

Horizontalism: systems thinking and the degrowth agenda

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What is horizontalism?

Horizontalism is a social and political idea that supports non-hierarchical structures, with decision-making power shared equally through direct democracy and self-management.

Horizontalism begins as a reintroduction of money supply theory. Its fundamental qualities of being 'horizontal', i.e., developing on a horizon as opposed to the vertical hierarchy, means that horizontalism has strong transference into politics. Characteristics such as self-managed and intentional cooperatives, collective agency and neighbourhood assemblies distinguish horizontal approaches from hierarchical ones (Sitrin, 2006).

It 'implies democratic communication on a level plane and involves... non-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian creation rather than reaction.' Thus, it departs from vertical organisations of society and strives towards a structure that is far more collaborative.

Future planning is one of the key operations of horizontalist methodology that opposes hierarchical and capitalistic ones, whereby horizontalism envisions futures that are created through self-managed and autonomous collective work with the earth (Liegey, Nelson and Leahy, 2026). This piece will introduce horizontalism, its cohesion with systems thinking, and briefly discuss why the Global North responds so poorly to it.

Background

Through its emphasis on diverse, decentralised and sustainable human development networks, horizontalism is symbiotic with the degrowth agenda (Gallagher, Evans and

Sarpong-Duah, 2024). The degrowth strategy is typically concerned with a total emancipation from capitalistic practices (Liegey, Nelson and Leahy, 2026).

Basil Moore's (1988) reintroduction of money supply, being an elaboration of endogenous money theories, eventually developed into structuralism (as we know it today) (Palley, 2013). Nevertheless, theorising development from an equal level was revolutionary for its time, closely aligning with current post-capitalist theories which remain unexplored in the Global North.

Countries in the Global North, such as the UK, operate under a capitalistic structure, where class division, income inequality and immobilisation of talent are rampant. Attempts to close these gaps can only be sustained so far under a hierarchical structure, where, for most, lifetime opportunities are predetermined at birth. Thus, the degrowth agenda and horizontalism are hardly introduced in policy within the Global North, though horizontalism has had its adaptations in the Global South.

Sustainable human development: education paradigm shifts in Ghana and Argentina

Ghana and Argentina are the most prevalent demonstrations of horizontalism, much to the dismay of the West. Ghana has adopted horizontalism in their education policy, where introductions of artificial intelligence have strived to diversify approaches to education in pursuit of accessibility (Gallagher, Evans and Sarpong-Duah, 2024). Horizontalism is particularly situated in local educational contexts. It is such that performance management and teaching that demands engagement with universalist, globalised policy is enhanced through artificial intelligence.

In medical education specifically, artificial intelligence is being utilised to diminish resource waste and ultimately improve healthcare delivery and practice (Ankamah, Gyesei and Amponsah, 2024). Here, artificial intelligence demonstrates its likeness to systems thinking, through means of capacity for experimental learning, individual educational

preferences and synthesis of complex material. Artificial intelligence's education potential is such that unique challenges and discussions have a dynamic solution to be offered, which is of particular benefit to students with learning impairments. Further, virtual reality and augmented reality are adapted to help medical students in learning material they would otherwise need to enter a laboratory for, a privilege which may not be as abundant in the Global South. Ultimately, the use of artificial intelligence in education can be contextualised by systems thinking. Education, healthcare and technology are interrelated systems whose full benefits are extrapolated when treating such systems contingently.

A symbiosis of systems thinking and degrowth is catalytic of a paradigm shift. Such a paradigm has the potential to be horizontalism if applied correctly. Since their economic crisis in 2001, Argentina broke from vertical hierarchical systems and turned to the 'horizontalidad' (horizontalism). What was, at the time, a grassroots ideology has instead manifested as sustainable human development in Argentina (Campano et al., 2010).

Scholars identify the root of the persistent achievement gap in Argentina as resulting from standardised testing, which fails to account for opportunity disparities amongst various local communities. Marginalised communities are punished further when they don't perform to the same standards as well-resourced communities. Horizontalism identifies this as a problem, instead offering that education is addressed 'from the ground up', thus fostering a system which emphasises creativity and academia for all students irrespective of their upbringing.

It is to say that those who endeavour to bring about systemic change the most are those who feel most negatively impacted by unfortunate circumstances. This strives for democratic creation and relationships, a fundamental antagonist to neoliberal capitalism, which plagues education in the Global North. Thus, structural liberation from hierarchical institutions would trigger a paradigm shift, and implementing horizontalism would instead stimulate creativity and attentiveness (Campano et al., 2010).

Recognition theory

Change is often inaccessible, however, and to be progressive in sustainable human development is a post-capitalistic view: a diversion from social practices in the Global North. The Recognition Theory, coined by Terry Cooke-Davies (2026) of The Schumacher Institute, identifies recognition as an intrinsic knowledge that is held from within. It is the reveal of a pattern's hold on you, your knowledge and your being, when that very pattern may be one you believed to be studying from afar. This is resonant to me, and I feel it speaks to my privilege to demand change from my academia in the Global North.

Education is what forms the crucial foundation of using privilege to produce sustainable human development, and presentational knowledge acquisition may be the key. Anecdotal experiences, told accessibly through metaphor and story, offers itself as an invitation for the recognition of patterns we think are otherwise unrecognisable. This is vital in instances of revolution and change, such as degrowth and horizontalism, as it reconnects human nature and intrinsic values through a detachment from capitalism. Instead, global dissonance fades through systems thinking mechanisms.

Recognition theory offers diagnostic tools within intervention, and distinguishes four ways of knowing: propositional, experimental, practical and the aforementioned presentational knowledge (Cooke-Davies, 2026). These ways of knowledge are considered wholly in the Recognition theory's diagnostic tools, to best simulate the course that intervention will take place and its effects on sustainable human development. Such tools include analysing current systems: their cohesion with new theorised practices, reframing our current understanding of them, and pacing intervention so as not to fall into a 'trap'.

Thus, Recognition theory foregrounds a bottom-up approach to systems thinking: an apparatus to explain the flux of communication between people. Bottom-up approaches are important to gain a nuanced and concerted address on systems, through gathering all relevant information initially and basing jurisdiction on it. Ultimately, systems thinking

is imperative for sustainable human development, whereby the introduction of horizontalist practices would be a shift in paradigm that may more closely align the world with intrinsic humanitarian values. Thus, as I advocate for sustainable human development and the degrowth agenda, I offer horizontalism as a means to do so.

Reconciling different approaches

Alternative approaches to systems thinking are also composed of complex organs that are receptive to variation in society, such as 'management science' and 'viable systems model' (VSM). VSM requires that a system be agile, effective, interconnected and autonomous (Espinosa, 2023). It's contingent on the cohesion of shared purposes, processes, technologies and ethos. Management science is a scientific methodology that reduces work into discrete, repetitive tasks. It does so through applied problem-solving and decision-making, specifically applying this method to managers, thus enabling them to utilise systems thinking to optimise performance and efficiency.

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