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**Bothness Despite Otherness: A Synergistic Approach
in a North-South Social Enterprise fusing Mutual
Collaboration with Degrowth Values**

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Disclaimer

The German-Kenyan organization under investigation will be referred to under the pseudonym *CADI* to safeguard its anonymity and confidentiality. Further, finding a single global standard for classifying countries and people is challenging. Therefore, we acknowledge that no specific best terminology exists. Since wording matters, in the following, we will geographically incorrectly refer to Kenya as the *Global South* and Germany as the *Global North* (Khan et al., 2022).

Abstract

Title	Bothness Despite Otherness: A Synergistic Approach in a North-South Social Enterprise fusing Mutual Collaboration with Degrowth Values
Authors	Ricarda Becker and Ladina Kaupp
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Purpose	This thesis aims to identify how mutual collaboration practices are infused with degrowth values within a business context that spans the Global North and the Global South. By examining the nature of intra-organizational collaboration practices among managers of a German-Kenyan company, we aim to enhance the understanding of degrowth values from theory with practical work examples.
Methodology	Our qualitative study follows the interpretive tradition and applies an iterative single-case approach based on abductive logic. We collected our data through twelve semi-structured interviews on-site in Kenya and over Zoom. Further, we carried out participative observations in Kenya.
Theoretical Framework	Our research builds on Froese et al.'s (2023) theoretical framework for degrowth-oriented organizational value creation. Based on a systematic literature review of 220 papers, this framework defines seven distinct patterns and provides a managerial perspective on degrowth. By focusing on one of the seven patterns, namely the pattern G3 of <i>joining forces in rewarding and mutual collaboration</i> , we can investigate managers' (inter)actions and reflect on how they are infused with three central degrowth values narrowed down and defined by Froese et al. (2023).
Conclusion	Key findings include the relevance of alternative terms contributing to a degrowth understanding in a north-south context. By introducing the concept of bothness, we suggest a degrowth understanding that builds on the alternative terms welfare, relocalization, and empowerment. These terms were reflected in practice by a strong team feeling of family, friendship, support, and a common drive for change and improvement. The compatibility of degrowth values with business operations in a German-Kenyan context underscores the potential for a mutually rewarding collaboration.
Keywords	Organizational Degrowth, Business, Case Study, Social Enterprise, Management, Kenya, Germany, Global North and South, Alternative Organizing, Mutual collaboration

Statement - usage of OpenAI for language alignment and rephrasing purposes: In this work, no direct sentences from AI were used; instead, they served solely as inspiration for linguistic refinements and as a source of inspiration for the further development and final formulation of the texts.

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Ricarda Becker and Ladina Kaupp

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1 Introduction

It is a typical Tuesday morning in the rural areas of Nairobi, Kenya, and Sulwe is seated at his desk in the office of a multinational corporation with branches in both Germany and Kenya. He stares at his computer screen, feeling the weight of the task ahead. The quarterly report is due, and the numbers do not add up. The company's growth trajectory seems unsustainable, and Sulwe cannot shake the feeling that they are headed for a dead end. He knows that traditional business models, driven by endless expansion and production, are no longer viable in today's world. Yet, convincing his colleagues and superiors of the need for a paradigm shift toward degrowth feels like an uphill battle. Sulwe has spent countless hours researching alternative approaches and exploring case studies from around the globe, but progress has been slow. As the morning wears on, Sulwe's frustration mounts. He takes a deep breath, feeling the corporate world's weight pressing down on him. But then, a notification pops up on his phone – an invitation from his friend Moritz to join him for lunch. Sulwe hesitates for a moment, torn between the urgency of his work and the chance to unwind with a trusted confidant. Ultimately, he decides to seize the opportunity to change scenery and perspective. As he steps out into the streets of Nairobi, Sulwe feels a sense of liberation wash over him. Surrounded by the sights, sounds, and smells of the bustling city, he is reminded of the resilience and resourcefulness of the Kenyans. Over lunch, Moritz shares stories of his struggles and triumphs in the local business community, offering Sulwe a fresh perspective on the challenges they face: the Kenyan entrepreneurs striving for continuous growth without considering that this form is not an option for the future. Inspired by their conversation, Sulwe returns to the office with renewed energy and determination. Armed with a newfound sense of purpose, he sets out to spearhead a grassroots movement for organizational degrowth within the company. Though the road ahead may be long and uncertain, Sulwe knows real change is within reach with his colleagues' collaboration and support.

1.1 Research Problem and Purpose

This thesis focuses on how embracing degrowth principles can address societal and environmental challenges in pursuing a more equitable and ecologically balanced future. Degrowth emerged as a critical response to the limitations of continuous growth (Banerjee et al., 2021; Schmid, 2018) and addresses the role of organizations within these capitalistic structures (Cheney & Munshi, 2017). In light of this, alternative forms of organizing are needed (Zanoni et al., 2017) to facilitate a transition that prioritizes social (e.g., individual, community)

and environmental well-being (Cheney & Munshi, 2017; Dahlman, 2021; Parker, 2002). Businesses that are oriented toward degrowth are considered to prioritize such social and environmental needs over profit (Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018). As the term might imply, degrowth does not necessarily mean a decline or reduction in economic output (Nesterova, 2020) but holds the potential to achieve business growth that sustains the well-being of people and the environment (Froese et al., 2023; Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018).

Our problematization centers on the nuanced understanding of degrowth, acknowledging its ambiguity stemming from diverse interpretations (Froese et al., 2023; Islar et al., 2024; Kallis, 2011; Lehmann et al., 2022). As a result, the term's practical implications remain abstract and ambiguous, requiring further research and analysis to disentangle its complex and multifaceted nature. Especially in a globalized world, where businesses operate across borders, an understanding of organizational degrowth that exceeds geographical boundaries and Eurocentric thinking¹ is required. Rodriguez-Labajos et al. (2019) argue that organizations in the Global South have not been fully engaged in the development of degrowth theory. "Leaving aside the well-known critiques about 'degrowth' as an unfortunate term, a revised terminology is needed that gives people in the South an opportunity to contribute" (Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019, p. 182). Therefore, a more concrete definition of what degrowth means for organizations operating in a north-south context is required. We examine degrowth through business dynamics rather than ecological or political frameworks. While existing literature highlights initial disparities in understanding degrowth between these regions, our study spans both contexts. This results in the following research question:

How are mutual collaboration practices infused with degrowth values in a social enterprise that spans the Global North and South?

We investigate a unique single case study on CADI, a social enterprise in the food manufacturing industry that requires mutual collaboration between German and Kenyan middle managers. As we will detail below in the case context, CADI integrates principles that are considered to be closely related to degrowth values. Our research aligns with the emerging body of literature on degrowth and acknowledges that existing case studies have primarily focused

¹ Eurocentrism entails interpreting the world through a Western-centric lens rooted in individualistic thinking (Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019)

on the food sector, which underscores our chosen research contexts' relevance (Ertör-Akyazi, 2019; Guerrero Lara et al., 2023; Öz & Aksoy, 2019; Pérez-Rincón et al., 2019; Renkert, 2019).

We aim to understand how mutual collaboration practices reflect degrowth values, contributing to a deeper understanding of degrowth for business (Froese et al., 2023; Henkammer, 2021; Lehmann et al., 2022) in a north-south context. The case represents contrasting economic contexts. The countries Germany and Kenya are interesting to study cases due to their distinct economic significance and evolving business relations between the two countries. As the world's fourth-largest economy and a central player within Europe, Germany substantially influences international environmental issues such as climate change (Lehmann et al., 2022). Meanwhile, Kenya's growing prominence as a trading partner for European nations, including Germany, underscores its relevance in the global economic landscape. Germany recognizes Kenya as one of their most important economic partners (Federal Foreign Office, 2024). CADI offers valuable insights into business collaborations between two countries representative of the Global North and South.

Building upon existing literature, we propose a qualitative, explorative approach to understanding mutual collaboration in a north-south context infused with degrowth values. Our main contribution to research builds upon the systematic literature review conducted by Froese et al. (2023), who classify seven degrowth groups based on real-world case studies. These groups allow for further practical application and analysis. We apply, revise, and extend the degrowth understanding, focusing on the group *Joining Forces in Rewarding and Mutual Collaboration* (G3). Our study utilizes four specific G3 patterns that provide a lens to investigate social interactions between managers. We recognize that the term degrowth is often applied retrospectively, primarily by researchers, as only a minority of organizations explicitly identify themselves as oriented toward degrowth (Froese et al., 2023). The degrowth label can be provided by examining the degrowth core values of “local and global equality, ecological sustainability, and conviviality and participation” (Froese et al., 2023, p. 2) within collaborative organizational dynamics. More specifically, G3 reflects the three degrowth values mentioned above as it demonstrates the connotation of initiatives that foster solution approaches (Froese et al., 2023) to be able to respond to societal trends such as globalization (Cheney & Munshi, 2017).

We aim to demonstrate to what extent G3 can be applied in the north-south context we are investigating. Importantly, Froese et al. (2023) acknowledge the presence of inequalities and power imbalances inherent in degrowth activities, resonating with concerns raised by other

scholars regarding the disparities between North and South (Chiengkul, 2018; Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019). Therefore, the framework of Froese et al. (2023) offers guidance for this study in analyzing managerial interactions within this context. It helps to capture the intricate dynamics involved, where individuals' subjective interpretations and value creation are crucial in shaping their understanding of collaborative activities. Although there are distinct contextual differences between the North and South, we assert that degrowth businesses must embody a principle of what we term bothness. The bothness concept aligns with degrowth principles as it acknowledges the importance of mutual collaboration between regions in promoting greater social and environmental well-being. Notably, this concept is rather context-independent and transcends carbon colonial approaches, attitudes, and practices. It is driven by recognizing a significant gap to explore practical insights in this context. Thus, bothness extends the understanding of organizational degrowth, acknowledging globalized supply chains and their intertwinedness with contextual and cultural distinctiveness.

