



Interview with Timothée Parrique and Delphine Gibassier, for NBS article: “Can Businesses Get Beyond Profit and Growth?”

Degrowth experts Delphine Gibassier and Timothée Parrique wrote detailed answers to a series of questions posed by Charles Duprez. Duprez drew on their comments to author the article “[Can Businesses Get Beyond Profit and Growth?](#),” for the Network for Business Sustainability (2024).

If you’d like to read the original written exchange between Duprez and Gibassier and Parrique, please continue on below!

About the experts:

- [Timothée Parrique](#), economist and researcher at Lund University School of Economics and Management (Sweden), is a prominent advocate for the concept of degrowth. He wrote “[Slow down or perish: The economy of degrowth.](#)”
- [Delphine Gibassier](#) is Professor of Accounting for Sustainable Development at [Audencia Business School](#) (France) and founder of [Vert de Gris](#), which helps organizations with sustainability transformation. She contributed to the European Union’s Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) standards and now [works on post-growth](#).

1. **C. Duprez: There is little understanding of what companies should look like in a post-growth society. Could you explain to us what a post-growth company is?**

T. Parrique: *Degrowth* is a transition, a just, convivial, and democratic downscaling of production and consumption to reduce ecological footprint in high-income nations. I don’t think it makes much sense to speak of a “degrowth company” (in the same way that there is no such thing as a “growth company”). A degrowth transition will require certain actors to produce and consume less while enabling others to keep operating, the net result being a decrease in overall economic activity. **Post-growth, on the other hand, describes a destination.** A post-growth economy remains in a **steady-state in harmony with nature that can prosper without growth.** This is an economy where actors prioritise sustainability, social justice, and wellbeing over financial indicators like revenues, profits, and GDP.

D. Gibassier: Let’s say that in a world where other bricks of the system would have also changed, a post-growth company is one that understood the [three circles of René Passet](#), or [the doughnut of Kate Raworth](#), therefore their activities do not bring us to overshoot planetary boundaries (e.g. climate change, ocean acidification) or destroy social foundations (e.g. education, health, social equity). It is of primary importance to consider the macro-environmental and social conditions under which companies have to work: we live in a world of limits, not in a “no limit world”. As shown by the three circles of René Passet, the economy is a small part of society, which itself is part of the environment.

2. **C. Duprez: But then what specific goals or traits match this concept for businesses?**

D. Gibassier: For the economy to thrive, the environment and society must thrive. This means that businesses should prioritize (a) doing no harm to the environment and society (avoidance), (b) if harm is done, reducing that harm, and (c) recognizing that companies could be in environmental or social bankruptcy if they cross planetary boundaries or social foundations.

We push individual success metrics for organizations, stressing responsibility but overlooking broader, vital metrics. Shifting focus to multi-actor and multi-level measurements could redirect attention from the organization itself to broader concerns (e.g. ecosystem health, poverty). Take Seabos, for example, bringing key industry players, including scientists, together to tackle issues like overfishing or modern slavery that individual actors couldn't solve alone. Seabos decided to de-zoom the industry and work on the ocean as an ecosystem, urging other industries to collaborate on environmental and social issues.

T. Parrique: I can think of three main characteristics that will enable organisations to both navigate a degrowth transition and thrive in a post-growth economy. **Firms should be (1) not-for-profit, (2) jointly-owned as cooperatives, and (3) small enough to be democratically-controlled.** Instead of being organised around moneymaking, a not-for-profit company is organised around a clear and irrevocable social or/and ecological purpose. A cooperative is an organisation owned and democratically run by its participants. Effectively, it turns employees (and even broader stakeholders) into shareholders, except they cannot either purchase or resell their shares. And to be able to self-organise following the principles of direct democracy, companies should also be limited in size. Only companies demonstrating ecological sustainability and possessing a clear, legitimate mission for the common good should be legally allowed to operate. This requires companies to shift their key performance indicators, prioritizing social and environmental metrics over financial ones.

D. Gibassier: However, we are incapable of reconsidering accounting from scratch. Our current system, tied to tax and legal structures is always a double entry system that ends with a profit & loss account. Yet, it's crucial to link the economy with social and planetary limits and reconsider the unit of accounting, as outlined in Bebbington and Larrinaga's work on accounting FOR sustainable development: economic profit should not be the single unit of success. Accounting has taken very different forms in the past: ancient Egypt, in Buddhism, also in colonial times. Christine Cooper and Daniela Senk have also started to push the idea of a possible eco-feminist type of environmental and social accounting.

3. **C. Duprez: According to you, what legal form of company is best suited to a post-growth society?**

T. Parrique: The most promising legal form that currently exist is **the French *Société Coopérative d'Intérêt Collectif* or SCIC (collective interest cooperative company)**. It's a cooperative with a mission of social interest, which limits the distribution of its profit, includes a diversity of stakeholders and its governance, and is externally audited on a regular basis. Governed by a one-person-one-vote system, its mission revolves around producing goods and services for social benefit, explicitly outlined in the company's statute. Comprising a multi-stakeholder board, including workers, beneficiaries, and a third party (e.g. public authorities, funders, associations, private business), a portion of its profit must be re-invested in the company and can't be appropriated by private parties.

