit wages (currently 18€/h), and offering special supplements for disabled or caregiving people (Premium Kollektiv, 2024). The latter is supported by the idea of Jackson (2009) to counteract a wave of unemployment, as discussed in *drivers and constraints*. Though the example is a small-scale company, it shows how organizations might act upon unemployment.

### **Feasibility Testing and Critical Reflection**

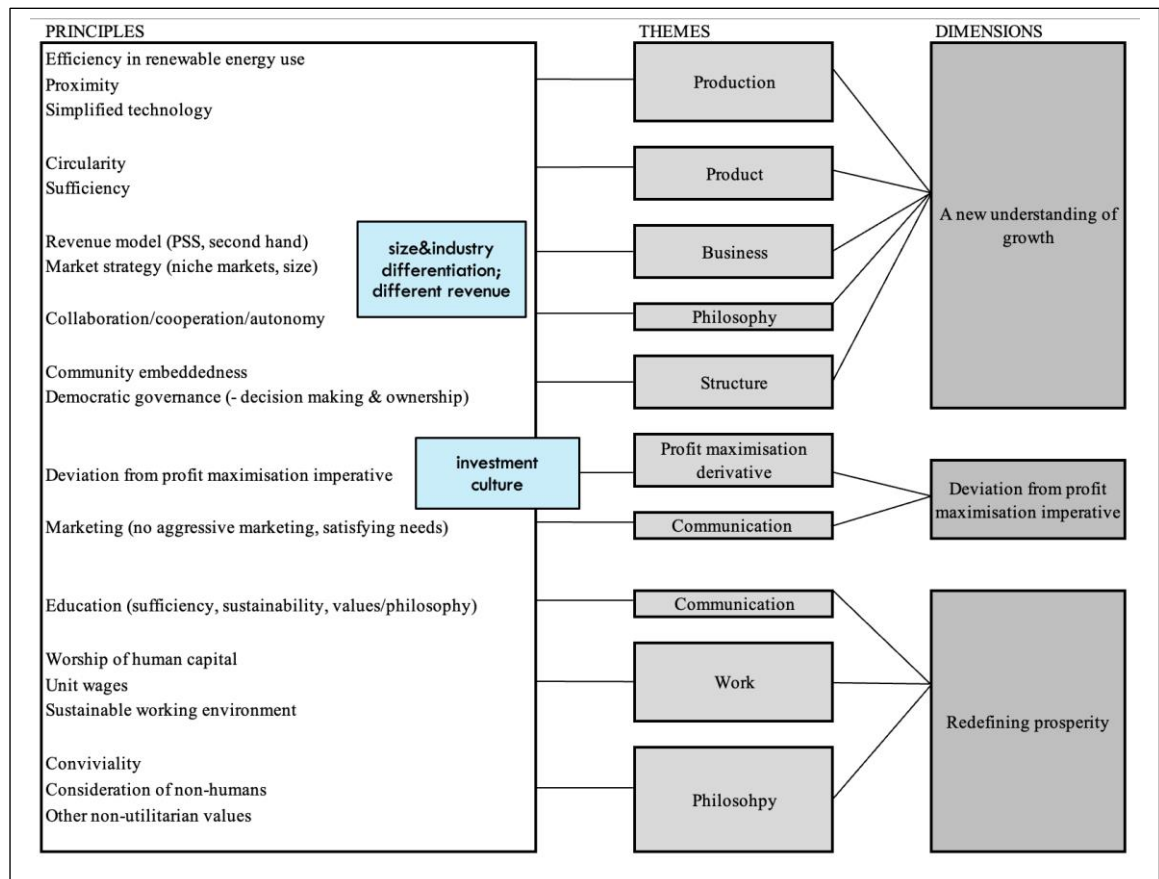
Premium Kollektiv adheres to most of the principles already within the current economic system, withstanding most of the constraints elaborated on in *drivers and constraints*. Regarding the PMD, they are a showcase example of a company that does not want to generate excess profit, focusing on other activities but still growing. In the third dimension, the redefinition of prosperity, Premium Kollektiv fosters conviviality and autonomy, offering transparent communication and education and fostering a sustainable working environment.

These findings support the feasibility of a BMBG on the pathway towards a society as depicted in the overarching vision. Though the framework's principles can provide practical implications for the business case for a change within the current capitalistic system, it lacks consistency and needs constant adaptation. Additional aspects already

resulted from the discussion of the case example and *the drivers and constraints* part, like the newly distilled aspects of the handling of investments, the differentiation between industries and size, and the evaluation of potential alternative revenue models (see Figure 2).