1.2 Thesis Outline

This thesis consists of six chapters. The first chapter of the thesis served as an introduction, wherein the problem and importance of the research question were discussed. The challenges associated with the general topic of degrowth were explained, and a proposal was presented to address these challenges. The second chapter provides an overview of existing research and presents the theoretical framework. It develops initial ideas for understanding degrowth that combines four elements – theory, practice, and the Global North and South. After an initial conceptual delimitation, the various approaches to degrowth within research, primarily based on approaches from the Global North, are presented. This is followed by a discussion of degrowth from the perspective of the Global South. These two understandings are then placed in the business context to approach an organizational understanding of degrowth. At the end of this chapter, we will present our concept of bothness, which enhances our knowledge of organizational degrowth that bridges both contexts. The third chapter elaborates on the methodological research approach. Here, we address the philosophical grounding, the research design, and the research process. We also explain how our data was collected and analyzed. In the fourth chapter, we present and analyze our empirical data. The fifth chapter discusses our results based on the literature review. In doing so, we expand on existing concepts with newly gained insights and point out discrepancies between theory and our field research. Lastly, the sixth chapter summarizes the theoretical and practical contributions, addresses possible limitations, and presents the resulting suggestions for future research.

2 Theoretical framework

The following chapter presents the literature review to lay the theoretical basis for answering how degrowth values are realized within a north-south collaborative context. The first part of the literature review aims to explain how organizational degrowth differs from post-growth, green-growth, and sustainable growth. Given our company's operational presence in the Global North and South, we will then focus on understanding the relevance of degrowth in the Global South. Finally, we examine the significance of investigating mutual collaboration to understand organizational degrowth.

2.1 Conceptual Delimitation

Due to closely related terms surrounding the literature of alternative business models, this chapter focuses on delineating degrowth by outlining its relationship to post-growth, green-growth, and sustainable growth. While these concepts have similarities and are intertwined, they have distinct focuses.

Post-growth and degrowth both reject the idea of continuous economic growth but differ in their scope and underlying principles. While degrowth focuses more on reducing economic output and reorganizing a society toward sustainability, post-growth takes a broader view that encompasses cultural, social, and psychological dimensions (Islar et al., 2024; Kallis, 2011; Lehmann et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the terms green-growth and degrowth relate. Here, the connection lies in the contrasting approaches to addressing sustainability challenges. Green-growth narratives, prevalent in political discourse (Lehmann et al., 2022), first and foremost argue for resource efficiency and relative and absolute decoupling of CO₂ emissions from production processes (Parrique et al., 2019). However, degrowth focuses on transforming a “society that lives better with less” (Kallis, 2011, p. 873). Scholars critique green-growth for its potentially misleading objectives and its limitations in achieving sustainability (Hickel & Kallis, 2020; Islar et al., 2024). Green-growth is further considered as one strategy (among others like circular economy and sustainable consumption) of sustainable growth to achieve economic development while minimizing environmental impacts (Jackson, 2009).

Sustainable growth differs from degrowth in that degrowth questions the growth paradigm. The correlation between the two terms lies in reducing overall economic activity to ensure environmental sustainability and social well-being (Islar et al., 2024). The term ‘sustainable’, in this context, entails “ensuring and prioritizing [the] long-term survival [...] of humans, non-

humans, and nature” (Nesterova, 2020, p. 3). More precisely, “sustainable growth may be defined as an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human wellbeing and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level” (Schneider et al., 2010, p. 512). Integrating degrowth into sustainability science enriches the discourse and reinforces its intrinsic connection (Islar et al., 2024), offering alternative pathways to foster inclusive, equitable, and ecologically balanced societies.

These different perspectives lay the foundation for understanding degrowth and serve as an introduction to positioning this work within the diversity of perspectives on degrowth. Degrowth is not unsustainable growth that exceeds planetary boundaries and disregards ecological limits. Therefore, degrowth rejects business as usual, which prioritizes economic development at the expense of environmental degradation and social inequalities. Degrowth questions the assumption that continuous economic growth is necessary for prosperity. It is a voluntary rethinking of business-as-usual practices.

2.2 Diverse Approaches within Degrowth Research

The concept of degrowth is a subject of wide debate in academic circles, leading to various interpretations. This lack of a universal understanding has been recognized, with scholars highlighting the complexities of degrowth (Kallis, 2011; Nesterova, 2020; Parrique et al., 2019; Schmid, 2018). The idea gained prominence after the 2008 International Degrowth Conference in Paris following the economic crisis 2007/8 (Kallis, 2011). Today, degrowth is studied across different academic disciplines. It advocates for sufficiency and alternative economic models that challenge capitalist structures (Sekulova et al., 2013). Businesses are seen as political-economic agents for degrowth if they promote values beyond profit-making objectives. Among these are three essential degrowth values: local and global equality, ecological sustainability, and conviviality and participation (Froese et al., 2023, p. 2). The following section examines degrowth in the political and socio-economic camp and how the business camp conceptualizes it. This thematization of degrowth from two perspectives aims to discover the companies’ role as “a practical approach to achieving sustainability” (Islar et al., 2024, p. 1).

Political- and Socio-Economic Degrowth Perspective

The political-economic camp seeks to navigate and implement degrowth objectives within regulatory frameworks while considering broader socio-economic implications. For instance, social movements view degrowth as a political concept that challenges the dominant growth-oriented economic paradigm (Kallis, 2011; Kovanen, 2020; Sekulova et al., 2013). However,

opinions vary on what regulations can be implemented to address ecological, economic, and social sustainability (Kunze & Becker, 2015). Scholars with a less radical understanding of degrowth advocate for quality-over-quantity growth within the existing structures, striving beyond a sole focus on GDP increase (Sekulova et al., 2013) and aiming for enhanced societal well-being (Banerjee et al., 2021). Other researchers hold more radical views and call for an institutional and societal transformation initiated by political actors (Kallis, 2011; Kunze & Becker, 2015). These perspectives reflect the multifaceted approach of seeing degrowth as a means to reconfigure governance structures and economic systems to ensure equitable resource distribution and the reduction of social inequalities (Islar et al., 2024). These ideas can be framed as a problem concerning the argument that economic growth is essential for high employment levels and fiscal stability. The solution proposed by the political camp is to establish a welfare system that is independent of economic growth and financed by alternative sources such as taxes on property and wealth, carbon-intensive consumption practices, and the introduction of caps on wealth and income (Islar et al., 2024; Parrique et al., 2019).

While the political-economic camp discusses systemic and governance changes, the socio-economic camp focuses on the social implications and economic dynamics of transitioning toward a degrowth-oriented society. For example, research centers on alternative forms of organizing that advocate for democratic and locally responsible structures that reject the dominant socio-economic order (Dahlman, 2021; Parker, 2023). Here, debates concentrate on “living better with less” (Kallis, 2011, p. 873), and degrowth is seen as a means to “intentionally making the economy both smaller and better” (Nesterova, 2020, p. 1). Researchers argue that a degrowth economy does not mean shrinking businesses but that selectively growing small and medium-sized economic activities are necessary (Schneider et al., 2010). One form of social implication, suggested by researchers from the socio-economic camp is relocalization, emphasizing the importance of shifting toward more localized, community-centered systems to promote sustainability, resilience, and social well-being (Banerjee et al., 2021; Islar et al., 2024). A more sustainable and environmentally viable future can be achieved by rethinking production and consumption patterns at the local level, prioritizing shorter supply chains, and promoting knowledge and skill exchange (Liegey & Nelson, 2020). The relocalization approach can further be considered to emphasize the role of social enterprises in tailoring value to the needs and aspirations of individuals and communities within local actor networks (Froese et al., 2023; Zanoni et al., 2017). These, like other alternative forms of organizing, are characterized by attributes that are particularly receptive to care, the fulfillment of basic human needs

(Banerjee et al., 2021; Daly, 2007; Soper, 2023), and the acceptance of responsibilities (Dahlman, 2021; Parker, 2023; Werner et al., forthcoming).

The political and socio-economic camps share the aim to promote degrowth as a pathway to sustainability and social justice, with some more and some less radical proposals. In this thesis, we take a less radical understanding of degrowth. Less radical means that this study builds on a degrowth understanding, which does not aim for a socio-political transformation. Instead, this study builds on a degrowth understanding that sees companies as actors that can initiate a socio-political change, whereby this change does not necessarily have to take on broad dimensions but can also mean thought-provoking impulses. With a focus on degrowth on the micro level, this study aims to identify a practical degrowth approach for organizations that acknowledges the constraints and complexities of operating within existing systems while striving for positive social and environmental outcomes.

Business Degrowth Perspective

Compared to the political camp, researchers from the business camp follow a different approach specialized on the micro level, which is less radical. While some authors suggest that companies can act as political agents that can bring about social transformation (Hankammer et al., 2021; Nesterova, 2020), others propose a more modest approach, suggesting that different forms of corporations – such as social enterprises – can prioritize social structures and thereby practice a form of organizational degrowth (Froese et al., 2023; Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018). Given that businesses strive to develop practical strategies within the current capitalist system (Hankammer et al., 2021), researchers call for the examination of implications for business from a practical standpoint (Froese et al., 2023; Nesterova, 2020; Roulet & Bothello, 2020).

To enable businesses to embrace the concept of degrowth, scholars have developed frameworks based on extensive literature reviews (Froese et al., 2023; Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018; Nesterova, 2020). These frameworks are designed to promote ecological sustainability and societal well-being from a business perspective (Froese et al., 2023). While some frameworks are intended to initiate discussions rather than provide practical tools for business models (Nesterova, 2020), others define specific criteria to determine whether a company's activities align with degrowth principles (Froese et al., 2023; Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018).

These different orientations of frameworks relate to the theme of balancing utopian, idealistic concepts with pragmatic, solution-based concepts, discussed in particular in research on alternative forms of organizing (Dahlman, 2021; Reinecke et al., 2016; Zanoni et al., 2017).

