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## EDITORIAL IN DEFENCE OF SCIENCE, ECONOMICS AND THEORY



BY TONE SMITH, ESEE NEWSLETTER EDITOR

Welcome to Pontevedra! I would like to start by thanking Mario Pansera and his team for all their hard work over the last year. Clearly 1200 participants registering for the conference is a great success, but requires a lot of organising.

This is the first ever in-person conference combining ecological economics and degrowth. Covid meant the planned event in Manchester was, after delays and a lot of work, converted into an online conference in 2021. Much can be achieved with online meetings, such as enabling inclusiveness and avoiding travel, but face-to-face conferences provide more meaningful experiences and chances to interact dynamically, discuss, socialise and learn from each other.

I would like to take a moment to reflect on some topics for discussion over the coming days. Part of the interaction expected at this conference involves reflecting upon the relationships between ecological economics and degrowth. What constitutes these collectives, and what should we expect them to do? Is degrowth an applied research area within ecological economics, does ecological economics provide the theoretical grounding for degrowth, and more generally what do the two want to achieve together?

Answers to such questions depend in part on our definitions of degrowth and ecological economics, which are themselves contested. For example, the 2022 IPBES report on “The diverse values and valuation of nature” presented degrowth as a sustainability pathway underpinned by ecological economics which is described as a “key body of knowledge”. Degrowth is variably seen as a process, an end, an approach, a pathway, a strategy, a social movement, or some combination of these. Ecological economics is in turn a debated and contested field variously regarded as a transdiscipline, a pluralist collective or a new economic paradigm.

Working within the *Rethinking Economics* network, I have increasingly

come to present ecological economics as an economic theory: a theory that should be taught alongside other economic theories in economics education, and a theory that has much relevance for degrowth. Calling ecological economics an economic theory is different from simply being an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary field integrating knowledge from various disciplines or combining ecology and economics. While traditionally coming from diverse backgrounds, an increasing number of ecological economists now regard themselves as (heterodox) economists — at least in Europe, where the social-ecological economics camp is strong. This entails reclaiming definitional power over the meaning of “economics” and what it is to be an “economist”. It entails adding positive content to reimagine economics — as the science of social provisioning — rather than letting the mainstream economists control definitions. It entails rejecting the exclusively negative associations of economics with utilitarianism and self-interest, prevalent amongst early degrowth writers such as Gorz and Latouche.

What draws us together at this conference is our deep concern for other beings and ways of being, and the need to transform away from the current destructive and discriminatory social-economic system(s). However, most scientific approaches have no apparatus to theorise about creating change. In our joint efforts to transform there is much focus on the need for alternative visions or “stories” about other ways to organise society and economies. While we do indeed need this, engaging stories are not enough. It is also necessary to theorise how alternative futures can be actualised, *(Continued on page 4)*

## TRANSFORMING CLIMATE ADAPTATION AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

ESEE Newsletter editor Tone Smith interviews Taylor Black (master student and content manager for ESEE communication outlets)

### Tell us about yourself

Hello! I'm Taylor, and I'm currently studying in the Socio-Ecological Economics and Policy (SEEP) master's programme at the Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU). I'm from the United States (Tennessee to be exact), but I now live in Leiden (in the Netherlands), with my boyfriend and my cat, Zora. Before moving to the Netherlands, I lived in Vienna for one-and-a-half years studying in the SEEP programme. In my free time, I enjoy cooking new foods, spending time outside in the sun, swimming, taking trains, snuggling with my cat, practicing yoga, and reading. Lately, I've also been also trying to learn some new languages, including German and Dutch, as well as improving my French.

### What are you researching?

I'm currently working on my master's thesis, which is on the topic of locally led climate adaptation. Specifically, I'm analysing barriers and enablers toward transformative locally led adaptation, which addresses the underlying structures and practices that are driving unequal climate vulnerability and overtly challenges predominant power structures, economic inequalities, and social injustices. For my analysis, I am relying on a mostly abductive and qualitative approach. I am conducting interviews with several community practitioners who are working in locally led adaptation in various countries in Africa and Asia, as well as with a couple of researchers on locally led adaptation at research institutes and non-profit organisations (NGOs). The interviews are still ongoing, but the results are already super interesting! I've greatly enjoyed speaking directly with community practitioners and hearing about their experiences with climate adaptation and local resilience.

