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Transformational job-policies as pathways to a degrowth future in tourism? Understanding the workers' perspective

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The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted that it will only be possible to move towards a sustainable transformation in tourism, if path dependencies rooted in neoliberal growth-oriented economies are addressed. A central transformative component is the labour market and the decoupling of work from the pursuit of economic growth. The aim of this study is to contribute to the tourism degrowth debate by elucidating the often-neglected perspective of workers concerning their situation on the labour market and the resulting demands regarding policies for change. For this purpose, a focus group with nine tourism workers from Barcelona, complemented by ten stakeholder interviews, allowed to analyse their current situation and explore to what extent different popular policy proposals would empower them and thus have path creating potential towards a sustainable transformation of the tourism industry. The results outline that the workers find themselves in an exploitative system rooted in neo-colonial capitalist practice, which reproduces the precarisation of predominantly female and migrant labour even more since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. To improve the situation on the labour market, workers endorse all of the discussed policy programmes, but clearly favour bottom-up initiatives for empowerment such as a strengthened system of economic democracy.

Keywords: *Path creation, Tourism degrowth, Universal basic income, Working time reduction, Economic democracy, Job guarantee, Qualitative research, Barcelona*

1 INTRODUCTION

The general hope in society as well as in the academic world at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis that the pandemic hiatus could serve as an impulse to rethink our relationship with the environment has vanished. Regarding tourism, it can be observed that the anticipated turn towards sustainability in line with planetary boundaries has mostly not taken place (Gössling et al., 2023). In many places, tourism-specific

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indicators, such as arrivals or overnight stays, are already at pre-pandemic levels and a path-dependent response to the crisis, in line with the continuously dominant growth-paradigm, is evident (Wilkinson et al., 2022; UNWTO, 2023).

The pandemic highlighted the dependencies and lack of economic alternatives to tourism that prevail in many destinations. Hence, the question arises about how to break up these dependencies and the associated locked-in growth path of the sector. A growth-critical theory that has generated more and more attention in the past decade, *inter alia* due to the incompatibility of a continuation of the current tourism model with the Paris climate goals, is the degrowth concept (Gössling et al., 2023). Degrowth in tourism can be defined as a deliberate transition in tourist destinations and their local economies, ending the overexploitation of resources as well as the overproduction and overconsumption, leading to a general improvement in well-being of all involved stakeholders (Kallis, 2018). The aim is to bring the tourism system through responsible and fulfilling, slow, low-carbon travel back into the given planetary boundaries. In addition, the degrowth concept considers the aspect of equitable distribution of profits from the sector for the benefit of all stakeholders involved, the dismantling of harmful subsidies and the incorporation of externalised costs (Andriotis, 2018). Most degrowth scholars agree that such a transformation requires moving beyond capitalism, as it is not compatible with capitalism's imperative of continuous economic accumulation (Foster, 2011; Kallis, 2018; Schmelzer et al., 2022). It rather implies the necessity of rethinking society's fundamental values around concepts like sufficiency, community, care, well-being, conviviality, equity and global justice among others (Büchs and Koch, 2019; Büscher and Fletcher, 2019; Kallis et al., 2022).

Leading degrowth researchers like Hickel et al. (2022) recently called for a new research agenda particularly seeking to identify and address growth dependencies on a sector-by-sector basis. At this point, Durand et al. (2023) recognise strikingly little research on what planning for degrowth would actually entail and how the transition should be initiated. It becomes apparent that it will only be possible to move towards a sustainable degrowth transition if questions such as how and which policies would enable to break up path dependencies rooted in neoliberal growth-oriented economies are addressed. A central component in this endeavour is the labour market and the decoupling of work from the pursuit of economic growth (Mayrhofer and Wiese, 2020).

The aim of this study is to contribute to the tourism degrowth debate in this regard by elucidating the often-neglected perspective of workers regarding their situation in the labour market and the resulting demands and proposals for change. For this purpose, a focus group with nine tourism workers from Barcelona, complemented by ten semi-structured stakeholder interviews, allowed us to analyse the characteristics of their current situation and explore to what extent different popular policy proposals would empower them and thus have path-creating potential towards a sustainable degrowth transformation of the tourism industry. The policies analysed are being debated in progressive agendas and proposed by degrowth thinking: universal basic income, working time reduction, economic democracy and job guarantee (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022).

Hereof this paper adds value to the degrowth debate regarding the lack of research on planning instruments (Durand et al., 2023), extends the path creation concept in evolutionary economic geography (Hassink et al., 2019; MacKinnon et al., 2019) and establishes a constructive dialogue between workers' voices and the degrowth discourse (Barca, 2017), which is essential for the success of a socio-ecological transition.

2 DEGROWTH IN TOURISM

The degrowth discourse has become increasingly prominent in recent years, both in academia and in civil society. The level of approval for fundamental positions advocated by degrowth proponents (see Latouche, 2003; D'Alisa et al., 2015; Kallis, 2018) can be seen in recently published studies that confirm broad levels of support for post-growth ideals amongst both scientists and the general public. For example, 86% of climate researchers in the EU are in favour of post-growth positions (King et al., 2023). A survey of almost 500 sustainability scientists also found that 77% of respondents call for post-growth pathways for high-income countries (Koskimäki, 2023). Furthermore, representative data from Germany show that 88% of the population agree that 'we must find ways to live well independently of economic growth' and 77% agree that 'there are natural limits to growth that our industrialised world has long since reached' (BMUV, 2023). This is also confirmed by a survey in 34 European countries, which shows that an average of 61% of respondents are in favour of post-growth ideals (Paulson and Büchs, 2022). Also on a practical level, local governments in various European cities have begun to actively question how the mainstream focus on continued growth contributes to sustainability and collective well-being. As a result, various policies that can be attributed to the spectrum of degrowth interventions have already been implemented. For example, cities such as Amsterdam, Glasgow, Barcelona and Copenhagen promoted slow mobility, housing cooperatives, communal living, moratoriums on evictions, rent caps or emissions caps, and binding fossil fuel phase-out targets (Savini, 2024).