In light of this research, it becomes clear that alternative forms of organizing that want to practice organizational degrowth must be balanced between concepts of non-existent realities on the one hand and practical implementation possibilities on the other.

Another subject discussed in the business camp is the role of leaders in implementing degrowth values in operational business activities. Khmara and Kronenberg (2018) argue that leaders' commitment to company values is one characteristic of organizational degrowth. Although this study does not directly investigate the impact of leadership on degrowth practices, it acknowledges the potential influence.

By aiming to merge organizational models with degrowth, business frameworks have been developed to promote ecological sustainability and societal well-being from a business perspective, balancing utopian ideals with pragmatic approaches. Considering, however, the argument that socio-economic and cultural contexts shape the implementation of certain principles within organizations (Thornton et al., 2012), it is evident that practical implications for degrowth-oriented organizations will vary between the Global North and South.

2.3 Rethinking Degrowth: Perspectives Regarding The Global South

When evaluating the concept of degrowth from a Global South perspective, we encounter challenges and opportunities. First, we examine degrowth challenges and reservations in the Global South. Then, based on case studies, we present arguments advocating for the potential of degrowth initiatives within this context. By doing so, we suggest that the term degrowth, despite criticisms, holds relevance in the Global South.

Degrowth: A Feasible Term in the Global South?

Scholars have raised concerns about whether degrowth suits the Global South (Kallis, 2011; Leoni et al., 2023; Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019). While degrowth or post-growth strategies may be advocated in developed countries to address environmental concerns, Leoni et al. (2023) argue that these approaches may not align with the development goals of the Global South, where economic growth is often a key driver for addressing socio-economic challenges. Although degrowth may fit the objectives of the Global North, it clashes with the needs and desires of the South, which still battles with historical situations of poverty and insufficient satisfaction of basic needs (Leoni et al., 2023; Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019).

Moving further to the micro level of degrowth, the question arises as to what extent certain organizational forms, such as a social enterprise practicing degrowth, can be combined with local values. Based on the assumption that social norms, values, and beliefs influence the

behavior of organizations (Thornton et al., 2012), it can be assumed that organizational degrowth values originating in the Global North are incompatible with the Global South. Individual values like responsibility and care for others, prevalent in places like Kenya (Aharonovitz & Nyaga, 2010), may not align with economic degrowth models from the Global North.

In a globalized world where businesses operate across borders, it is crucial that geographical boundaries and Eurocentric thinking, which may limit organizational degrowth, are minimized. A revised terminology would allow people in the South to engage and shape discussions around degrowth (Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019). Alternative terms like redistribution, relocation, and welfare have been proposed to align with local values and priorities, promoting social justice and sustainable development (Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019). Redistribution refers to reallocating wealth, income, or resources from one group or individual to another to reduce economic inequalities and promote social justice (Froese et al., 2023; Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019). Such measures must be developed and debated democratically to support transitions toward ecologically and socially sustainable societies and counteract growing economic inequality (Buch-Hansen & Koch, 2019). Welfare is an umbrella term for policies and goals addressing social and environmental concerns. Various welfare definitions share the “common ambition to develop welfare concepts and policies that consider the environmental crisis and/or the limits to growth” (Hirvilammi & Koch, 2020, p. 2).

Relevance and Synergies Between Degrowth and Indigenous Movements in the Global South

There is a growing recognition in the Global South of the relevance of degrowth principles. Models based solely on GDP growth have been criticized for not guaranteeing poverty reduction and improved well-being (Leoni et al., 2023; Rosa & Henning, 2018; Sekulova et al., 2013). Degrowth approaches in the Global South emphasize fulfilling needs, wealth distribution, and challenging the dominant growth-driven paradigm of the Global North (Daly, 2007; Escobar, 2015; Gerber & Raina, 2018; Hickel & Kallis, 2020). Thus, the South should not mindlessly follow the same growth and degrowth-based capitalist development path as the North, resisting a sole growth-based development (Gräbner-Radkowitz & Strunk, 2023; Latouche, 2004). This is especially important given the significant challenges in the Global South due to extractive industries, deforestation, pollution, and climate change. Embracing degrowth principles is perceived as a viable solution to mitigate environmental degradation and promote sustainable resource management (Hollender, 2015).

Moreover, scholars suggest that the term degrowth holds significance in the Global South due to its similarities to indigenous movements (Dengler & Seebacher, 2019; Gerber & Raina, 2018; Latouche, 2004; Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019). Scholars argue for the existence of mutual goals and parallels between the degrowth movement and various indigenous movements within specific regions in the Global South, such as Buen Vivir in Latin America (Escobar, 2015), the Ubuntu Philosophy originating from South Africa (Chiengkul, 2018; Dengler & Seebacher, 2019), and Environmental Justice (EJ) movements² (Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019; Rosa & Henning, 2018). Although the degrowth concept originates from Eurocentric perspectives, aligning core themes of the degrowth discourse in the Global North and EJ movements in the South can enhance collaborative efforts and foster synergies within both contexts (Rosa & Henning, 2018). Degrowth and EJ movements emphasize the importance of solidarity and international cooperation in addressing socio-environmental challenges. Also, both movements advocate for the fair distribution of environmental burdens and benefits, aiming to reduce the negative impacts of resource extraction and ensure equitable access to resources (Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019).

Exploring Degrowth in Practical Contexts: Insights from Global South Case Studies

Practical case studies conducted in the Global South reveal that degrowth approaches inspire the North in the degrowth discourse, indicating the potential for collaboration and learning from the South (Gräbner-Radkowsch & Strunk, 2023). The argument that historical colonial practices have evolved into current economic systems that perpetuate exploitation, inequality, and environmental degradation (Leoni et al., 2023; Parsons, 2023) is contrasted with the argument of Dengler and Seebacher (2019), who claim that degrowth in the Global South can effectively promote socio-ecological justice without reproducing colonial continuities.

Existing research that examines degrowth in practice is mainly based on South America, Asia, and Africa (Gräbner-Radkowsch & Strunk, 2023). For example, case studies in South America address the conflicts surrounding resource extraction and community-led tourism in Ecuador (Pérez-Rincón et al., 2019; Renkert, 2019). Recent attention has shifted to fisheries and marine ecosystems, termed blue degrowth (Guerrero Lara et al., 2023). The fishery and food sector theme also explores the challenges small-scale fishers face in Turkey (Ertör-Akyazi, 2019) and investigates food cooperatives in Istanbul (Öz & Aksoy, 2019). Qualitative research

² See Glossary for definitions of Buen Vivir, Ubuntu, and EJ Movement

on energy enterprises in Kenya is conducted in East Africa (Gabriel et al., 2019). This variety of studies shows that degrowth for business in the Global South can be found in practice, and it is not an entirely unexplored research subject. However, it becomes clear that degrowth does not have a universally applicable signature. Instead, the studies show that new terms, such as blue degrowth, are necessary to avoid generalisability. The nuances in terminology can provide a way to address the challenges of feasibility in applying degrowth strategies in practical scenarios, especially in different geographical and socio-economic landscapes. Interestingly, the study landscape in the context of the Global South shows that degrowth is understood concerning farming practices (agriculture, fishing). Sustainable farming practices are considered to improve food security, preserve biodiversity, and enhance resilience to climate change (Bloemmen et al., 2015; Escobar, 2015). Looking at the case studies conducted on degrowth for business in the Global South, it emerges that sustainable farming practices are closely related to degrowth. The studies also show that research in different geographical and industry contexts requires different terms for degrowth, which raises the question of whether a shared understanding of degrowth can and must be found when two geographical contexts are analyzed simultaneously. Therefore, examining degrowth in the food production sector across two different regions simultaneously enhances the value of existing research on examining collaboration, learning, and socio-ecological justice between the Global North and South.

2.4 Toward Bothness: Mutual Collaboration Infused with Degrowth

The following chapter elaborates on the applicability of degrowth values within a north-south business context by focusing on mutual collaboration. For our research, mutual collaboration means social structures facilitating relationships among managers, fostering shared values, community involvement, and proactive care for members to address global challenges and promote sustainability. The following chapter outlines mutual collaboration and curates bothness.

From Inequalities Toward a More Equal Degrowth Future

In search of an understanding of degrowth that benefits both North and South, we cannot ignore a significant area of research on the inequalities arising from north-south collaboration. Active north-south links suffer from power ambiguities and give way to appropriation and cooptation, which, in turn, fuels a climate change hegemony (Leoni et al., 2023; Parsons, 2023; Schmidt & Pröpper, 2017).

Despite these inequalities and power ambiguities between the Global North and South, which seem to not allow for a common definition of degrowth (Chiengkul, 2018; Gräbner-Radkowsch & Strunk, 2023; Kallis, 2011; Parrique et al., 2019), it is still possible to identify starting points for a shared understanding of degrowth. This understanding does not yet exist in a formal sense, but there is potential for it to emerge. The potential for this can be found in research that advocates for collectively meeting environmental and social aims across borders, prioritizing ecological integrity and social justice (Gräbner-Radkowsch & Strunk, 2023; Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018). Cooperation becomes central for managing mutual efforts across borders to address pressing challenges like climate change, inequality, and power differentials (Chiengkul, 2018; Dengler & Seebacher, 2019; Escobar, 2015; Gerber & Raina, 2018; Gräbner-Radkowsch & Strunk, 2023). This solution perspective also means that highly developed nations, as well as the Global South (Daly, 2007; Escobar, 2015; Gerber & Raina, 2018; Hickel & Kallis, 2020), need to turn away from a growth-centric development agenda to remain within the planet's ecological limits (Alier, 2009; Van den Bergh & Kallis, 2012; Victor, 2012). In this proposed effort, researchers suggest that collaboration between North and South provides mutual learning opportunities (Dengler & Seebacher, 2019; Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019). Specifically, the North can learn about sustainable livelihoods and community care organizations. At the same time, the South can benefit from the experiences and perspectives of the Global North to address challenges and contradictions in a solely growth-orientated economic focus (Dengler & Seebacher, 2019).