### How were you introduced to ecological economics?

Frankly, I had not heard about ecological economics until I started looking for postgraduate programmes. For my bachelor's, I studied international affairs and



French, and never came across the field of ecological economics, nor did I encounter it afterwards when I was working at an environmental NGO in the US. When I started looking for a potential master's programme, I sought out programmes that were interdisciplinary in encompassing social, ecological, and economic issues, so, naturally, I found the SEEP programme, and through SEEP, I was first introduced to ecological economics. Now, I'm in charge of the communications content for ESEE, which has further exposed me to the field of ecological economics and introduced me to some of the incredible people working in it.

### If you were in charge of the world economy for one day, tell me one thing that you would do and why?

I don't have a strong economics background, so it may not be wise to put me in charge of the world economy for a day... But nevertheless, I would still make a lot of changes while I can! Generally, I would eliminate fossil fuel subsidies, make trains free, heavily tax the wealthiest people, and try to implement a foundational economy (is all this possible in a day??). I've also been focusing on my thesis a lot lately, so this answer is very related to that, but I would definitely change the structures for distributing climate finance that are currently often inaccessible, limiting, and unequal. Climate finance, especially for adaptation, is a debt that is owed to the

people who are most vulnerable to climate change by the funders who are often from the countries contributing most to the problem. Thus, I would open up climate finance opportunities so that it is readily accessible and unrestricted for the people who need it — no more arduous grant-writing procedures or quantitative metrics to assess adaptation projects! Instead, we'd redistribute the funding so that more money flows directly toward local adaptation efforts in the areas that are most vulnerable to climate impacts. So, yeah, I'd have a pretty full day.

### Tell me one thing that you think many ecological economists don't realise, but should

I think one of the most important things that researchers and academics in ecological economics need to emphasize is a more transformative process to conducting research that captures the plurality of knowing and doing. I think many ecological economists may already realize this, but in practice, it can be quite challenging to implement, and it's something that I wish had been more discussed in my master's courses, particularly related to research methods. It's something that I've also been thinking about with my thesis, but it's so important for researchers to actively engage with different forms of knowledge and ways of creating knowledge, whether that be through art, interactive media, collaborative workshops, etc. It's particularly important in working to decolonize and diversify research.

### What's next? Do you have any specific future plans?

Well, first, I have to finish my master's thesis. I'm aiming to complete it in August, but we'll see if I'm able to pull that off... After my thesis, I will continue interning at the Global Center on Adaptation in Rotterdam, and then I will search for jobs in the field of ecological economics, climate adaptation, environmental governance, and just transitions, with the goal of staying in the Netherlands. For now, I'm trying to enjoy working on my thesis, looking forward to summer, and taking every day as it comes.

# HUNGARY: A STRANGE PLACE FOR ECOLOGICAL ECONOMICS TO FLOURISH

by Gabriella Kiss (ESEE country contact for Hungary) and Alexandra Köves (vice-president of ESEE), both work at the Research Centre for Ecological Economics, Corvinus Institute of Advanced Studies, Corvinus University of Budapest.



Photo: The 2017 ESEE Conference LOC in front of Corvinus University

At the country contact meeting of the 2022 ESEE Conference in Pisa, we were asked to put little round stickers on a relatively large map of Europe to show where ecological economics is researched, or teaching offered. The area of Hungary was quickly covered with colourful dots. This is, of course, on the one hand due to the country being quite small on a map drawn by hand, and on the other, most major universities in the country have at least a small ecological economics hub consisting of a few researchers. Its active participation in the ecological economics community might also be reflected by the fact that currently both the president elect of ISEE and one of the vice-presidents of ESEE are Hungarian ecological economists.

There are various universities that offer educational and research activities in the area. These include, amongst other, the Corvinus University of Budapest, University of Szeged, Eötvös Lóránd University, and Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Typically, these institutions offer ecological economics and degrowth courses on master's level and, occasionally, elective PhD courses such as the one in ecological economics at Corvinus. Additionally, there are research groups that operate independently of universities, such as ESSRG. The Environmental Social Science Research Group, along with their domestic research collaborators, are



Photo: Alexandra Köves (left) and Gabriella Kiss (right)

now part of leading international research networks and continue to contribute to important topics related to ecological economics. Moreover, the field is currently undergoing serious institutionalisation. The first PhD specialisation in ecological economics has been announced in Szeged, in the newly renamed Institute of Ecological Economics. The Research Centre for Ecological Economics was established this year at Corvinus. There are also ongoing plans to establish the Hungarian Society for Ecological Economics.