Nevertheless, the initiation of a wider degrowth transformation is neither foreseeable in tourism nor in general, as the real-existing impact of the degrowth movement on the functioning of the growth-oriented economic system is so far insignificant. Buch-Hansen (2018) identifies four prerequisites for a change towards degrowth. Of these, however, only the first two are currently fulfilled to a certain extent: a profound crisis of the existing system; an alternative political project; a comprehensive coalition of social forces that undertake political efforts to make the project hegemonic; and at least passive consent, not only for some ideals but also for the project as such, amongst the wider population. Utilising a Gramscian understanding of society and transformation, there is thus a lack of support and conviction for a degrowth project in both political and civil society (D'Alisa and Kallis, 2020). This raises the question of agency within degrowth transformations (Savini, 2024). Amongst degrowth advocates, there is general agreement that the movement is rooted in grassroots cultures, particularly among social movements advocating for public transport, housing, care, equal rights, public space and land rights, while opposing extractivism (Latouche, 2009; D'Alisa et al., 2013). Considering political agency, degrowth advocates argue for an ecological class consciousness through the formation of a new social movement, which bridges economic and ecological concerns (Barca, 2017).

In addition to the central theoretical and conceptual papers on tourism degrowth (e.g. Fletcher et al., 2019; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019; Fletcher et al., 2021) and articles including comprehensive literature reviews on the topic (e.g. Dwyer, 2023; Murray et al., 2023; Langer and Schmude, 2024), most recent contributions focused especially on the analysis of the claim to degrow mass tourism as a means to implement 'quality tourism', leading to an elitisation of travel vs a genuine touristic degrowth agenda, downscaling the eco-social overreach of the industry through social and environmental justice measures (Blanco-Romero et al., 2023); the relationship between degrowth in tourism, energy spending and climate change through the lens of localised forms of

travel (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2023); or practical possibilities of tourism degrowth at the local level (Ruiz-Ballesteros and González-Portillo, 2024).

However, the questions of who should initiate the necessary change towards less or negative growth and what exactly should be reduced within a degrowth scenario in tourism continue to be addressed in the tourism degrowth literature largely without the consideration of agents of social transformation and policy-making and thus remain unanswered (Valdivielso and Moranta, 2019). In particular, workers are not yet considered as key actors with agency in the tourism degrowth literature, although this is exactly what is advocated in the broader degrowth literature (Barca, 2017). A look at the general degrowth literature on labour shows the focus on a reconceptualisation of work through deprioritising wage labour, reducing unemployment, redistributing productive activities towards care and volunteer work and the promotion of social and ecologically meaningful jobs (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022). In this regard, four policy features stand out. Universal basic income (UBI), working time reductions (WTR), economic democracy (ED) and job guarantee (JG) are considered to be elementary components of a transformation of the labour market, in order to achieve the objectives mentioned (Hickel et al., 2022). All four policies are frequently outlined and cited within the degrowth literature; hence, according to leading researchers, they belong to the ten core policy instruments of a degrowth transformation (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022). They are not considered mutually exclusive in the degrowth literature but could also coexist or act in a complementary way. Subsequently, they will be briefly characterised.

UBI is a state-led programme in which every citizen receives an unconditional income on a regular basis (Birnbaum, 2016). The level of this payment differentiates in the literature, but most advocates argue that it should be sufficient to cover one's basic needs (Wright, 2010). There is no form of behavioural conditionality, pre-requisites or means test to receive the UBI (Birnbaum, 2016). While the UBI frees people from the necessity to work to fulfil their basic needs, everybody can still choose to engage in income-generating activities (Mayrhofer and Wiese, 2020). Scholars argue that the introduction of UBI is a means to create more equalitarian and happy societies (Pickett and Wilkinson, 2010), by practically eliminating poverty and economic insecurity (Alexander, 2015). A wealth redistribution supported by UBI, financed through progressive taxation schemes, could imply a reduction in consumption of scarce natural resources, as research shows that income inequality and environmental degradation are highly interlinked (Wiedmann et al., 2020). Furthermore, it might be a pathway to more fulfilling jobs, as workers would improve their bargaining power concerning decent working conditions by reducing their dependence on paid employment (Alexander, 2015), which could lead to higher engagement in environmentally and socially beneficial non-profit oriented work (Birnbaum, 2009). Generally, proponents of degrowth argue that the introduction of UBI supports degrowth transformations by distributing wealth and income through non-market mechanisms, and by maintaining an adequate material guarantee for all during transitions to smaller and less marketised economies (Kallis et al., 2020).

Second, WTR refers to the reduction of the total spent working hours at constant or higher income levels. Different conceptions exist about how this could be implemented. They range from shorter working weeks to an increased minimum number of holiday days per year, as well as strengthened rights towards maternity and paternity leave, rights to reduce working hours (e.g., for care-work) and earlier retirement policies (Pullinger, 2014). The benefits of reducing time spent in wage labour include, amongst others, higher rates of productivity (Bourlès and Cette, 2006), better work-life balance allowing people to engage in welfare-enhancing activities (Albertsen et

al., 2008) and reduced involuntary and structural unemployment through work sharing (Schor, 2015). Additionally, WTR policies are receiving increasing attention as a means to lower carbon emissions and overall environmental pressure (Kallis et al., 2013; Fitzgerald et al., 2018). It is thus seen as a key policy to reconceptualise work within the degrowth literature by deprioritising wage labour, leveraging productivity gains, ending overproduction and hence freeing time for self-defined work, such as self-regulated community initiatives (Kallis et al., 2020; Fitzpatrick et al., 2022).

Third, the central idea of ED is a redistribution of control over firms from corporate managers and corporate shareholders to a larger group of stakeholders, mainly workers (Archer, 1995). Johanisova and Wolf (2012: 564) thus define ED broadly as 'a system of checks and balances on economic power and support for the right of citizens to actively participate in the economy regardless of social status, race, gender, etc.' Several forms of ED exist, all aiming at democratising the power and control over processes, decisions and working conditions within a company, as well as the mission, objectives and operational direction of the company and the economy itself (Cumbers et al., 2020; Mayrhofer and Wiese, 2020). Examples include cooperatives, social enterprises (Johanisova and Wolf, 2012), worker-managed private and public businesses or worker-owned businesses (Gunderson, 2019). Some of the key advantages of ED being discussed in the literature are the reduction of inequality within contemporary societies (Johanisova and Wolf, 2012; Cumbers, 2018), the creation of more resilient and economically stable organisations (Mayrhofer and Wiese, 2020), higher quality of life amongst the workers (ESS, 2016) and a general strengthening of democracy (Timming and Summers, 2020). Moreover, as opposed to capitalist firms operating within the growth imperative, it is argued that ED might also have environmental benefits, as economic-democratic firms could potentially further incorporate sustainability in the decision-making (Gunderson, 2019). Kallis et al. (2018) perceive ED as an essential element within a degrowth transformation to radically restructure the scope, functions and organisation of economic processes through collective deliberation. Furthermore, Johanisova and Wolf (2012) argue that ED would enable easier implementation of degrowth policies, by for instance mitigating growth pressures caused by profit-oriented enterprises, creating more resilient societies and consequently enhancing the protection of natural support systems and non-industrial methods of production.