**FIGURE 2**

*BMBG Potential Extensions (Source: Own Illustration)*



Explanations for the lack of knowledge of these aspects (and potentially others) might be the sparing number of case examples and the novelty of the BM frameworks within the overarching vision, most of them being created after 2015. This study has tried to bridge the gaps by integrating different literature streams, connecting macroeconomic ideas with the organizational level, and critically assessing potential drivers and constraints.

The comparative presentation shows that the framework's principles are 1. not exhaustive, missing out on differentiations of industries, size, revenue models, and other detected constraints, and 2. cannot be used as forcibly cohesive guidelines. This shows the importance of extending this research by qualitatively assessing multiple case examples from different contexts, warranting a higher validity than a single case example. The BMBG framework must be understood as a unified whole, not a combination of

separate features. Even though the single principles are essential, they do not hinder companies that deviate from one principle, for example, the idea of growing in throughput, from still generating excess profit and exploiting natural resources. For practical implications, this study further supports the importance of change agents in envisioning real utopias, as suggested by Gümüşay and Reinecke (2022) and Rindova and Pontikes (2020). It also highlights the ability of organizations to escape the profit-normativity within a for-profit market (Hinton, 2021), contrary to Hankammer's (2021) concern about combining the concepts of business models and degrowth (or similar concepts) within the capitalistic system. At the same time, more practical advice for beyond-growth pioneers on overcoming restricting barriers needs to be showcased.

An incisive limitation of this paper is the author's perception, which is limited to the European culture of economizing, therefore missing out on principles that haven't already entered the discussions around the subject of degrowth. Most of the literature is composed in English or German, excluding exhaustive literature from France, where the degrowth and post-growth debate is highly established and originates from non-English speaking countries, creating a gap in voices and ideas heard from other norms and ideologies.

Future research should seal this gap, including cross-cultural literature from different economic perspectives. The subject should find consideration in transdisciplinary knowledge creation and social sciences, broadening the organizational perspective. This might shed light on organizations' impact on influencing the social logic of consumerism via business activities. This might include practitioners from different backgrounds to formulate a holistically feasible conceptualization. An important issue for future research should consider companies that comply with most of the criteria to assess further consistency, feasibility, and environmental impact of the framework on a larger scale. The overall shift in economic values and its effects on organizational action and vice versa should also be focused on interculturality. It would be interesting to discuss the impact of change agency in economic value systems and to elaborate on which specific values should be included that might even promote other principles from the BMBG framework. To create further insights, a quantitative assessment of the framework should be considered, focusing on its consistency, feasibility, and environmental impact. This could also connect to the ecological allowance design by Reichel and Seeberg (2011), a tool to test an organization's environmental impact. A constant adaptation of the framework, as well as a revision of its categorization, might be interesting. However, the

latter does not seem inevitable since the principles should rather be seen as holistic, finding application in all business dimensions.

The theoretical puzzle of *How an integrative business model framework beyond growth (acting within the planetary boundaries) can look like?* was answered in this study with the creation of a BMBG framework. Even more, it has resulted in the acknowledgment that organizations can implement business practices beyond growth already within the current economic system, continuously advancing the framework's principles with empirical findings from practical cases. This is highly relevant since it enables change agents to move business practices toward organizations that align with the formulated overarching vision.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this bachelor thesis highlight the pressing need for a transition towards an economy within the planetary boundaries as described in the overarching vision. By challenging the prevailing ideology of perpetual economic growth, this research offers a fresh *mélange* on alternative (business) models prioritizing sustainability, well-being, and social equity. The pathway towards this real utopia can find its realization on the organizational level. The operational and strategic principles proposed in this thesis serve as a guide or inspiration for organizations looking to align their objectives with the depicted overarching vision. The results of this study show different principles regarding a new understanding of growth, profit, and prosperity. It is relevant to extend this research with case studies to test the feasibility of the framework. Organizations can gauge their readiness and commitment to embracing a more balanced and sustainable approach to economic development by analyzing factors such as resource consumption, social and environmental impact, and value shifts. Implementing these principles requires a fundamental change of mindset and reevaluating conventional notions of success and worth. Organizations must recognize that growth for the sake of growth is no longer viable in a world with finite resources and mounting environmental challenges.

Overall, this thesis advances ideas beyond growth on the institutional and organizational level. By adopting these new insights and principles, organizations can play a pivotal role in shaping a more just, sustainable, and resilient future for all.