Ecological economics was taught already in the 1990s at Corvinus and books were published from the early 2000s (e.g. Zsolnai, 2001, Ohnsorge-Szabó László, 2003, Pataki & Takács-Sántha, 2004). The Hungarian journal Kovász was founded in 1997 and played an important role in the domestication of ecological economics in Hungary. The International Degrowth Conference in 2016 and the ESEE Conference in 2017, which both took place in Budapest, were great successes, further strengthening ecological economics in Hungary. Since the beginning of 2020, a Hungarian language podcast on ecological economics, with now over 160 episodes, has run with a much wider reach than just ecological economists.

## Environmentalism and communism

But is it not controversial that heterodox thinking is left to flourish in a country whose official representatives seem to undermine almost all collective international efforts to protect the environment? To understand this seemingly polemic issue, we need to turn both to history and to the cultural dimensions of Hungary.

The green movement and green issues had an important role in the country even before the regime change in 1989, and some claim that it contributed significantly to the fall of communism in the region. In the 1980s, there was a plan to build a dam on the Danube (Bős-Nagymaros) which would have caused environmental damage and required

large investments. To prevent this, a scientific and civil partnership was formed, and it became a political force known as the Duna Kör (Danube Circle). The communist government ultimately decided to abandon the investment due to the movement's strength and influence. This made the environmental protection movement an integral part of the resistance, and environmentalism became a symbol of action against communist power. For their efforts to protect the Danube, the Danube Circle and its leader János Vargha, were later awarded the Right Livelihood Award and the Goldman Environmental Prize. Donella and Dennis Meadows founded The Balaton Group in 1982 (Officially: the International Network of Resource Information Centers) and meetings have been held at the Lake Balaton for most of the past 32 years, involving many Hungarian environmental scientists. After such antecedents, it is not surprising that in Hungarian academic life, after the changes in 1989, departments dealing with environmental science soon appeared at Hungarian universities and were held in prestige.

## Specific Hungarian context

It is easier to explain the current state of affairs through the lenses of Hungarian culture. Geographically being at the crossroads of power struggles, Hungarians learned to find individualistic strategies to maintain psychological distance from those in power. And those in power learned not to overstep these individualist boundaries to be left in power. This individualism is coupled with an extremely high degree of masculinity, i.e., success and merits are put way before quality of life. This strange combination results in an environment where individual scientists can pursue their chosen fields provided that they are successful in what they are doing. And this is part of our understanding why ecological economics can flourish in a place where it might be least expected.



## Podcast

In May 2021, ESEE launched a podcast series called “Economics for Rebels”. Here, hosts Alexandra Köves and Sophus zu Ermgassen aim to communicate ecological economics ideas, open them to critical discussion and test their applicability – from global problems to people’s everyday lives. A new episode is released every second Monday. The podcast series, which has become tremendously popular, has by now released more than 50 episodes!

The last episode was an interview with journalist Nick Romeo on the critical role of the media in questioning mainstream economic paradigms. More information and previous episodes can be found here: [ecolecon.eu/esee-podcast](http://ecolecon.eu/esee-podcast)

If you feel like trying yourself out as a host, feel free to contact us: [alexandra.koves@uni-corvinus.hu](mailto:alexandra.koves@uni-corvinus.hu)



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## Call for contributions to the newsletter

Remember that as an ESEE member, you have the possibility to present your work and/or to comment on theoretical issues and policy relevant matters in this newsletter! We welcome several kinds of contributions, such as commentaries or debates. Such articles should be maximum 500 words. We would also like to present a selection of summaries of recent peer reviewed papers or policy reports. Such summaries should be kept to maximum 250 words. Deadline for contributions to the next newsletter is 15th of August.

## EDITORIAL continued from page 1

as addressed in two recent books: “*Deep Transformations*” and “*Foundations of Social Ecological Economics*” (see p. 5). Topics such as mechanisms, drivers, barriers, opportunities and enabling conditions for transformation are central to a number of sessions in the Pontevedra conference programme. Studying such aspects can be done, but depends on an approach to science which can grasp the deeper levels of reality, including underlying and invisible structures, mechanisms and even unrealised *potentialities*.