Lastly, the JG signifies a permanent, federally or nationally funded, and locally administered policy programme through which the government offers voluntary employment opportunities for everybody of legal working age, regardless of labour market status, race, sex, colour or creed, who is willing to work at a living wage (Wray, 1998; Tcherneva, 2018). While the jobs and respective projects are funded by the state, their implementation is administered in a decentralised, local and democratic manner in order to respond to the necessities and characteristics of the local communities (Tcherneva, 2018). The preferred fields of application are especially those which are not sufficiently covered by the private sector, such as social community services, environmental community development or renewable infrastructure installations (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Hickel et al., 2022). Key strengths of the JG are the elimination of involuntary unemployment, a decoupling of employment and economic growth (Wray, 1998; Parrique, 2019), the manifestation of employment as a right rather than as a duty, positive implications for the well-being of individuals (Alcott, 2013; Tcherneva, 2018) and the function as a macroeconomic stabilisation and inflation control tool (Tcherneva, 2018). Accordingly, in degrowth literature, it is argued that JG leads to a general mobilisation of labour towards social and ecological objectives. One

example could be the assurance of a just transition out of jobs for workers in declining industries, such as those based on fossil fuels (Hickel et al., 2022).

3 PATH CREATION IN TOURISM

Path dependence and path creation, sometimes also referred to as (new) path development (MacKinnon et al., 2019), are the key theoretical approaches of evolutionary economic geography (EEG), arguably one of the most influential paradigms in economic geography of the past decade, to analyse the challenges and impediments to initiating transitions (Martin and Sunley, 2006; Boschma and Frenken, 2011; Hassink et al., 2019). Path dependency essentially refers to forms of current and future development that are rooted in the past and have limited capacity for change (Anton Clavé and Wilson, 2017). These developments are characterised by self-reinforcing dynamics that result in inertia and irreversibility (Gill and Williams, 2017). A major deduction from the path dependence theory is the concept of lock-in. This refers to different structural, cognitive and political elements that act as mechanisms to preserve the continuation of the established path (Grabher, 1993).

Discourses supporting a more radical rupture with the past are being developed under the term path creation (Karnøe and Garud, 2012). Nielsen et al. (1995: 7) highlight the importance of human agency within path creation and emphasise that 'within specific limits, social forces can redesign the board on which they are moving and reformulate the rules of the game'. The catalysts of change (Gill and Williams, 2017) leading to new paths with permanent changes and towards more sustainable outcomes can be, *inter alia*, formal and/or informal policy measures, political and grass-roots collaboration or entrepreneurial innovation-led mechanisms (Martin and Sunley, 2006; Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2017). Concerning the role of agency within path-creating developments, EEG analysis has focused traditionally on firm-driven processes, hence firm-driven agency (Boschma and Frenken, 2011). Hassink et al. (2019) and Dawley et al. (2015) instead argue for an expansion of the scope of analysis, also to the system-level agency of a broader range of actors, such as policy actors and the state. Therefore, influences outside the institutional and organisational boundaries of companies should be included and the importance of future-oriented expectations and visions of different actors should be taken into account (Steen, 2016).

Within tourism research, a lot of emphasis has been put on understanding the potentially negative outcomes of path dependence in mature destinations with high tourism dependency (Brouder et al., 2017; Wilkinson et al., 2022). Path dependence in tourism was especially analysed regarding the avoidance of future regional ruination, as it implies being forced to continue on the same path once established as well as limited capacity for innovation (Anton Clavé and Wilson, 2017). The COVID-19 crisis confirmed the early assumption of Brouder (2020) that the likelihood of transformation as a result of the crisis is low, due to the insufficient capacities of institutional innovation on both demand and supply sides. Meanwhile, the dependencies on tourism prevailing in many destinations became apparent, resulting in a lock-in to the dominant growth path (Wilkinson et al., 2022).

Recently, Hassink et al. (2019) called to rethink critical research on path creation and follow-up upon new research strands beyond the development of paths towards goals such as competitiveness, innovation or growth. Furthermore, EEG generally is being criticised to neglect the role of social and institutional environments of economic activities (Henning et al., 2013; Pike et al., 2016), whilst also not incorporating other

potentially influential exogenous sources, such as national and supranational policies and regulations (Martin and Sunley, 2006; Dawley et al., 2015).

The views and perceptions of workers regarding national and supranational policies and regulations potentially creating new paths in the tourism sector have not been integrated in sufficient depth into the tourism geography literature (Cañada, 2018). Moreover, to the best of the authors' knowledge, workers have not yet been studied as actors obtaining human agency in tourism degrowth transition literature.

A notable exception explicitly highlighting the agency of workers in mostly rural and indigenous settings in the so-called Global South is the stream of literature focusing on community-based tourism (Chassagne and Everingham, 2020; Renkert, 2020; Cañada, 2021). However, this article focuses on tourism workers in urban settings in the so-called Global North, which are employed and dependent on wage labour, whilst also not possessing any direct ownership in the tourism organisations or businesses they are working at.

Against this background, we want to assess to what extent the outlined policies, all core features within the broader conceptualisation of a degrowth transformation, could potentially act as path creating forces towards a sustainable future in tourism. The chosen approach extends the analytical focus of path creation research beyond firms and entrepreneurs as actors and aims to determine whether and how the policies are perceived by workers as possibilities to pave new paths in the tourism industry. In order to characterise and differentiate the potential for change perceived by the workers, the empowerment concept is used. Aghazamani and Hunt (2017: 343) define empowerment as 'a multidimensional, context-dependent, and dynamic process that provides humans, individually or collectively, with greater agency, freedom, and capacity to improve their quality of life as a function of engagement with the phenomenon of tourism'. According to Scheyvens (1999), we differentiate between economic, psychological, social and political forms of empowerment as opposed to disempowerment, which refers to the lack of participation in decision-making or governance, to assess the path creation potential of the presented policy instruments.