On the organizational level, collaborative north-south business practices are crucial for promoting global equality, aligning with collaborative value creation (Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018). The need for collaboration becomes clear as environmental needs are global in nature and require joint efforts for sustainable development (Chiengkul, 2018). Collaboration, such as the form of mutual collaboration suggested by Froese et al. (2023), has the potential to overcome inequalities and power ambiguities. This form of cooperation is orientated toward the sustainable improvement of socio-ecological conditions. Importantly, Froese et al. (2023) acknowledge the presence of inequalities and power imbalances inherent in degrowth activities, resonating with concerns raised by other scholars regarding the disparities between the Global North and South (Chiengkul, 2018; Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019). However, the authors propose that actors collaborate, reciprocate, and (re)distribute resources and establish protected spaces and infrastructures. This approach enables tackling social and environmental challenges

that exceed economic and core business concerns but foster degrowth-oriented value creation (Froese et al., 2023).

Despite the contextual obstacles between the Global North and South, we assert that mutual collaboration within this business context entails operating concurrently in both regions to promote greater social and environmental well-being, representing the idea of bothness.

Bridging the North and South in Business

Our research builds on the systematic literature review conducted by Froese et al. (2023). Their work resulted in a framework that classifies seven thematic groups based on real-world case studies related to degrowth. Concerning our research objective of revealing the fusion between degrowth in theory and degrowth in practice, our thesis focuses on G3 (Table 1). While acknowledging that the term degrowth is often applied retrospectively, with only a minority of organizations explicitly identifying themselves as such (Froese et al., 2023), it is relevant to note that practices and solutions suggested in G3, although not explicitly tailored for managerial levels, usually fall within managerial responsibilities.

Mutual collaboration (G3)	Solution perspective
Practicing a culture of reciprocal care (P1)	Proactively caring for other organizational members and, correspondingly, building internal structures around aspects of mutual support, reward, security, autonomy, dignity, and trust to mitigate the impact of market pressures on employee well-being and appreciate each other and collaboration as valuable in itself.
Doing business in local actor networks (P2)	Engaging primarily with local suppliers, customers, as well as public and private partners (e.g., local charities and authorities) and involving local communities to support the regional economy and community embeddedness in terms of close, collaborative, and long-term relationships, as well as to increase accountability as well as resource and energy efficiency.
Engaging in value-based business relations (P3)	Consistently selecting and collaborating with suppliers, economic partners, and customers based on shared social and environmental values and practices and on an equal footing to realize those values (e.g., fairness) as well as the long-term benefits of trustful and loyal cooperation and, ultimately, overcome a narrow market logic.

Mutual collaboration (G3)	Solution perspective
Distributing through a cooperative sales network (P4)	Distributing produce through a producer-owned logistics and sales system involves profit sharing, empowers producers, retains a higher share of revenues to finance high ecological and social production standards, and potentially shortens value chains that improve environmental performance.
Joining forces in mission-driven networks (P5)	Provide infrastructures that allow a diverse group to support each other and leverage synergies (e.g., sharing knowledge, space, or equipment) to collectively gain the strength and capabilities to implement socio-ecologically-oriented practices.

Table 1: Extract Mutual collaboration Group (Froese et al., 2023, p. 14 f.)

Legend Table 1:

G3: One out of seven groups of degrowth-oriented patterns (G1-G7)

P1-P5: Five degrowth patterns of G3

P4 (grey): excluded pattern from the scope of this research

Froese et al. (2023) advocate for a solution-oriented approach grounded in collective solidarity and fairness, aligning with the core values of alternative forms of organizing, including autonomy, solidarity, and responsibility (Parker et al., 2014). These values are expressed similarly in the concept of mutual collaboration in the form of the three degrowth values: “local and global equality, ecological sustainability, and conviviality and participation” (Froese et al., 2023, p. 2). By incorporating these values, mutual collaboration means cooperative and respectful interactions, cultivating community and solidarity, and supporting the integration of diverse viewpoints in decision-making processes (Froese et al., 2023; Khmara & Kronenberg, 2020). For example, G3 reflects the three degrowth values as it demonstrates the connotation of initiatives that foster knowledge sharing and facilitate the exchange of innovative ideas (Froese et al., 2023) to be able to respond to societal trends such as globalization and growth-centered development (Cheney & Munshi, 2017).

Our curation of the existing literature focuses on the complexities surrounding degrowth in theory and practice and the potential synergies between north-south collaboration. While we have discussed the theoretical framework and practical implications of degrowth, there is a need for more empirical research to validate and extend these concepts in real-world contexts. Returning to our research question on how mutual collaboration practices are infused with degrowth values in a social enterprise that spans the Global North and South, this study aims to extend G3 with examples from practice. Our research engages with the discourse on degrowth, focusing on understanding how managers make sense of mutual collaboration in their day-to-

day activities. Froese et al.’s (2023) framework offers guidance for this study in analyzing employee interactions within this context. It helps capture the dynamics involved, where individuals’ subjective interpretations and value creation are crucial in shaping their understanding of collaborative activities.

We join the research conversation by focusing on the micro level of degrowth, which we term organizational degrowth. Our approach to organizational degrowth centers on alternative forms of organizing³, particularly social enterprises, and focuses on intra-organizational mutual collaboration. This creates the basis for our bothness concept (Figure 1).

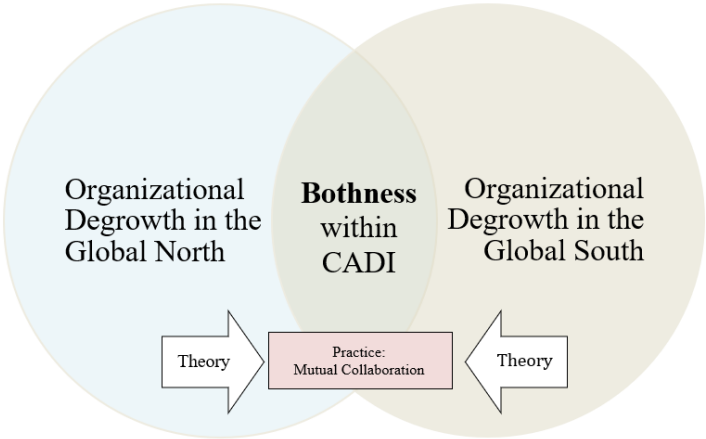


Figure 1: Bothness Concept (own illustration)

On the one hand, bothness stands for understanding degrowth rooted in theory and simultaneously advocating for practical application. On the other hand, it aims to provide an understanding of degrowth valid in both the Global North and the Global South. Mutual collaboration connects the degrowth values of “local and global equality, ecological sustainability, conviviality and participation” (Froese et al., 2023, p. 2) defined in theory and the degrowth actions found in practice. The investigation of mutual collaboration practices among managers enables us to bridge theory with practice. In an increasingly interconnected world where social and environmental challenges transcend borders, understanding how organizations can embody degrowth principles while fostering collaborative partnerships across geographical divides is crucial for shaping a degrowth future.

³ We are aware of a huge body of literature on hybrid enterprises, which, however, does not explicitly refer to degrowth. That is why our focus lies on the literature that posits their approaches as degrowth.

3 Research Method and Data Analysis

The following chapter presents the methodology as the link between the problematization that requires an enhanced north-south degrowth understanding and the theoretical framework of Froese et al. (2023). This framework focuses on the group *Joining Forces in Rewarding and Mutual Collaboration* (G3). While our literature review has provided insights and has laid the groundwork for further inquiry, it also serves as a call to action for continued research and exploration into the complex interplay between degrowth, mutual collaboration, and organizational north-south practices. First, we illustrate this thesis's underlying tradition and present our ontological and epistemological standpoint to demonstrate how we intend to bridge the research gap. Then, we transparently provide an overview of the case context and explain how we collected and analyzed the data. Lastly, we reflect on the limitations of this analysis.

3.1 Research Approach and Philosophical Grounding

To answer our research question, we use Froese et al.'s (2023) G3 as a framework to investigate individual managers' perceptions of mutual collaboration. This group, outlined in Table 1, is significant for managers as mutual collaboration is usually enacted through managers.

While recognizing the potential benefits of quantitative research methods (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017) standard in positivist traditions, we have opted to rely on qualitative research (Prasad, 2018). By studying mutual collaboration in its natural setting and examining the meanings individuals ascribe to this social interaction, qualitative research allows us to explore the complexities of collaboration practices and illustrate the multiple interpretations managers assign to them (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Quantitative data can provide insights into the structures of social life and answer the question 'what' is happening in a particular collaborative effort. Additionally, qualitative data can offer insight into the practices behind these social interactions, allowing us to address the question of 'why' managers construct meaning in a particular way (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Accordingly, our research question does not focus on uncovering objective truths. On top of that, qualitative research requires our perspective as researchers (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017) to discuss how the degrowth values local and global equality, ecological sustainability, and conviviality and participation (Froese et al., 2023, p. 2) are infused with individual mutual collaboration practices.

Mutual collaboration refers to a social situation where individuals work together to create a more human-centric environment, taking collective responsibility for themselves and their socio-ecological surroundings (Chassagne & Everingham, 2020; Nesterova, 2021; Schmid, 2021). Therefore, qualitative research acknowledges that the individual realities of CADI managers are subjective and intertwined with the broader societal context (interpretivism) (Prasad, 2018). For illustration, social interactions between German and Kenyan middle managers and engagements with the local farmer community and customers contribute to the co-construction of the meaning of CADI employees. This results in diverse interpretations, reflected by the complex interplay of perspectives and experiences within the social enterprise (Bell et al., 2022; Prasad, 2018).