There is currently a tendency to talk about “Western science” as a universalised and general concept, and to contrast it with other forms of knowledge as if they were necessarily in competition and opposition, and as if all Western science is equally good (or bad). However, science is being carried out in various ways and we shouldn’t give-up on distinguishing the validity of different claims. While being aware that science is neither power nor value free, there is much in the saying: “The strength of a theory lies in its capacity to explain real world phenomena”. This

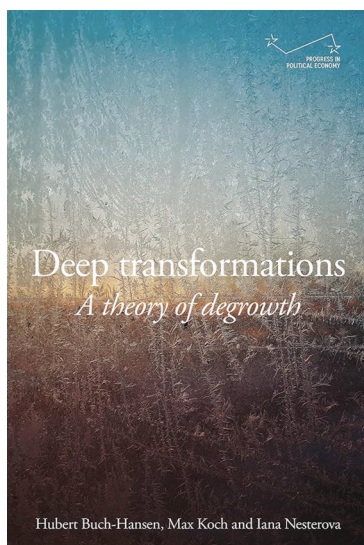
implies a much more ambitious take on economic science than a relativist position where it all depends on the “lenses” through which we see the world, or that all theories are merely stories told by different groups. If ecological economics is going to be a scientific theory, then it will have to focus on producing good causal explanations rather than being an eclectic collection of all sorts of knowledge.

Democratic processes and policy development is a different domain, where the challenge is to combine different sources of knowledge, while also keeping in mind values, interests and power. Democratic processes require other processes than scientific knowledge creation, and alternative potential ways to address societal challenges need to be considered, as addressed elsewhere in this newsletter. We might agree that policy pathways should not be determined via technocratic top-down institutions. There are indeed legitimate concerns over the colonial dismissal of local knowledge and indigenous knowledge that involves its own legitimate practices and insights as to how the world works.

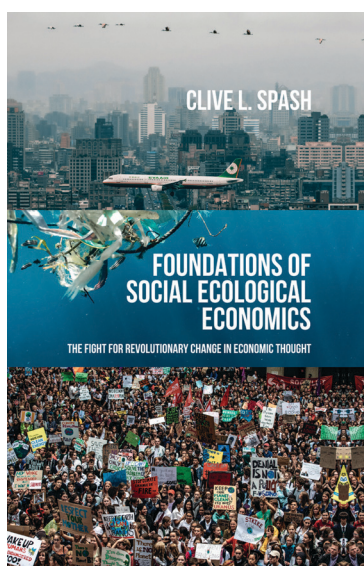
A degrowth society requires transformation of the hegemonic social-economic system, but also of ourselves. Hence, the increasing attention to the need for academics, activists and academic-activists to address not only their knowledge, but also their emotional lives. Attempts at radical change involve tremendous commitment, hard work as well as emotional highs and lows. Many people in recent movements (e.g., Fridays for Future, XR) got burnt-out in a short amount time. Personally engaging in “changing the world” and being critical of the status quo has social and psychological repercussions and is far from easy, contrary to the common comment “it’s easy to criticise”.

This conference has much to offer, both in terms of how we can better embody our feelings, emotions and frustrations, but also how we can be (embody) the change we want to see. However, theorising about the personal is different from experiencing it. We need both, but we need to know the difference. Let’s make this event a real festival for change and enjoy the experience!

## New books out in 2024!



**Deep transformations.**  
**A theory of degrowth**  
by Hubert Buch-Hansen, Max Koch and Jana Nesterova  
Manchester University Press



**Foundations of social ecological economics.**  
**The fight for revolutionary change in economic thought**  
by Clive L. Spash  
Manchester University Press

## ESEE Country Contact Network

The Country Contact Network helps facilitate the transfer of information between the membership and the Board of ESEE. The board of ESEE is happy to consider proposals regarding the appointment of country contacts for additional countries. Please contact: Rita Lopes at [rjl@fct.unl.pt](mailto:rjl@fct.unl.pt)

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## End of free access to *Environmental Values*

For many years, members of the ESEE were granted free access to the journal *Environmental Values*.

However, this offer seems to have been little used by ESEE members who probably already have access through their universities or research organisations. Since there were near zero

accesses by ESEE members in the last few years, the free access arrangement was ended when Sage took over the publishing process for The White Horse Press at the beginning of 2024. *Environmental Values* still continues to welcome submissions from ecological economists.