4 RESEARCH CONTEXT

As outlined, the COVID-19 crisis revealed the path dependencies in many destinations, where the necessary sustainable transition of the tourism model could not be initiated, but the 'old normal' as Wilkinson et al. (2022: 3) label the lock-in to the dominant neoliberal growth-oriented path in tourism, is returning. One of those destinations is Barcelona, a city where tourist arrivals are already above pre-pandemic levels (Observatori del Turisme a Barcelona, 2022). The city, therefore, proves to be a valuable context to explore the perception of workers in precarious working environments (Cañada, 2018; Cañada and Izcara, 2022; Walmsley et al., 2022) on potentially path creating elements. In Barcelona, the tourism labour market plays a significant role within the urban economy. Estimates indicate that 9% of the working population in the city are employed in tourism (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2023). The governance of the growing and intensifying urban tourism in Barcelona was the subject of intense public and political debate before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Blázquez-Salom et al., 2019; Milano et al., 2019; Mansilla and Hughes, 2021). Cañada (2018) identifies increasing outsourcing practices, enabled by a labour reform in 2012, as a particularly influential factor leading to precariousness in the tourism labour market in Spain. These externalisation tendencies led amongst others to a decrease in salaries; an intensification of work; greater

uncertainty in the duration of employment, timetables and work schedule; deprofessionalisation; negative effects on workers' health, including increased stress and burnout as well as a decrease in the capacity of representation of workers caused by a decline in unionisation (ibid). Furthermore, Cañada and Izcara (2022) researched the situation of tourism workers in Barcelona during and after the COVID-19 induced lockdowns, and how the pandemic changed the situation of the tourism labour market. Their results outline a situation of increasing uncertainty and precariousness in many jobs, leading to a lack of staff in numerous companies. Many workers seem to flee from a sector that is characterised by low wages, unfavourable working hours and an overload of work. Despite the growing acknowledgement that neoliberal organised and growth-driven tourism management leads to precarious jobs and deteriorating working conditions in many destinations suffering from overtourism (UNWTO, 2019; Bianchi and Man, 2021), there is so far little engagement within the tourism geography discipline in general and studies of tourism degrowth in particular with tourism employment and the marginalised situation of many tourism workers regarding the involvement in decision-making (Cañada, 2018; Walmsley et al., 2022). Nevertheless, it can be observed that since the COVID-19 pandemic the interest in topics surrounding tourism labour and employment, the so-called sustainable employment in tourism agenda (Mooney and Baum, 2019) is increasing. Examples include studies on decent work (Ioannides et al., 2021), dignity in tourism employment (Winchenbach et al., 2021), job vulnerability and income inequality (Sun et al., 2022) or the interconnectedness of tourism and labour migration (Salazar, 2022), amongst others. In this paper, tourism workers' perspectives on the situation are explicitly incorporated, through which the paper fosters to build up a necessary constructive dialogue between workers' voices and the degrowth movement (Barca, 2017).

5 METHODOLOGY

This research follows calls for new research agendas within economic geography based upon qualitative research methods (Hassink et al., 2019; MacKinnon et al., 2019), exploring agency beyond firms as actors in order to generate empirical prospective data of anticipated alternative futures (Steen, 2016). As a methodological approach to engage with the worker perspective, a focus group seems particularly suitable in this endeavour. Focus groups allow for in-depth exploration of individual views of several participants, whilst also generating interesting group dynamics, which stimulate and enhance creative debates between the participants (Barbour, 2018). In a group setting, participants can outline their experiences, perspectives and opinions on a given topic, which allows the researcher to understand the contextual factors shaping behaviours in a given economic and social setting (Krueger and Casey, 2015). The diversity of the multiple perspectives involved in a focus group helps to identify patterns, commonalities as well as different social and psychological dimensions amongst the participants. This contributes to a comprehensive and deep understanding of the researched issue and involved processes (Barbour, 2018). The composition of the participants of the focus group was based on the principle of purposive sampling, aiming for a group characterised by heterogeneity in terms of employment fields in tourism and diversity in terms of sociodemographic attributes, professional experiences and personal backgrounds (Patton, 2015). Ladkin (2011) acknowledges the complexities in defining tourism employment, which are connected to the ongoing discussion of whether tourism and hospitality are to be seen as a common or two separate industries. We adapt an understanding of tourism employment in a broad sense, based on the UNWTO (2024:

5) definition of employment in the tourism industries referring to 'all jobs (or persons employed) providing tourism and non-tourism services in all tourism industry establishments'. According to the ILO (2006: 5), tourism industries are the sum of all tourism characteristic industries, which in turn can be defined as 'an industry that either (a) produces commodities of particular importance to visitors which therefore represent a significant part of tourism demand, (…) or whose existence is very strongly dependent on tourism demand and would be seriously affected were tourism to cease'. We adhered to this definition and understanding of tourism workers, in the sense that all focus group participants were falling into this categorisation. As we focus on the perspective of the working class, all participants were employees, who are compensated through salary-based contracts and rely upon their earnings from wage labour. The participants were contacted and invited online (especially through social media) and via existing contacts in the tourism field in Barcelona from previous research. Apart from being willing to share and discuss own experiences, expectations and needs of workers in the tourism sector, no further background information on the research approach was given prior to the focus group. All necessary information about the researcher and the research project as well as the focus group procedure was explained verbally at the beginning of the focus group. The revelatory heterogeneous group highlighted diverse perceptions of tourism labour among workers and thus fulfilled the goal of providing an information-rich perspective on the research topic (Daniels et al., 2018). Furthermore, in the sampling process we paid attention, that there are no hierarchies or power imbalances within the group (Barbour, 2018). Along with Krueger and Casey (2015: 26) we tried to establish a 'permissive environment that encourages participants to share perceptions and points of view'.

The focus group that forms the empirical basis of this research took place on the 24 August 2022 in Barcelona. Participants were nine tourism workers from different employment fields and employed by different companies. The group constellation reflected the predominant female and migrant workforce in the tourism sector in Spain (Cañada and Izcara, 2022), insofar as eight out of nine participants were female and six out of nine participants were not from Spanish nationality (Table 1).