Accordingly, this research aligns with symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1986), acknowledging “social interaction as taking place in terms of the meanings actors attach to actions and things” (Bell et al., 2022, p. 595). This study explores the everyday work environments of individual Kenyan and German managers of CADI to understand (verstehen) how mutual collaboration is perceived and constructed in practice. As middle managers collaborate within the organizational context of CADI, these individuals must arrive at shared interpretations of reality (intersubjectivity). At CADI, managerial practices and understandings build on diverse individual realities tacitly adjusted and agreed upon in day-to-day operations (negotiated order) (Prasad, 2018).

In sum, compared to alternatives, such as more positivist approaches (common in quantitative research), symbolic interactionism offers a more nuanced and contextually rich understanding of social phenomena like the north-south mutual collaboration at CADI. It allows us to explore the complexities of human interactions, subjective meanings, and organizational dynamics in ways that quantitative data alone cannot capture. In addition, it enables us to uncover how diverse perspectives shape this collaboration without assuming initial differences between managers and, further, how the actual practices within an organization like CADI, which spans the Global North and South, adhere to degrowth values.

3.2 Research Design and Process

The following section outlines the selected organization, our data collection process involving in-depth interviews and observations, and our data analysis procedure. We conducted a single case study without assuming any initial differences between the North and South to investigate how degrowth values are reflected in the daily collaboration between German and Kenyan managers at CADI. This approach allowed us to understand how managers perceive

the phenomenon through real-life experiences and beyond what would be possible through comparative analysis alone (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

3.2.1 Case Context and Personal Motivation

We have obtained data from CADI, a social enterprise that operates in the food manufacturing industry and connects Germany and Kenya. Middle managers employed by CADI Germany GmbH and CADI Group Limited Kenya collaborate in their daily operations. This case study allows us to examine the unique single case context and understand how middle managers maintain the company's vision that benefits both the Global North and South. It is important to note that these managers have different roles, which adds to the diversity of perspectives (Appendix A). German employees mainly handle sales, marketing, and distribution of the final products to wholesalers and retailers worldwide, creating market opportunities for Kenyan employees.

Most value creation occurs in the rural areas where CADI Kenya is situated, and the company aims to maximize the added value retained in Kenya. Therefore, the social enterprise prioritizes relocating production to support rural communities, which presents an intriguing opportunity for studying degrowth. CADI's emphasis on relocalization offers a compelling case context to investigate how degrowth intersects with strategies like relocalization. During our field research, we learned that at its core, CADI believes that by keeping the value creation of goods within the country, more people can benefit from global trade. The company is committed to sustainability and inclusivity and uses development, fair trade, and organic practices to improve the living standards of rural populations. The company covers the entire supply chain process, from receiving goods to dispatch. CADI can process and package fresh raw materials in local factories by purchasing directly from local smallholder farmers. Additionally, CADI has a nursery where farmers can learn more about agricultural topics, ensuring the quality of the goods produced.

Given that the organization under study operates within a growth-based environment, the case context offers distinctive perspectives on the difficulties of upholding the fundamental principles of a social enterprise in a global capitalist economy that prioritizes profit. Over the last decade, CADI has grown from a small social start-up to a medium-sized multinational enterprise with over 700 employees.

Given how the social enterprise is structured and what it values, it provides a unique opportunity to examine non-profit-orientated business practices within the context. The flat hierarchies at CADI, for example, illustrate the company's closeness to alternative forms of

organizing. This is reinforced by the company's commitment to sustainable practices throughout the entire value creation process, from the most energy-efficient production possible to using reusable pallets for transporting goods and the reusable exhibition stands for presenting items at the trade fair. Further enrichment for the case context is that the company - operating in the B2B sector - engages in values-based partnerships concerning farmers and customers rather than relying on intermediaries.

Both of us, the authors, have a personal connection with Kenya and the company. One of the authors has known CADI since 2015, when it was a small social enterprise, and witnessed its transformation into a more prominent internationally operating organization. After completing school, she spent three months at company facilities in Kenya as part of an internship, where she gained practical insights. Pre-existing relationships facilitated the recruitment of interviewees, and trust was established more quickly, which supported greater depth in the research process. The resulting trust helped to have more open and insightful discussions, enriching the research (Bell et al., 2023). The other author spent a year volunteering in Kenya, lived with a host family, and worked in a local school, which enabled her to form deep connections within the community and better understand the cultural backgrounds. The personal connection between one researcher and CADI should not be seen as a bias-enhancing factor, as the second researcher also ensured a balanced and critical perspective. This connection also allowed us to conduct on-site observations to better understand the complexities of mutual collaboration within this context.

We chose to work with CADI as this unique case context allows us to contribute to the degrowth literature. What sets this case apart from others is that we investigate one social enterprise operating in both the Global North and South simultaneously. It enabled us to delve deeper into a unique collaboration model between the two contexts. Additionally, CADI's focus on localized production and sustainable practices makes it an interesting case study for examining degrowth values. For the aim of this thesis, we traveled to Kenya for almost a month to visit the facilities and make participant observations that enriched our research.

3.2.2 Data Collection: Interviews and Observations

To investigate our research question, we designed an interview guide with questions informed by our literature review and the G3 group developed by Froese et al. (2023). To stick to the symbolic interactionism tradition, we interviewed managers and conducted participative observations to generate a more profound understanding (*verstehen*) of the managers'

individual sensemaking processes (Prasad, 2018) of how they perceive their work relationships within CADI.

Data collection

We could interview managers with different occupations, giving us valuable insights into different individual realities. We conducted 12 semi-structured interviews, for which middle managers in Kenya and Germany were purposively selected. We chose this sample size because we are investigating social interactions, and only these 12 middle managers primarily interact and bridge the north-south context. Seven participants represented various departments in Kenya, including human resources, special products, food safety, traceability, quality control, operations management, and marketing. The occupations of the five interviewees from Germany involved marketing, innovation, internal sales, sales, and supply chain management.

Our selection criteria prioritized interviewees holding middle management positions, maintaining connections with either German or Kenyan employees, and offering diverse perspectives from their occupational backgrounds. In line with our case context, we decided to interview middle managers, as the collaboration between CADI Germany and CADI Kenya occurs mainly at the top and middle management levels. Since the top management level consists of only four people and we intended to ensure a certain homogeneity in task responsibility and work experience in our sample group, the limitation to middle managers was suitable. The sampling approach allowed us to answer our research question, as our purposive selection criteria ensured that our interviews were rich in context and perspectives. It facilitated a more nuanced understanding of how collaboration between Germany and Kenya manifests within CADI's organizational structure and operational dynamics.

In-Depth Interviews and Observations

The interviews were arranged in advance within a designated timeframe of three weeks through Google Forms. Due to the execution of the interviews during the hectic harvesting period, some interviews in Kenya were conducted spontaneously to accommodate the limited time available to the managers. Before the interview, we sent an introduction to all interviewees (Appendix B) to facilitate the interview process. We distributed the consent form for participation in the research over e-mail to the German sample group. The aim was to reduce concerns and foster a comfortable setting, framing the interview as more of a conversation and handling the data confidentially. We adopted an overt approach by clearly identifying ourselves as researchers and respecting individuals' privacy, allowing them to decide whether to

participate (Bell et al., 2022). The confidentiality of the interviews provided individuals with a space to reflect and articulate their reflections on the company and its values, which generated a narrative of the employees and gained insights into their perceptions of everyday work.

Since the company facilities are in Kenya and the primary value creation occurs there, interviews were conducted on-site with the Kenyan sample group in English. At the same time, interviews over Zoom with the German sample group were conducted in German since work is carried out remotely from Germany. We conducted them in German to make the interviewees more comfortable speaking their native language, reducing misunderstandings. We, the researchers, are both German speakers and translated the excerpts in the findings section for data analysis purposes.

The interviews aimed to provide an initial question to the interviewees, allowing them to start their narration about their work at CADI. More specific questions targeting the overall topic of mutual collaboration resulted from our literature review. They made up our interview guideline (Appendix C), forming four main categories that gave structure to the process while maintaining the flexibility to add questions (Bell et al., 2022). The following four categories for our interview guideline were designed to leave enough room for the interviewees' narratives while at the same time addressing the topic of mutual collaboration:

Main category 1: Biographical narration

Interviewees were asked to describe their daily operations. With these initial questions, the interviewees needed to begin narrating. By asking such broad questions, their answers made visible what is vital to each individual's daily work. In addition, the stories about collaboration within the company helped identify subjects we could return to later in the interview and gain insights into individual formulations about what they value and expect.

Main categories 2 and 3: Culture of Reciprocal Care and Mission-driven networks

This part was mainly oriented on G3 of the Froese et al. (2023) framework and specifically on the two patterns: *Practicing a culture of reciprocal care* (P1) and *Joining forces in mission-driven networks* (P5). We decided to focus on these two patterns as they are most strongly designed to examine relationships between managers. In contrast, the other patterns focus more on relationships outside the organization. Based on the attributes defined for P1 and P5, we created our questions without querying the attributes directly. Instead, we aim to understand managers' understanding of mutual collaboration and, by analyzing the responses, identify whether similar or the same attributes are mentioned. While P1 refers to team characteristics

such as support, dignity, trust, and autonomy, P5 refers to how synergies can be leveraged through mutual collaboration.

Main category 4: Focusing on interviewees' selves

This category focuses on the individual and allows them to share additional insights or concerns about their motivations, ideals, and values.

This interview design enabled us to do initial analytical work already during the interviews by, for instance, being able to ask clarification questions. Based on our theme of mutual collaboration within degrowth, we asked dynamic 'What' and especially 'How' questions. It was important not to ask managers about their values directly but to focus on practice-oriented questions to find out what happened based on their stories that led to collaborative relations. We explored self-identity issues by asking subjects how they see themselves and others in different social and everyday situations (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). To receive answers to our research question of how mutual collaboration practices are infused with degrowth values, our approach investigated the theoretically defined degrowth values in degrowth research based on Froese et al.'s (2023) framework. Furthermore, we must ensure openness to be able to identify practices within the field by asking questions about specific personal perceptions of incidents within everyday work. From these narratives, we could identify patterns that managers attach particular or little importance.