D. Gibassier: I would also mention companies with shareholder foundations ("fondations d'actionnaires" in French), where employees can buy back their own companies, etc. Two key characteristics are crucial:



(1) legal forms involving a wider range of stakeholders and (2) those limiting profit to social and environmental goals. But we haven't gone far enough: two missing aspects are their ability to consider the long term and the forgotten stakeholder (the next generation), but also the “silent stakeholder” (earth and our shared resources).

4. **C. Duprez: But can we achieve that with for-profit private enterprise?**

T. Parrique: No: in a post-growth society, they should not exist. The profit motive is an outdated institution that is an obstacle to any ambitious ecological transition. I would even go further and argue that it is a near-pathological deviance that should be considered inappropriate anywhere except inside casinos. Economics is about the satisfaction of needs and the securing of wellbeing, not the accumulation of money. So, it would make more sense to have a *for-wellbeing motive* rather than a *for-profit motive*. Said differently, all companies should have a not-for-profit legal status with strict non-distribution constraints, meaning that financial surpluses cannot be appropriated by private individuals. In spirit, this resembles the French legal status of *association*, a group of people coming together for a common purpose that is not to make a monetary profit.

D. Gibassier: I would add that the question of profit is the same as the question of GDP: both are outdated. This is not an interesting goal either at country, regional or company level. But I think that even before the *for-wellbeing motive*, we should have a for-earth (nature) motive. For instance, many indigenous communities have learned to live in harmony with their ecosystems, knowing that they depend on them. Learning from others could reshape our measures of success and our relationships with both people and nature.

5. **C. Duprez: Is this realistic?**

T. Parrique: For-profit business is not an inescapable status quo. In theory, all existing companies with several employees could transition to a not-for-profit legal status, which, in terms of number of productive organisations, is the rule rather than the exception in modern economies. Indeed, there are only 287 large firms in France, much less than SCICs (1,359) and associations (1,5 million).

D. Gibassier: It is completely realistic. I think the B corporation status, the social enterprises and the purpose companies in France are good examples of transition in progress. For this we need more leadership also from governments to provide legal status, tax status and accounting change required to further the first changes that we already see.

6. **C. Duprez: What should then be the first move towards a post-growth business model?**

T. Parrique: I would advocate changing your legal status and **becoming a non-profit organisation**. Specifically: **dilute the ownership** of the organization within a broader group of stakeholders, organize a stakeholder convention to **define the social and/or environmental purpose of your business**. If production involves too many stakeholders, territories and activities, the organization can be divided into a number of autonomous local entities. Each of these entities can then define its own social-ecological performance indicators and, if necessary, organize a certain reduction of its production levels, depending on context.



D. Gibassier: Companies should start **by asking good questions**. A lot of organizations, including bold movements, understand the need for change but are still looking for economic growth. It's due to inadequate questioning. Imagine a transport company upgrading its vehicles and adopt a circular economy. They need to question what and why they transport, rethinking their role and value chain to minimize transportation. Just like the Seabos example, companies must collaborate within and beyond their industry, engaging various stakeholders to redefine their purpose

Questioning the size matters too. While there's no ideal size, ecosystem-tailored small businesses are often more resilient. With modern information sharing, solutions from different regions are easily accessible. Initiatives from elsewhere can be replicated if they suit your ecosystem. **It's about fitting your environment, not conquering the world!**

7. **C. Duprez: But what would this mean for currently large companies? We feel like people would struggle a lot with the idea of downsizing companies as it means social consequences (layoffs, etc.). How can a company gracefully navigate a desizing process?**

D. Gibassier: Large companies have already split in the past. the EU sometimes also decides not to allow for mergers... So it is not unusual to see companies refrain from growing, or adapting better to their market. A retail company I was talking to the other day explained how they had recalibrated their company from a multi-country approach to a simpler French approach. Some large companies (conglomerates etc) have split in the past. I don't think that would mean so much downsizing but rather potentially more jobs, locally.

T. Parrique: After the Global Financial Crisis, discussions arose about the necessity to split "too-big-to-fail" banks that became a risk for the whole economy. We're now facing a similar problem with **too-big-to-be-sustainable businesses** with enough power to block any ecological transition. The economies of scale of these giants increase their profit margin while often deteriorating working conditions, fiscal justice, and ecological footprints. Slicing up these global giants into smaller, more grounded and more democratic entities is likely to improve these aspects, even though it will most certainly lower the profitability (and power) of corporations. If Total was run as a SCIC, it would have ceased extracting fossil fuels long ago. The only reason Total still does is because key decisions are taken by a handful of shareholders who only seek to maximise their return on investment.

D. Gibassier: We must understand that simply changing system components such as accounting and legal structures will not work without placing humanity at the center of society. This, unfortunately, cannot be done only by changing all to cooperatives or benefit corporations: the whole government of our societies must change to allow for more social justice overall first. We also need to rethink our ways of "living together" (education first) so that post-growth companies can exist, but not in a vacuum.

About the Author

Charles Duprez is a PhD student in administration at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) and in Sociology at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS). His research interests lie in social justice in the ecological transition with special focus on the post-growth economy and on the transformation of forms of social solidarity. Before his PhD, Charles worked for several years for the Network for Business Sustainability as a digital strategy manager.