# CLIMATE ASSEMBLIES – HOPE OR HYPE?

by Ines Omann<sup>1</sup>



Addressing the climate crisis requires deep and rapid social and economic transformations that will have significant impacts on citizens' lives and behaviours. There is a growing recognition that such transformations need to engage the public directly (Averchenkova 2024).

Climate assemblies in the form of so-called “mini-publics” are a mode of involving the public in which a lot of hope is put these days. The OECD talks about a “deliberative wave” of citizens' assemblies. At the peak of that wave are climate assemblies. Since the French Citizens' Convention for the Climate began its work in October 2019, over 170 climate assemblies have taken place across Europe, of which more than a dozen at the national level, including Austria (see below), France, Germany, Scotland, UK, Denmark, Spain, and, currently, Sweden and the Netherlands (Smith, 2024).

Experience to date shows that climate assemblies can indeed be an effective tool for public participation, while at the same time making citizens more climate aware and politically confident and strengthening participatory democracy. They offer a great opportunity for civil society to advance public and political debate on climate action towards better quality and more robust and more legitimate climate policies, and can potentially help increase public acceptance, break political deadlocks and minimise social backlash against urgently needed climate policies. However, although hopes are high, expectations have, for various reasons, not always been met. Below, I give an overview of the Austrian climate assembly — which I co-coordinated for the Austrian Ministry for Climate Action — and reflect on its associated hopes, expectations and outcomes. But first, a brief description of what makes up a climate assembly.

1. I write this hot topic in my roles as coordinator and moderator of past citizens' assemblies and as a board member of KNOCA (the Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies). KNOCA is a European-based network, currently funded by the European Climate Foundation, that aims to improve the commissioning, design, implementation, impact and evaluation of climate assemblies using evidence, knowledge exchange and dialogue. Find out more at <https://knoca.eu/>

## What is a climate assembly?

A Climate Assembly is a form of deliberative public participation with three important key features: a) the random selection of participants amongst the local population, usually aiming for representativeness, through a democratic lottery and sortition process in terms of socioeconomic, gender, spatial and sometimes political characteristics; b) a facilitated learning and deliberation process amongst these participants on a topic connected to climate policy; and c) the decision on recommendations as an outcome.

Climate assemblies can take different shapes. Besides taking place at the national or sub-national level, one can differentiate between ad hoc and permanent assemblies, as well as between mixed and pure citizens' assemblies. Ad hoc assemblies are usually concerned with one specific topic or remit and are called into life on specific occasions. Permanent assemblies (e.g., in Brussels, Milan, East-Belgium) are recurrent in a specific location and institutionally embedded into local democratic structures on the longer term. Each cycle of a permanent climate assembly can be concerned with a specific and new topic, or the topic of one cycle can be built upon the outcomes of the previous cycle.

Usually, the participants of climate assemblies all stem from the local population and hold no other stakes. Yet sometimes, it can make sense to implement mixed climate assemblies, where citizens, policy makers (politicians, civil servants), and other stakeholders, such as local entrepreneurs, NGOs, initiatives and unions participate together. The sessions of a mixed climate assembly can either take place with everyone together, as in the case of Ravensburg (Germany) or the Dutch municipal concept 'G1000 – The whole system in one room', or they can follow a sequential design, as in Erlangen (Germany), where citizens and stakeholders sometimes meet all together and sometimes deliberate separately.

## The Austrian Climate Assembly

The first national Austrian Climate Assembly (Klimarat) was conducted from January to June 2022 (six in-person weekends). It had a clear aim: provide policy recommendation that support reaching climate neutrality by 2040.<sup>2</sup> The Klimarat was organized in response to one of the demands of a citizens' initiative on climate protection (Klimavolksbegehren) in 2020. In 2021, the parliament handed over the responsibility of organising a climate assembly to the Ministry for Climate Action.

The governance structure of the Klimarat was quite comprehensive with a core team, a facilitation and organisations team (with about 30 persons), a scientific advisory board, a stakeholder advisory board, a communication team and civil society engagement officers.

Statistics Austria was allocated the task of recruiting 100 participants by random stratified sampling through a two-stage civic lottery. The criteria applied were age, gender, education, urban/rural, region, income-level and having lived in Austria for at least five years.

The Klimarat process itself was organised with a mixture of scientific input, group and plenary discussions, market places and evening talks with experts from ministry and media, and also included non-verbal exercises to foster team building and support creativity.