Notably, since we are focusing on one company operating in Germany and Kenya, we initially avoided suggesting differences between the two countries. Instead, we would ask follow-up questions to explore distinctions, such as, 'How does this apply to colleagues in Germany versus Kenya?' The interviews lasted 45 minutes on average. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and no participant raised concerns about being recorded. The range of the interviews was from 28 minutes to 75 minutes.

Furthermore, social interactionism incorporates participative observations alongside interviews, allowing us to witness firsthand participants' behavior within their everyday 'Lebenswelt' (Prasad, 2018). While on-site in Kenya, we observed the entire manufacturing process, from receiving to packaging, and toured the nursery. Our observations are based on our shared experiences with the on-site managers. These include guided tours of the production facilities and walks through the surrounding farmland. These observations yield findings characterized by authenticity, as they are not influenced by potential biases inherent in self-reported data (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016).

3.2.3 Coding and Analysis

To ensure this study's validity and reliability, we will provide information about how the collected data is processed, structured, and analyzed (Styhre, 2013). To move from our data to an argument for our research question, our case study approach is iterative and based on an abductive logic, as suggested by Dubois and Gadde (2002). We distilled (reduced) the interviews and observation notes into themes and shorter meanings and categorized (sorted) them (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). By continuously moving back and forth between empirical observations and theory, this approach allows for the refinement of G3. This proceeded progressively through a series of steps described in turn.

In the first step, we began to familiarize ourselves with the data by an open coding process. This was performed on the transcribed interviews through Word online. This first step is based on an inductive logic, whereby the procedure cannot be described as purely inductive, as we were guided by the categories of the interview guide, which in turn draw on the framework of Froese et al. (2023). This first open coding process worked the following way: We sorted our data according to the four main categories from our interview guideline, which stemmed partly from the two patterns, P1 and P5. This means that we initially categorized what was said into the categories biographical narration (category 1), culture of reciprocal care (category 2), mission-driven networks (category 3), and interviewees' selves (category 4). Category one includes all information essential to understanding the external circumstances surrounding the individual's daily business. Categories two and three include statements that can be related in some way to the degrowth framework. Category four contains topics that were raised by the managers but cannot be assigned to the framework.

In the second step, we began the abductive work with theory. The theory was drawn from the Froese et al. (2023) framework. During the process, we noticed the need to expand categories two and three (P1 and P5) to include P2 and P3 since many answers addressed the topics defined in these patterns. The only pattern we excluded is *distributing through a cooperative sales network* (P4), as this is only marginally applicable to the context of CADI. This led to seven principal codes. Codes one to four directly derive from the Froese et al. (2023) framework. Code six (Yet to be assigned) helped us look for solid and puzzling themes that do not fit the framework. Code seven (Organizational growth at CADI) was introduced to group relevant statements about how CADI managers understand future business growth:

Code 1: Culture of reciprocal care (P1)

Subcodes: Mutual support, reward, security, autonomy, dignity, trust

Code 2: Doing business in local actor networks (P2)

Code 3: Engaging in values-based business relations (P3)

Code 4: Joined forces in mission-driven networks (P5)

Subcodes: knowledge sharing, shared space, collective strength

Code 5: Biographical narration

Code 6: Yet to be assigned

Code 7: Organizational growth at CADI

Within this second coding round, we looked more specifically at the various characteristics of mutual collaboration. During this process, we realized that all our cases had mentioned at least one characteristic equivalent to those defined by the Froese et al. (2023) framework, most mentioning support. Interestingly, managers directly address mutual support, security, and trust, while autonomy, dignity, and reward – other elements stated in the Froese et al. (2023) framework – were not explicitly mentioned. This strong correspondence between the values and characteristics that managers at CADI appreciate about collaboration and the characteristics defined by Froese et al. (2023) surprised us and, at the same time, made us realize the danger of wanting to standardize all statements due to this strong agreement. This shared understanding, therefore, prompted us to re-examine the data more closely.

In a third coding round, we first used the content of Code Six. We created new categories not yet present in the framework to identify other used keywords, thus finding that our interviewees favored specific terms: family and friendship. During the third coding round, we had intense discussions and an exchange of reflections with each other. Within this process, we further reduced the data. For example, themes such as reward were only raised once and did not go into great depth regarding content related to our research question, which was labeled with the lowest priority. This focused reducing and sorting approach ensured that our analysis remained manageable and relevant to our research objectives.

After coding, essential for extracting concepts and terms facilitating the interpretation of meaning (Styhre, 2013), we then interpreted (argue) these categories to work out structures and discuss the relations of meaning that are not directly said (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). For example, we looked at whether our data revealed patterns in which a form of autonomy was addressed without explicitly using the term. The starting point for our interpretation was the underlying degrowth values: local and global equality, ecological sustainability, conviviality and participation (Froese et al., 2023). For arguing, we looked for terms that had a similar meaning to the degrowth values. For example, we related teamwork or organizational culture

themes to conviviality and participation to analyze how this degrowth value is understood in practice. Criteria to assign and interpret were the frequency, consistency, and relevance of a term regarding our research question.

In the fourth step, our observations were integrated. These observations were written down in a notebook during our stays on-site and the online interviews. After analyzing verbal responses, we sorted all observations into the individual chapters of our analysis. In a step-by-step approach, we strengthened our analysis with those observations that either supported or contradicted a statement.

The collected empirical data will be presented and discussed below. To ensure clarity, we adhere to the excerpt-commentary framework, which comprises four standardized elements: analytical point, orientation, excerpts, and an analytical commentary (Emerson et al., 1995). This approach enabled us to uncover phenomena while concurrently providing interpretation (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). We organize the analysis into two main sections, which are different from each other. The interpretation of our data in the second part is more analytical since we look at it from a more distanced level to understand them from bothness.

3.3 Reflexivity and Methodology Limitations

In the following section, we reflect on methodological limitations. For instance, it is essential to consider how personal connections may be perceived as bias-enhancing factors. In our study, the researchers' personal connections to the company under investigation could be seen as potentially introducing bias (Bell et al., 2022). However, as we were two researchers, this situation balanced insider perspective and outsider critique. While one researcher had particular proximity to company processes and employees, the other maintained a critical outsider view, ensuring a comprehensive and balanced analysis. For example, there was a situation in which the researcher, who was close to the company, took for granted that managers in Kenya spend most of their time with colleagues, even at weekends, and seem to spend more time in the company than with their own families. It was only through extensive discussions and the exchange of perspectives between the two of us at the end of each day that we realized together that this is not a common practice and thus maintain a balanced perspective on the situation. Furthermore, the limitation of our study lies in the number of interviews conducted, which was restricted to twelve middle managers at CADI. This limitation stemmed from the fact that only twelve managers at the middle management level maintain regular contact with German or Kenyan colleagues. The given case context may offer limited access to collaboration practices since middle managers primarily interacted with colleagues from other continents in

their offices, with personal meetings occurring sporadically. Communication channels such as WhatsApp, Google Meet, and e-mail are commonly used, reflecting the practical constraints of north-south collaboration. One notable limitation was the absence of insights from the finance manager, who could have provided valuable perspectives on financial barriers or incentives for implementing degrowth strategies. The finance manager was unavailable during the study period for personal reasons. However, we spoke with a manager who previously served as a financial consultant at CADI. Despite not holding an explicit financial managerial role at CADI, his profound insights into the company's financial structures provided valuable insights into potential financial considerations.

4 Findings

The analysis examines the 'Lebenswelt' of middle managers, focusing on how their perspectives on social interaction within mutual collaboration practices are infused with degrowth values. The findings section is divided into two parts. In the first part, we analyze whether and how managers express corporate growth and to what extent this understanding of growth corresponds with the existing knowledge of degrowth from research. We then examine the collaboration between CADI managers and how these practices reflect degrowth. To investigate these practices, we will explore an individual's and organizational values, teamwork, and collaboration characteristics with the external environment. In the second part, we will interpret our results by taking a distance from our data to analyze the three degrowth values within bothness.

4.1 Managers' Understanding of Organizational (De)growth

To approach our research question, we first analyze how our interviewees understand corporate growth and to what extent their understanding is similar to the knowledge of degrowth from research. Our findings reveal that the term degrowth is not used explicitly but that CADI managers' understanding of corporate growth is very much in line with literature. Although it should be added that this understanding cannot be assigned to degrowth alone, the boundaries between degrowth, post-growth, green-growth, or sustainable growth appear to be blurred in this understanding.