The focus group was organised in three stages, which also laid ground for the structure of the results section. First of all, participants shared insights on their current situation on the tourism labour market (see Section 5.1) and subsequently discussed their wishes and demands for change (see Section 5.2). Throughout this part, the session was moderated using guiding topics and questions. In addition to oral contributions

Table 1 Focus group constellation

–	Nationality	Employment field	Employment type	Gender
P1	Brazil	Event Industry	Self-employed	female
P2	Spain	Retail	Regular contract	female
P3	Spain	Kitchen	Regular contract	male
P4	Colombia	Cleaning	Regular contract	female
P5	Ecuador	Cleaning	Subcontracted	female
P6	Spain	Cleaning	Subcontracted	female
P7	Peru	Cleaning	Subcontracted	female
P8	Belgium	Catering trade	Regular contract	female
P9	Brazil	Event Industry, Nightlife	Self-employed	female

Source: Author elaboration.

and as a means to render the session more dynamic and visual, note-pads were made available for all participants where they had to write down key words and ideas associated with the themes being discussed. Second, the focus group moderator presented and defined the four policy programmes to the participants, which, third, were asked to assign the keywords collected during the discussion to the four policies. This was done in a collective manner, placing the note-pads on a board with regard to the potential of addressing their problems or meeting the demands formulated. Furthermore, participants were given the opportunity to specify which of the issues they highlighted would not be addressed by the policies and would therefore require alternative measures. Figure 1 depicting the final visualisation of this process, as well as a further analysis of this activity can be found in Section 6. The sense of implementing an interactive character in a focus group through specific tasks or activities is to foster active participation, enhance collaboration and stimulate creativity amongst participants in order to generate data and insights in a synergistic manner (Finch and Lewis, 2003).

This study furthermore adapts a mixed-methods approach of data triangulation to strengthen the methodological basis of this research (Patton, 2015). Apart from the focus group, ten semi-structured stakeholder interviews with high-level officials from the public administration of Barcelona (IADM1,2), social movement activists involved in the debate around tourism degrowth in Barcelona (IACT1,2,3), tourism science academics of different public universities in Barcelona (IACA1,2,3) and executives in management positions of local tourism businesses (IBUS1,2), all conducted in May and June 2021, serve as a foundation for the preparation of the focus group and also complementary enhance the credibility of evidence presented in the results section, by providing cross-data validity checks (Mertens and Hesse-Biber, 2013) (Table 2).

Conducting the stakeholder interviews was the first step in the research process. Targeting the research participants for the stakeholder interviews followed the principle of purposive sampling (Patton, 2015). All interviewees were contacted online and given information about the research before the interviews. The interviews were guided by predetermined questions, whilst still allowing the interviewees to express insights on their own experiences and perspectives on the research topic. Building on the contextualisation of the situation by the stakeholders from diverse professional backgrounds and involvements in the debate around urban tourism development in Barcelona, the focus group described before was then methodologically developed upon the empirical foundation of the interviews. We use this qualitative method triangulation to achieve

Table 2 Overview of interviewees

–	Institution/Organisation/Business
IADM1	Consell de Turisme i Ciutat
IADM2	Consorci de Turisme de Barcelona
IACT1	Ecologistas en Acción
IACT2	Assemblea de Barris pel Decreixement Turístic
IACT3	Federació d'Associacions de Veïns i Veïnes de Barcelona
IACA1	Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
IACA2	Universitat de Barcelona
IACA3	Universitat Oberta de Catalunya
IBUS1	4-star hotel owner in Barcelona
IBUS2	Certified tour guide for Catalonia

Source: Author elaboration.

more comprehensive understandings of the research phenomena through enhanced data richness and depth of inquiry (Lambert and Loiselle, 2008). The interview data complement the focus group data in Section 6 to explore the structural characteristics of potentially path creating policies in the tourism sector. The synergy of data sources ultimately creates a more complete picture of the research topic. All interviews lasted in between one and two hours. Eight interviews were conducted personally in Barcelona and two interviews took place online, using the software Zoom.

The effort to protect the confidentiality of the participants of the focus group and the interviewees was ensured at all times. The focus group was conducted in Spanish, the interviews in either Spanish, English or German. All the material was recorded (with permission of all participants/interviewees), transcribed and subsequently translated to English by the authors.

Regarding the analysis of the data, a primarily inductive approach with an open coding process was used. As Thomas (2006: 239) outlines, in the inductive analysis 'although the findings are influenced by the evaluation objectives or questions outlined by the researcher, the findings arise directly from the analysis of the raw data, not from a priori expectations or models'. The only level of a priori set deductive codes was the categorisation of the findings of the transcribed discussion in the focus group as well as the visualised collection of the key themes and their respective relation to the four policies into the four dimensions of empowerment or disempowerment (Scheyvens, 1999). The analysis of the empirical data was carried out with MAXQDA to guarantee rigor by enhancing validity, transparency and credibility (Chandra and Shang, 2017).

6 RESULTS

The following section focuses on the experiences of the workers in the given context, as well as on the resulting demands and desired changes on the labour market through their perspective. The analysis is structured into the different forms of psychological, social, political and economic disempowerment being experienced or empowerment the workers are seeking. Finally, the path creation potential of the different policies is assessed. Throughout this section, the empirical findings from the focus group are being complemented by the perspectives derived of the stakeholder interviews.

6.1 Situation of the tourism workers

Fear and uncertainty regarding the continuity of their work characterise the psychological situation participants are experiencing currently, and which is especially enhanced through the COVID-19 crisis (P3):

> 'I think there is also a fear of being out of work. The fear of not having continuity of employment has also been a factor after the pandemic. If there was already poverty before the pandemic, this has even made people more afraid. So fear makes it easier for the company to control the worker'.

Furthermore, they account an increasing overload of work and stress at the workplace (P1):

> 'It is simply not possible to work more than we are currently working',

coupled with a lack of empathy and valorisation towards their work from many employers (P1, P6, P7). Finally, the participants report that the political mobilisation

of workers has resumed after the pandemic break, taking up the fight again to claim their rights and improve the working conditions in the sector. It gets emphasized that the main demands, such as an end to subcontracting and a reduction in the volume of work, have not changed significantly in comparison to the years before the pandemic, but must now be reintroduced into the public debate in an organized way (P5).