Recommendations were developed in five thematic fields (two groups were organised per team): mobility, housing, energy, production and consumption, and food and land use. Two transversal themes were also identified — global responsibility and social justice — which were considered by all groups.

In weekend 4, the Assembly engaged with the Stakeholder Advisory Board and with politicians from all parties represented in the parliament, which was an important step in the process, while also a reality check that led to some frustration among the participants.

2. See the official website with lots of information material: [www.klimarat.org](http://www.klimarat.org)



Recommendations were first developed and decided in the working group, then in the workstream and finally in the plenary. The decision making was done via systemic consensus, meaning that only those recommendations against which no strong resistance existed, were accepted. Where this was the case, the recommendation was discussed and eventually reformulated, until there was no longer a veto. In the end, 93 recommendations were approved. These were then summarised in a public report, which was handed over to the government soon after the last weekend.

## Evaluation

One of the success factors of the Klimarat was the communication and press work. A professional communication team worked closely with the core team of the Klimarat to ensure publicity and transparency. Amongst others they organised press conferences and got in contact with journalists throughout the process. Participants who wanted to be put in contact with media got a special training.

The organisers held the view that involving the public in the process would increase legitimacy of the process and the social acceptance of the implementation of (radical) recommendations. However, there are not many climate assemblies that have done this successfully. In the Klimarat, an online consultation using the Pol.is platform was opened in the middle of the process. The interested public was able to rate 100 statements formulated by the Assembly and to add their own ideas. Around 6,000 people participated. The results were then discussed by the Assembly.

A scientific evaluation team accompanied the Klimarat with observations, interviews and surveys. The results showed that the expectations of the organisers and the commissioners to inform and empower the citizens, to offer a safe space where deliberation and serious conversation would happen, and to support the development of strong recommendations were fulfilled (Buzogany et al. 2022, Praprotnik et al. 2022). One could say the experiment of applying a new democratic instrument was a success.

Nevertheless, there remains a shale aftertaste. On the one hand, there was weak political support during the process (only one political party pro-actively supported the Klimarat; the bigger partner in the government even sabotaged it). On the other hand, very few concrete steps have been taken on the national level to follow up on the recommendations, despite the final results being widely reported across different media formats and following the publication of the Assembly's final report. Even a spontaneous rally in support of the climate assembly took place, organised by Fridays For Future. One of the few responses was a report by seven ministries, commenting on each of the recommendations and the promise that further work is taking place as part of the preparation for the government's updated National Energy and Climate Plan.

Luckily, the participants got active themselves by founding an association and pushing — quite successfully — for the implementation of the results on municipal, regional and federal state levels. Further sub-national climate assemblies are planned in Austria as a result.

## Conclusions

The first wave of climate assemblies provides evidence that citizens are willing and able to come to robust policy recommendations on complex and controversial aspects of climate policy, often more radical solutions that politicians would suggest.

However, although they have had some notable impacts on climate policy, public debate and assembly members' attitudes and behaviours, this novel democratic institution has not been institutionalised and embedded within our political systems. How this can be done should be the priority focus of further research and experimentation with citizens' assemblies.

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Photo: Klimarat – Karo Pernegger

# ESEE MEMBERSHIP

ESEE is the European branch of the International Society for Ecological Economics (ISEE), providing a network for ecological economics in Europe. ESEE is a diverse, friendly and inclusive society open to scholars, practitioners, decision-makers and activists who are keen to understand and act upon social-ecological crises and advance alternatives that enable 'living well within limits'. You will feel at home within ESEE if you are open to inter- and transdisciplinary work, and your research and actions cover topics like:

environmental and intergenerational justice

systems change

the commons

biophysical accounting

environmental values

environmental governance

degrowth

post-growth

ecological macroeconomics

## BENEFITS

ESEE offers several benefits to its members:



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Network and collaborate with ecological economists on cutting edge research for societal impact across Europe and around the World



### PARTICIPATE

Participate in initiatives of the ESEE Board that aim to synthesise research for societal impact, such as Staying Grounded, the ESEE podcast, ESEE summer schools, changing curricula, etc.



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- Advance the methodological and conceptual foundations of ecological economics
- Create a community of critical scholars who are ready to change the world
- Spread ideas of intergenerational and environmental justice, degrowth, or diverse values across academic fields and policy arenas
- Advance knowledge exchange and co-creation between scholars, teachers, students, practitioners and policy-makers
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## HOW TO BECOME A MEMBER

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