Our interviewees do not explicitly use degrowth as a term. In conversations regarding CADI's future growth, it becomes evident that growth revolves around balancing ideologically driven initiatives and ensuring profitability to sustain its operations. Interviewees elaborated

that it is a balancing act to generate profits and achieve more significant socio-ecological improvements (C3, C11). Corporate growth at CADI – or “healthy growth”, as manager C11 calls it – means generating profit not for the sake of it but to make a social and environmental impact (e.g., C1, C8). Manager C12 explains:

“We do not pay out dividends or bonuses because some years have been good, but we have the ambition to put everything back into the growth of the farmers. In other words, we want to bring in more farmers, which is also a form of fair participation as we are offering them access to a fairer market and therefore sharing monetary prosperity.” (C12)

Manager C9 agrees and goes on to explain that healthy growth means resilience:

“For me, [growth] means resilience. I would say a resilient system. A system that cannot be broken easily. A system that will stand the test of time. Be it climate change or market dynamics, this system can still stand it. The system can still stand and give benefits.” (C9)

This understanding shows the similarity to the degrowth theory without explicitly naming it, which, according to research, is unsurprising. External observers, such as researchers, usually label organizational practices as degrowth-aligned retrospectively (Froese et al., 2023). In the words of CADI managers, Degrowth means the voluntary, active orientation of corporate activities geared toward fulfilling ideals and simultaneously demonstrating consistency. This voluntary orientation also creates a sensitive behavior toward what surrounds the company. The following statement further sheds light on CADI’s growth agenda and why the theory of degrowth can be considered to describe their growth ambitions:

“I would say that we are morally upright but also idealistic – I always say pragmatic-idealistic. It does not do us any good if we show pure idealism but forget to do business. [...] You always need money to finance.” (C12)

Here, the ideological character of the growth idea becomes apparent. Simultaneously, managers raise doubts about the practical applicability of the degrowth concept as financial aspects and market dynamics cause limitations (e.g., C3, C12). The growth idea for CADI is built on pragmatic-idealistic principles to achieve “healthy growth” (C11). For managers, healthy growth is achieved by reinvesting profits and prioritizing resilience, innovation, and efficiency. In line with the degrowth understanding outlined by Islar et al. (2024), the theory promotes resilience and adaptation by encouraging diversification, resource

efficiency, and the development of sustainable practices. To achieve these sustainable practices, innovation is seen as a central element in research (Islar et al., 2024). At CADI, innovation is frequently mentioned in our dialogues about future growth (e.g., C4, C7). Innovation at CADI is centered on achieving stable and healthy growth. As examples of this type of innovation, managers at CADI strive for technological improvements and a continuous evaluation of internal processes and role allocations. The latter is intended to ensure that managers are trained in each other's areas of responsibility for continuity.

The discussions surrounding (de)growth at CADI reveal a paradoxical nature. Firstly, the CADI understanding of growth, built on an ideological connotation, is considered to clash at specific points with market dynamics. In alignment with literature, our interviewees also recognize the tension between idealism and pragmatism (Ashforth & Reingen, 2014; Öz & Aksoy, 2019). Critically assessing this tension shows that degrowth may be more of an abstract concept than a tangible reality for CADI. Potential challenges are indicated due to the current economic system's reliance on growth to maintain competitiveness, which resonates with the ongoing research discourse on structural barriers that must be addressed to realize a degrowth society (Just et al., 2021; Zanoni et al., 2017). Secondly, the term itself presents a paradox, as it evokes interpretations of economic decline. This understanding resonates with scholars' arguments that degrowth carries connotations of shrinking, yet its essence lies in economic downscaling by prioritizing ethics over profit maximization (Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018; Nesterova, 2020).

Additionally, our conversations illustrate that while scholars differentiate between degrowth, post-growth, green growth, and sustainable growth, this differentiation does not exist in practice. Instead, degrowth seems to go hand in hand with understanding sustainable growth due to the shared goal of achieving socio-ecological sustainability (Islar et al., 2024). The terms as they exist in theory do not appear in the same form in the corporate world. In practice, healthy and resilient growth is used instead. It expresses a type of growth that builds a system that ensures ecological sustainability and social well-being due to shared "monetary prosperity" (C12). This understanding of CADI managers about corporate growth leads us to expand the degrowth theory from research to include the concept of sensitivity.

In the following, we need to understand organizational degrowth by connecting the observed practices to degrowth values. Without managers directly stating that they practice degrowth, the following section analyzes the extent to which their values and business activities

are infused with degrowth values to map, more specifically, how degrowth is understood in practice.

4.1.1 CADI-Managers in a Mission-driven Collaboration

The bothness concept means that the collaboration between Germany and Kenya works toward common goals, i.e., having a common mission. This mission will be analyzed in the coming sections. The team values and embraces diversity and recognizes its potential to create value. CADI Germany and CADI Kenya are unified despite the physical distance separating them. Shared vision and common goals bind the two entities together as a cohesive unit. As manager C1 implies:

“CADI Germany and CADI Kenya is one. The only thing which is dividing us is the distance.” (C1)

Acknowledging distance as the only barrier stresses the commitment to overcoming geographical challenges through collaboration and mutual support. This perspective reflects the essence of bothness, wherein despite geographical disparities, organizational cohesion and shared purpose prevail, driving collective efforts. The understanding of CADI as one unified team working toward the same goals is further mirrored by the company slogan ‘One Team. One Goal’ (C6). In addition, the foundation of collaboration at CADI transcends geographical, cultural, and racial differences, rooted in establishing friendship and partnership between the entities that foster a sense of unity and shared purpose, enabling individuals to work toward common goals without being constrained by borders or boundaries. Manager C9 describes this phenomenon as follows:

“It is first friendship. These different continents, cultures, and color, and all these differences are there, but it starts with friendship first. [...] It goes to a level where we see ourselves as friends and partners and where we get to think borderless. We do not see the boundaries. We are people who are working together toward a common goal, and that is the most outstanding bit about it.” (C9)

This emphasis on friendship and partnership as the basis of collaboration underscores the importance of interpersonal relationships in transcending barriers and promoting inclusivity within diverse teams to achieve a common goal. In addition, most managers mention the feeling

of family. For example, manager C11 is puzzled about where the sentiment of joining forces as a family comes from, although continents separate the team members:

“It does feel like one family, but I can not tell you exactly where it comes from and how [CADI] managed to get there.” (C11)

The sense of familial connection within CADI reflects a profoundly ingrained organizational culture that has evolved organically over time, drawing from shared values, mutual support, and a collective commitment to the company’s mission. The terms friendship and family reflect the community value present between the managers. Distance is not seen as a hindrance but potential, as manager C12 explains:

“The fact that we have people in both parts of the world should help us get the best out of both worlds and minimize the disadvantages. [It is] a benefit that we have interdisciplinary groups in contact with each other.” (C12)

This narrative implies that having team members situated in different geographical locations can be advantageous, highlighting the potential for leveraging the strengths of both worlds while mitigating their respective limitations. Organizations like CADI can harness various perspectives, skills, and resources to tackle challenges by fostering interdisciplinary collaboration among team members from diverse backgrounds and locations. These synergies drawn from the collaboration can be described as rewarding for both sides. At the core of bothness lies the notion that cultivating a team endowed with diverse perspectives and skills stemming from geographical and cultural disparities enriches organizational degrowth contexts.

CADI’s collaboration showcases how interpersonal relationships can unite efforts toward common goals, transcending cultural and geographical barriers through bothness. Drawing on Froese et al.’s (2023) framework, which emphasizes the importance of collective strength in value creation through collaborative networks, the following analysis illustrates how CADI cultivates this collective strength. One key aspect contributing to this strength is Care. Consequently, we delve into the internal structures at CADI that facilitate mutual support among managers and capitalize on synergies between its North and South locations. These collaborative practices benefit individuals, the organization, and other stakeholders. Subsequently, we examine how value creation enhances capabilities for socio-ecological initiatives, mainly benefiting the local community and broader social and environmental efforts.

4.1.2 An Organizational Culture of Reciprocal Care

In line with Froese et al.'s (2023) framework, which outlines the pattern *Practicing a Culture of Reciprocal Care* (P1), understanding bothness cultivates an organizational culture centered on family and friendship-based relationships. This culture fosters a supportive atmosphere for employees, regardless of their geographical location. The managers at CADI define this environment by expressing a feeling of support, empowerment, and comfort. Our data highlights that support is the cornerstone of this culture at CADI, intricately intertwined with autonomy, security, and trust. For example, managers note that receiving comprehensive work-related information contributes to their sense of support, enabling them to work in a more self-directed manner. One manager articulates that access to information fosters a feeling of empowerment:

“We feel empowered when we get this information. We can know what is going on in terms of the market, for instance, when we have the orders and when we are able to sell. I would say that this is the biggest support.” (C9)

Managers understand support as granting room for individual autonomy since the supportive exchange of information empowers and facilitates self-directed work. CADI managers prioritize autonomy, recognizing that access to essential knowledge empowers them to work independently. They prefer not to rely on others, aiming to maximize their potential work performance (C4, C11). How autonomy and support are linked becomes visible in the following statement of manager C3:

“You have to coordinate things, but it is not controlling. You can work independently and try things out. Where you say I do not have the perfect plan for approaching this topic, but I will just do it now. [The directors do not] look over one’s shoulders in detail, which is liberating inside.” (C3)

Managers do not directly address autonomy as autonomy is more understood in self-directed work. Autonomy allows for the trying out of new things and freedom in decision-making at CADI. This autonomy fosters a sense of empowerment and liberation. Managers feel that they are in charge of their work and can try new things without worrying about being watched too closely. In addition, managers offer assistance, extending support beyond professional realms to encompass personal well-being. This environment fosters a sense of solidarity, with team

members helping one another, be it socially, emotionally, or even financially, as manager C1 says:

“We support each other on every aspect. [...] If I am having an issue at home [...] the team will come to my rescue. They want to support me socially, mentally, even financially.” (C1)

The narrative indicates that when individual employees experience that coworkers consider their personal life situation, they feel supported. This environment promotes a sense of belonging, enabling individuals to navigate challenges more confidently, knowing they have a reliable support system to lean on. For example, by finding solutions for single mothers to combine work and childcare (C6). Alternatively, providing mental health support and time off work for employees experiencing the loss of a family member (C4, C11). In addition, the narrative suggests that the concept of support extends beyond professional assistance to encompass personal aspects, blurring the lines between work and private life. This integration was evident during our observations in Kenya, where we were warmly invited to a Sunday birthday celebration organized by the Kenyan director and manager. During this celebration, we saw firsthand how the relationship between work colleagues is closely tied to friendship and family. Joy and socialization, even on weekends and at private birthdays, seem to be the team's core values, reflecting a form of conviviality. Value for the individual is created by prioritizing building close relationships that enrich one's personal life. Additionally, our practice insights show that joy and fulfillment are essential elements of the organizational culture at CADI, further illustrating the team's understanding as family and friends. For example, manager C9 explains:

“For me as a person, I strive for happiness. I want to make everyone happy to achieve personal satisfaction. I need to create the best work environment for people to be happy. I try not to be a boss. I would rather try to be a support system for everyone.” (C9)