All focus group participants agreed that the struggle to gain a livelihood with their respective jobs has worsened since the COVID-19 crisis:

> 'Because in the end we are the same or worse off than before, because we have been regressing years and people are getting poorer and poorer while the millionaires make more than before at the expense of the working class. We are struggling to make ends meet'. (P5)

The necessary financial support during the pandemic came mainly from small self-organised collectives and the community, but not the state, as one participant explains:

> 'We have received help from small collectives to get ahead, because many of our colleagues have found themselves on the street (…) So they [the collectives] went on to set up soup kitchens. They have been the ones who have brought whole families forward. As we always say, the people save the people, because the governments and the institutions or the trade unions don't do anything'. (P6)

The hope of a staff member in the tourism department of the city of Barcelona that the COVID-19 crisis might be utilised for an improvement in working conditions for tourism workers, therefore, proved to be false:

> 'Hopefully now is a moment to rethink that, when the tourists come back to Barcelona, they [the workers] have better working conditions. I really hope that the city can develop normatives or whatever it's needed to make that happen'. (IADM1)

From the preceding aspect results an enormous disappointment towards political structures in their commitment to support workers during the crisis (P1, P5, P6, P7). The focus group participants, particularly those who are in subcontracted employment relationships and without the Spanish nationality, have until now not achieved any pandemic-related financial support, as one participant points out:

> 'COVID-19 has closed the doors [to receive public support] even more to us'. (P6)

Hence, there is no hope among them, that effective help can be expected from governmental structures (P5, P6, P7, P9). This is also manifested by the non-fulfilment of political promises such as the implementation of the 'Kelly law', which would have meant comprehensive improvements in the working conditions of subcontracted workers in the hotel industry (P5). Overall, there exists widespread disagreements between self employed or subcontracted workers (P1, P5, P6, P7, P9) and those in regular employment (P2, P3, P4, P8) about the role of the state as well as about the major trade unions. While regularly employed participants in less precarious situations emphasise the value of works council organisation supported by trade unions, the self-employed or subcontracted workers, who face higher barriers to union organising, feel left behind and have mostly lost faith in state or trade union institutions.

There is a common agreement that the externalised and subcontracted workers, who result to be the most vulnerable, were most impacted by the crisis in economic terms, while the ones organised in works councils were less affected (P3, P4). Most of the focus group participants report that with the beginning of the lockdowns and the total

halt of any tourism activity, they lost their jobs without any eligibility for unemployment benefits, short-time allowances or state rescue funds. One of the self-employed participants (P1) of the focus group shares her experience, which she has in common with many other self-employed or subcontracted colleagues:

> 'I was left in the […] pandemic with nothing to earn. Nothing, nothing. Because there are no events,I'm self-employed and bam [I'm without any income]'.

This shows that the governmental institutions have mostly failed to meet the needs of workers in precarious working environments and have not complied with the measures demanded by stakeholders at an earlier stage of the pandemic, especially geared towards fast and easily accessible universal social security measures to vulnerable tourism workers of all employment types (IACT1, IACT2, IACA1).

Those able to continue to work sporadically give account that wages were often paid long overdue or sometimes not at all due to insolvencies of their employers (P1, P6, P7). Furthermore, participants reported that it is common practice to employ migrant workers without legal residence papers and in subcontracted relationships, often drastically below the actual Spanish minimum wage:

> 'The first step is to have papers, so there are a lot of people like the chambermaids that don't have papers. But they [the employers] arrange something so that you can work. It's unbelievable. What they pay is five euros per hour if you don't have papers'. (P1)

The above-described developments, amongst others, led to many workers switching the sector and leaving the country during the pandemic, causing the much-reported shortages of staff many destinations and tourism businesses are experiencing currently (P3, P4, IBUS1, IBUS2).

6.2 Demands arising of the context

Regarding the psychological dimension of empowerment, several participants are calling for a better valorisation of their work from their employers (P1, P4, P6, P7). This demand is also expanded towards the worker–customer relationship. Different workers emphasise that a different vision of the hospitality system is needed, in which a humanisation of the often invisible work that workers are performing should be guaranteed (P1, P2, P7, P8). The participants share reflections upon the desired vision, which revolve foremost around respect (P8):

> 'I know a bar, where in the bathroom there is a sign that says this bathroom is cleaned by a person. And the fact that it has to be there for people to notice that kind of thing is horrible. It really disgusts me. […] It's an invisible job. In the end you can't see if it's done, but if it's not done, who cleans up the world? We lack respect for these people who do it, don't we?'.

Additionally, an underlying critique of money and power in contemporary capitalist societies is highlighted. One participant (P1), who works in the events industry, illustrates that an unjust system prevails in tourism in which many workers from the Global South depending on tourism labour are exploited and tourists predominantly from the Global North enjoy a feeling of superiority due to their high solvency. As a result, many of the participants repeatedly experience situations where both the tourists and the employers convey the feeling that they can get away with anything:

> 'So there is a whole colonial system within a capitalist system in which the idea of tourism is: I pay, I can'. (P1)

To confront the various problems on the labour market in tourism, the necessity of ensuring basic working conditions for all workers is acknowledged from the public administration (IADM1). One academic expert (IACA2) emphasises that:

> 'the first step is to give decent jobs to this generation. So, to get these cleaners and housekeepers a decent job, meaning a 40-hour contract, not a temporary job. And then we can start to talk about a more sustainable sector'.

Above all and as a first step from the workers perspective, improving the reconciliation between job and family and ensuring the continuity of work must be addressed (P3, P6). To ensure these basic rights, several participants highlight the imperative to continue the recently re-emerging organisation throughout the different workers' collectives and take their demands as a unified sector to the streets (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6).

Concerning social forms of empowerment to be advanced in the sector, different participants pledge for the worth of social tourism certificates to enhance the profile of sustainable travel choices for the consumers (P1, P3). In this way, participants explicitly stress the consumers' responsibility. To fulfil this responsibility, it is also emphasised that further information and educational measures regarding the social and ecological impact of tourism actions would be necessary (P1). Additionally, the need to improve training and educational measures within the sector is commonly identified by the focus group participants (P6, P7) and academics (IACA2) as well as the public administration:

> 'If we want to be an example of sustainable urban tourism, the first thing we must do is to educate well all the people we have working in our sector and equip them with really equitable salaries. We have to give value to these professionals, because one of the big problems in tourism is staff turnover'. (IADM2)

Improved educational measures, therefore, apply, on the one hand, to minimise job-related health risks and accidents, and on the other hand, to counteract the emigration of human capital to other countries (P6, P7).