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# Appendix

**TABLE 1a**  
*Extended Version of Table 1 “Overview of existing frameworks”*

	Johamissova et al. 2013	Klimra and Krotenberg 2018	Liesen et al. 20	Bloemmen 2015	Nestorova 2020	Hankammer 2021	Hinton 2021	Nissen and Bocken 2021	Parrique
<b>PRINCIPLES</b>									
<b>DESIGN</b>									
Circularity	x				x		x	x	x
Repairability	x		x		x		x	x	x
Frugality	x		x		x		green alternative, less clutter, respecting planetary boundaries	x	voluntary simplicity
Quality	x		x	quality over quantity	x		x	x; personalized production (customization)	x
Durability	x		x		x		x	Demand reduction services	x
Sufficiency	x				x; sufficiency in productive capacity	encourage sufficiency	x	Demand reduction services	voluntary simplicity
<b>PRODUCTION</b>									
Renewable energy use	x				x	Be locally embedded and community based	X; green alternative	x	x
Local	x				x		x	x	proximity
Regional	x		regional markets		x			x	proximity
Efficiency	x		cost reduction purposes; Revenue growth due to innovation & efficiency		x		x	Demand reduction services	
<b>TECHNOLOGY</b>					simplified technology; dematerialisation of technology				
<b>BUSINESS</b>									
<b>REVENUE MODELS</b>									
Share, repair, lease			x		x	sharing resources	x	x; reparability; through open source creation	sharing, commons
Product as a service			x				x	x	x
Second Hand							Exchange platforms	x	
<b>MARKET STRATEGY</b>									
Customer relationship			reduced dependency				Exchange platforms		
Size	stop growing at a certain size and throughput			non-maximising, small scale	small scale		right sized business		
<b>POSITIONING</b>			Niche positioning						
<b>WORK</b>									
Work environment			limited wage difference to cut cost		human capital/potential, improve the work-life balance of employees		collaborative, inclusive, cooperation; reduction in working hours; human potential; worker self management		postwork
<b>PHILOSOPHY</b>									
Collaboration		x		x	Enable autonomy and capacity development		x		convivial tools
Cooperation				x	Enable autonomy and capacity development				convivial tools
Deviation from productionism									
Consideration of non-human life				Responsibility towards nature	decreased productivity		consideration of non-human life		
Conviviality	Scaling social innovation			x	reorientation towards environment; shift in values	Sympathy, community participation	convivial lifestyle;		value sovereignty; relational goods; joie de vivre; gratuity
Other values	solve social and environmental problems; corporate leaders' commitment to company values					repurpose the business for the environment and society; leadership commitment	social justice and equity; critical reflection on own activity		

**TABLE 1a (CONTINUED)**  
*Extended Version of Table 1 “Overview of existing frameworks”*

	Johamsova et al. 2013	Khmara and Kronenberg 2018	Liesen et al. 20	Bloemmen 2015	Nestorva 2020	Hankammer 2021	Hinton 2021	Niessen and Bocken 2021	Purique
<b>PRINCIPLES</b>									
<b>PROFIT MAXIMISATION DERIVATIVE</b>									
Money= means to an end			right sizing profit	nonprofit-seeking (profit is a means to an end)	social wellbeing as focus;	repurpose the business for social/environment	profit=means; legally binding degrowth		social enterprises
Shift in success measurement					focusing on qualitative change; other than material success non growth	Certification by third party; CSR accounting			
Degrowth and profit deviation	deviation from profit imperative	other aspect are in focus (social and environmental)	Growth in sales not an objective	non-maximising		Active decision not to grow			
<b>COMMUNICATION</b>									
<b>MARKETING</b>					no manipulative advertising			x no sales	
Moderating consumption									
No aggressive marketing									
<b>EDUCATION</b>									
Sufficiency/degrowth						promote societal acceptance of degrowth thinking, product and service design for sustainability		awareness raising	
Consumption								awareness raising ; questioning consumption	
Knowledge sharing						Enable autonomy and capacity development; sharing resources	Exchange platforms for knowledge sharing	open source creation; knowledge collaboration for repair and production	convivial tools
<b>STRUCTURE</b>									
Democratic ownership	democratic, collective ownership; Limited profit-distribution				alternative ownership (e.g. grassroots)	and implement democratic governance	incorporation of legal forms of degrowth		social enterprises
Democratic decision making	inclusive decision-making process	x				implement democratic governance	democratic, multistakeholder decision making & structure; decentralized, inclusive		social enterprises
Community embeddedness			x	x		Be locally embedded and community based	Exchange platforms for knowledge sharing		socially useful production
Cooperation				x	democratisation of technology				commons