As a means of political empowerment, participants view legislation changes within the tourism industry as inevitable (P1, P3, P5, P6). They place a special focus on an easing of immigration laws and easier access to legal working permits (P4, P6, P9). Female migrant workers particularly suffer from exploitative working conditions and externalisation due to their lack of political representation, despite arguably being the basis of one of the most important sectors of the whole Spanish economy (IACT3):

> '[we have to] work on the immigration laws, the recognition of migrants as a class which is actually the basis of everything. Like we come here to do the work that people here don't want to do and we do it well. All the people that I see are the most hardworking. The Latin Americans, the Africans, the Asians'. (P9)

To confront the political forms of disempowerment experienced by the participants, they are calling for the imperative of adapting an intersectional migrant and feminist perspective to resolve the racist and discriminatory issues that still affect many of them in their daily professional life (P1, P9). In order to create the necessary public pressure to move towards these far-reaching policy changes, which impact goes beyond only the tourism industry, two workers highlight the role academia could play in this regard (P1, P2). They directly call on the scientific community to endorse the workers' organisation, because diverse mobilisation and communication channels are needed to increase the public pressure on governmental structures:

> 'We need both internal and external impacts'. (P2)

Apart from trying to stimulate public and hence political pressure through workers' organisation and potential alliances with the academic world, focus group participants also formulate approaches on how to transform the economy from within, as a means of economic empowerment. Particularly flatter hierarchies leading to a more horizontal organisation of companies and the stimulation of an open and direct communication culture in businesses through the introduction of assemblies in which strategic decisions can be reached in a straightforward and efficient manner are considered essential in order to move towards a different economic structure:

> 'I am referring to an organisation with a more afro-diasporic vision, in which there are more assemblies as a form of exchange of ideas and functions as well'. (P2)

The ideas expressed by the participants therefore correspond with the proposals from researchers for strengthening cooperativism and social economy principles:

> 'When we think of cooperativism or social economy, we should also be talking about the tourism industry'. (IACA3)

As well as the introduction of bottom-up dynamic participatory governance approaches in order to move towards a more resilient and diversified local economy in Barcelona:

> 'That is something that should come from a bottom-up approach with dynamic participatory governance. The population needs to decide together with the politicians about the diversification and an alternative understanding of the urban economy'. (IACA2)

A tangible and, according to all focus group participants, central first measure towards a more worker-friendly future in the tourism industry would be to end the externalisation through subcontracts of many workers in the sector. They agree that this will effectively only be possible through changes in legislation and thus will ultimately depend on political will to regulate and impose stricter employment laws on companies:

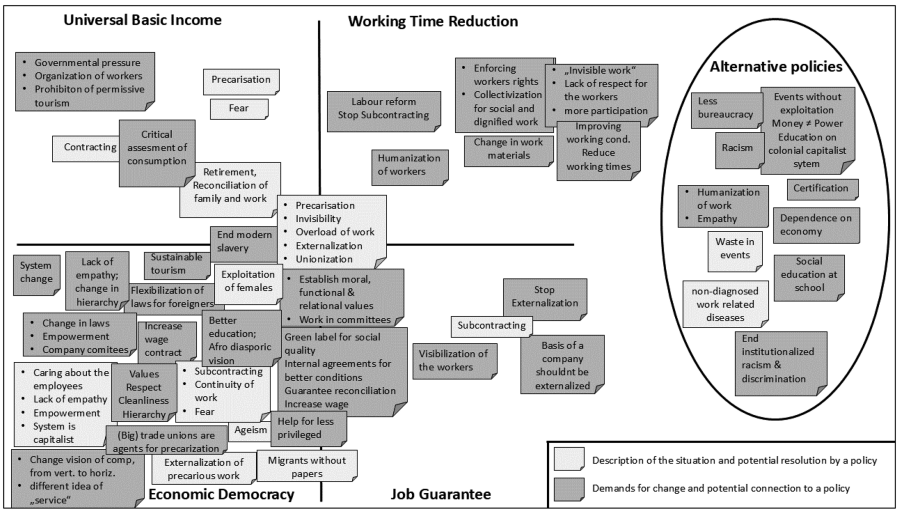
> 'I believe that we need to end outsourcing [externalisation]. That is the core principle. And the main basis of a company is that essential services should not be externalised'. (P1)

Several workers reflect optimistically that the current labour shortage and switch of sectors of many workers offers a good opportunity to shift bargaining power towards the workers and could thus provide an occasion for positive developments in the tourism industry (P3, P8). However, if an improvement of working conditions does not occur, the given circumstances would only entail a further intensification of work for those who remain in the sector (P3).

6.3 Workers perception of the policies

Figure 1 shows the result of the collective process of visualising the issues discussed throughout the focus group and the assessment of the path creation potential of the four policies.

The benefits of a UBI-scheme are primarily seen in social and political terms. Through the perspective of the participants, the key benefits of the UBI are an immediate end to the ongoing casualisation many workers are increasingly experiencing after the COVID-19 crisis. Participants assume that through the introduction of a UBI, far-reaching improvements regarding the reconciliation of work and family life could be achieved. The hopes of the workers regarding the UBI thus coincide with the central benefits from the perspective of degrowth advocates, which are the elimination of severe economic insecurity, a potential step towards decent working conditions and the end of the necessity to accept exploitative or degrading jobs just to survive (Alexander, 2015).



Source: Author elaboration.

Figure 1 Visualisation of the focus group results

It becomes apparent that the introduction of WTR policies would mainly address and improve psychological forms of disempowerment participants are being confronted with in their professional lives. This in line with research that found WTR policies to have positive effects on health and well-being (Lepinteur, 2019). The focus group participants see the prime benefit of WTR in a general humanisation of their work situation. Hence, it is perceived as an important step towards creating respectable and dignified conditions in the workplace. However, degrowth proponents acknowledge that the understanding of collective impacts of WTR policies is still limited and that potential pressures resulting from WTR on vulnerable workers need to be studied and addressed (Hickel et al., 2022). In the context of tourism with current labour shortages, it should be specifically examined to what extent reduced working hours really lead to less unemployment. Second, it is not yet clear whether a reduction in hours might not lead to an intensification of work and thus the opposite of the desired effect.

The concept of ED is participants' preferred concept in psychological, social, political and economic terms of empowerment. In a scenario of strengthened ED, workers aim to achieve bottom-up empowerment by structuring themselves into committees, hence changing the vision of companies from vertical to horizontal organisation and thereby overcoming the predominant marginalisation of female and migrant workers. ED is considered to have the potential to systematically alter the dynamics within the tourism sector, through which significant improvements in the working conditions could be realised. Participants ultimately expect that ED would allow for a new conception and understanding of the service economy. This clearly fits within Kallis et al. (2018) ED notion, as a necessary step towards more participatory forms of decision-making within businesses, in order to radically reform the structure of the economy in a degrowth scenario.

The main benefit of JG programmes would be to bring about the immediate end of externalisation and subcontracting tendencies in the industry, one of the prime concerns of the participants. When compared to the other policy features, the impact of

JG is unambiguously in economic terms of empowerment. Wray (2015) argues that in a scenario with existing JG, private employers will be forced to provide pay, benefits, and conditions at least on par with those of the programme. Accordingly, from the workers' point of view, JG serves primarily as a tool for achieving more stable working conditions. Workers thus have a clearly defined perception of the benefits of JG. This aligns with the degrowth literature's broader understanding of JG as a transformative instrument towards social and economic justice (Unti, 2015).

Factors that, from workers' perspective, would not be impacted by the policies presented are mainly social. In particular, it is striking that a large share of issues that can be attributed to social forms of disempowerment (social education, racism/discrimination, work-related diseases and lacking environmental awareness of the impacts of tourism) are not addressed by the four policies according to the participants but would require alternative approaches. Especially the experienced racism and discrimination on the job, which should be alleviated through systematic education initiatives, are the main challenges at this point.

7 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of this study highlighted that many tourism workers still find themselves in an exploitative system rooted in neo-colonial capitalist practice, which reproduces the precarisation of predominantly female and migrant labour. The focus group participants of this research outline a significant worsening of the situation within the tourism sector since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Generally, all the presented policy programmes are perceived as helpful in improving the situation in different manners, as outlined above. While all four policy schemes can be attributed to path creation potential, the confidence in top-down interventionist schemes like the UBI or JG is lower than in bottom-up empowerment through workers' organisation. A strengthened ED seems to be the most tangible scenario and is, therefore, prioritised as the most feasible and realistic option for the workers to transform their sector and empower themselves from within. Vogel et al. (2024) highlight that the discussed policy interventions have the potential to secure livelihoods and reduce dependency and vulnerability in volatile economies, such as the tourism industry. This could ultimately render the necessary stringent environmental policies needed to move towards degrowth in tourism more socially sustainable and politically viable.

The study shows that the workers lack confidence in political institutions to effectively improve their precarious situation in the tourism sector through top-down policies. By tolerating and in some instances even promoting their continued marginalisation for years, the belief that they could expect effective help from political structures eroded. The handling of the COVID crisis was just another step in this loss of trust and confirmation of the feeling of being left behind. Taking into account the current political climate in Europe and the almost total absence of degrowth positions in popular political discourse, the degrowth movement should, therefore, refocus again on its roots as a bottom-up movement instead of promoting top-down policy schemes as silver bullets to initiate a degrowth transition. There is currently a lack of political momentum for the implementation of policies, such as UBI, JG or WTR. The focus group showed that ED, on the other hand, has greater potential to mobilise the working class, challenge economic power structures and advocate for the democratisation of the economy. Johanisova and Wolf (2012) argue that strengthening ED would allow

for easier implementation of further degrowth policies, weaken calls for growth by better satisfying the needs of alienated and marginalised groups and mitigate growth pressures caused by predominantly profit-oriented businesses. Furthermore, it could be one central step in limiting the increasing inequality of societies in most Western democracies and thus be a measure against the advance of the political far right, which is highly influential in the current political discourse in Europe and makes any serious engagement with degrowth transformations on a broader scale unrealistic.

This paper added knowledge to the degrowth discourse regarding the general lack of understanding on how and through which policies to overcome growth dependencies in the tourism industry, by expanding the concept of path creation towards the evaluation of four key policy proposals of a degrowth transformation and integrating the so far often-neglected perspective of tourism workers. The findings revealing the different forms of empowerment workers are seeking in the selected policy proposals are of high value for governance and policy actors working on a socio-ecological transformation of the tourism industry, beyond the dominantly academic field of degrowth. A governance and planning approach to a tourism transformation should acknowledge and integrate the perspectives of the often-marginalised and oppressed voices of workers, which constitute the essential basis of the tourism industry. As such, it is more likely to be resilient and actionable than purely scientific visions of destination governance and policy-making, lacking the understanding of their social realities.

As Steen (2016) lays out, analysing path-creating elements requires attention to both context and agency. Hence, this study is clearly explorative in this regard and the results are especially tied to the context of the tourism industry in Spain and the personal experiences and views of the participating workers. The resulting limitations of the research design of this study, being based primarily on one focus group, are therefore, that we cannot claim the findings to be universally applicable and representative beyond the geographical context and time of data collection. Moreover, due to the challenging circumstances of the research, it was not feasible to establish a more time-intensive in-depth process to further involve the workers, who face heavy time constraints and stress resulting from their work situations. Further research in different geographical contexts and with a broader range of participants should verify and extend the explorative findings of this study to support future socio-ecologically sustainable policy-making in the tourism sector.

Finally, the findings of this study shed light on a paradox inherent in the degrowth discourse. Degrowth essentially aims for bottom-up empowerment but relies predominantly on top-down policy interventions as path-creating forces towards a socio-ecological transformation (Cosme et al., 2017; D'Alisa and Kallis, 2020; Durand et al., 2023). To harness the path creation potential of bottom-up initiatives and overcome this unproductive dichotomy inherent in the degrowth literature, a new research agenda through which the degrowth discourse increasingly fosters dialogue with workers should be pursued. The aim would be a common engagement, which works towards the joint goal of establishing transformative pathways to a growth-independent sustainable future.

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