Managers tend to reject superior behavior, so it can be assumed that performance orientation is not imposed top-down. Instead, each individual strives to do their best in their day-to-day activities. On-site observations attest that joy seems to be a priority at CADI. Our observations at the production facilities support the managers' claim that they prioritize joy. During our on-site interviews, the managers made it a priority to offer us tea and lunch to ensure we felt welcome and comfortable. It was crucial for Kenyan managers to create a joyful atmosphere within the interview process. This observation illustrates the prioritization of happiness and

friendship also within work-related situations. One reason where this joy at work originates appears to be that every manager is allowed to pursue the work that corresponds to their individual passion, as manager C8 outlines:

“But then I noticed, I can act out my passion [managers work field]. Very quickly, the business noticed that [...], and within no time, I got the opportunity to work for CADI in something that I personally enjoy doing. Therefore, work does not become like work. [...] This happens to almost everybody. When it is obvious that you are very good at something, your rules are arranged around what you like to do. People can shine and do the things that they like to do the most.” (C8)

This narrative indicates that one can expand and change the area of responsibility in a way compatible with one’s passion, allowing you to be yourself. The elements of joy, fulfillment, and meaningful work seem to be a supporting element. On-site observations demonstrate the intrinsic motivation that comes from each manager. At the production facilities in Kenya, we saw employees constantly moving up and down, heard continuous production noises, and felt productivity. For instance, we met managers working in temporary offices that were made of plastic packing cases. We realized that employees do not worry about having a proper workplace as much as they prioritize maintaining production processes. Even if it means holding meetings under a tree or amidst stacked plastic boxes, everyone seems committed to ensuring that production runs smoothly. These intrinsically motivated managers, in turn, also create value for the organization CADI. The desire of each individual to achieve top performance and the aim to contribute reflects the degrowth value of participation. Managers further feel supported when the company’s development is communicated regularly (C6). This is because the feeling of support is closely linked to receiving guidance and confidence in CADI’s future, which translates into job security and reliable wage payments (e.g., C4, C6). Interviewees treasure security, achieved by clear regulations and policies⁴, as manager C1 reflects:

⁴ We would like to point out that certain things such as regulated working hours are not standard in Kenya and therefore ask the reader not to understand all statements based on a subjective understanding of workplace organization, but to take the context into account as far as possible.

“The greatest thing to do is to make sure you have the right policies. Policies are like a bible. We do not even know the person who wrote the bible, but we subscribe to it—the same for every employer. As a [department] manager, you first need to understand the vision and mission of the company. And two, you need to know human rights. [...]. Without it, people will be confused, and you will not be able to achieve what you want to achieve as a business.” (C1)

Manager C1 utilizes an unconventional analogy of a Bible, as it is unclear who wrote policies, but people adhere to them. Comparing human rights policies to a religious artifact shows the managers’ firm conviction in the importance of policy adherence, particularly concerning human rights. Integrating these policies into the organization illustrates a commitment to ethical practices and social responsibility. This inclusion enhances a feeling of security for managers within the workplace. It aligns with the degrowth value of promoting local and global equality, ensuring that individuals are treated increasingly rightfully. Furthermore, trust is linked to support, as it is often mentioned regarding individual growth opportunities. When the organization assigns tasks to a young and inexperienced person, it shows a dedication to nurturing talent and creating chances for personal and professional growth. For instance, manager C4 remembers:

“I was young and had no experience with anything, but they came up and trusted me. [...] I started [different projects] from scratch, and they trusted me. I got the necessary support, the full support on funding and training.” (C4)

The willingness of executives to hand over responsibility for new projects is described as a form of trust. Trust from directors who believe in the capabilities and commitment to achieving results and the manager’s work is perceived as an essential element for an environment of support. Interestingly, aspects of care are not practiced consciously but tend to be implemented unconsciously, as manager C3, for example, expresses:

“I honestly do not think consciously [about caring]. Not necessarily in the sense that I think, okay, I will look after others, or they will look after me, but just a bit of this intuitive social component.” (C3)

The manager implies that unconscious practices - together with conscious efforts demonstrated by the company’s initiatives, such as implementing policies, a dedicated welfare

team, and platforms for employee feedback - foster an environment of support and care at CADI.

Our analysis reveals that within the bothness collaboration, managers cultivate a supportive culture of reciprocal care (Froese et al., 2023), which resonates with insights from the ethics of care literature. Organizational structures cope with the impact of market pressures on employee well-being by providing the feeling of being valued, supported, and empowered, reflected in a Culture of Support and Comfort at CADI. Further, the interviews underscore the close association of the pillars of trust, security, and autonomy as integral support components. In alignment with Deci and Ryan (2000), our study also suggests that individuals receive intrinsic satisfaction from progress, joy, and self-directed work practices, resulting in well-being. This closely aligns with Held's (2005) claim that care functions as a practice and a value, fostering interconnectedness and personal growth through caring, responsive relationships characterized by trust. Embracing a feeling of belonging and mutual care within CADI could foster the degrowth value of conviviality and participation.

Navigating Egos and Differences: Fostering Collaboration and Unity at CADI

After analyzing the culture of reciprocal care, we will examine how such a culture enables collaboration and team understanding at CADI. Here, too, we take up the central element that managers see the team as family. In addition, our findings show significant factors that influence team collaboration, such as the role of the company founders. We will start by briefly addressing two challenges that came to our attention during the interviews and then analyze the unique solution approach to dealing with them, portraying these challenges to strengthen team cohesion.

The two challenging elements that managers often address in terms of team collaboration are a certain amount of egoism on the part of each manager and the culturally determined differences in working styles, despite the slogan 'One Goal. One Team.' is used by CADI managers, and individual egoistic tendencies are perceived to hinder team performance. Managers point out that each team member is characterized by an ego (e.g., C8, C11) but that this egoism is put aside for the company's greater good, as manager C12 explains:

“Especially in an organization like ours, I believe everyone wants to fill their ego a little bit. But positively [when] they go hand in hand with the company goals. [...] The company's goal is not written in bold letters somewhere, but everyone has their idea of

where they want to go or how they define it. [...] For me, it is more about the sustainability we are now creating together that coincides with ego in each of us [...] For example, money and luxury are not everything. [...] But the feeling that I can change something in the world, that I am not just sitting there doing nothing.” (C12)

Based on this statement, the question arises as to whether a certain amount of egoism may hinder managers at specific points but that this egoism can ultimately also be the driving force behind a strong drive for team collaboration. Without the company vision being written on the walls or instilled in the employees, this egoism, which is in harmony with the company values, creates a strong team mentality. The alignment of company values and what the individual stands for is found in the importance of sustainability and positively impacting the world, as manager C12 states that making an impact stands above material wealth.

A second component that can at first appear to be challenging for the collaboration is the difference in working styles between German and Kenyan managers. Without entering into the analysis of cultural comparison, it is nevertheless worth mentioning that differences in working styles are mentioned by several managers (e.g., C7, C12) to influence mutual collaboration. The Kenyan working style is characterized by the attributes of hard work (e.g., C3, C10), helpfulness (e.g., C2, C11), solution orientation, determination (C12), and hospitable and caring (e.g., C3, C10). Our field observations further outline hospitality and care. During our stay, the managers arranged food, tea, and transportation for us in a very welcoming manner. Before and after each interview, it was important for the managers that we felt comfortable and well-fed. On the other hand, the German working style is described by the attributes self-driven to do the right thing (C8), directness (C9), a tendency to overthink (C12), meticulous, detail-oriented (C2), and future-oriented (C1, C9). Challenges that arise from these differences include, for example, the hard-working mentality of Kenyan colleagues, which can sometimes cause pressure, and the direct communication of German colleagues can be misunderstood. Managers perceive the different working styles as demanding. The hard-working style of the Kenyan colleagues creates the desire to match the coworkers' performance, leading to self-imposed pressure to surpass current achievements, and manager C9 says about the rather direct approach of German colleagues to ask for information:

“For some of the colleagues, I would say they are positively aggressive in a way that everybody wants to work so hard to push the business ahead. This is when you sometimes feel that they are making so many demands. But sometimes you must also explain to the team or the

people you work with. [...] That is the only kind of conflict, which may not be a conflict, maybe a misunderstanding.” (C9)

This statement addresses the ambition to achieve top performance and that only varying approaches to this ambition can harm team spirit. Interestingly, our interviews show that behind every approach to work lies the same motivation: managers are primarily concerned with driving things forward. This indicates that there are types of differences - for example, more collectivistic versus more individualistic traits - and elements of similarity and common ground. What is decisive here is the finding that differences exist but that these do not exist at crucial points. At CADI, one of these essential points is aligning corporate values with individual values, both based on a similar understanding of collaborative responsibility toward the environment to foster a form of degrowth. In terms of joint collaboration, these differences are seen as valuable potential. For example, providing specialized equipment from Germany to Kenya exemplifies this synergy (C8). This arrangement not only underscores the importance of geographical diversity within the organization but also demonstrates how collaboration across different locations enhances overall efficiency and contributes to the success of the entire operation.

When understanding the collaboration practices within team CADI, it is also essential to mention the company's founder as an influencing factor in this north-south collaboration. During our interviews, we observed that the founder from Germany and the director from Kenya play a significant role in bridging the two contexts and facilitating team coherence. The leadership style exhibited by the directors plays a crucial role in fostering team unity among managers, as manager C8 says:

“One of the things that is bridging the gap is our director. [...] He is interested in ensuring that we are able [...] to make an impact throughout the value chain.” (C8)

In addition to the bridging role of the directors, manager C7 further elaborates on what is valued about leadership behavior:

“When there is an issue even on our personal level, our leaders can guide us well. [...] They can listen to you. [...] Our leaders are providing us with an enabling environment.” (C7)

The founder and director create an environment that guides and cares for employees. Directors cultivate a supportive atmosphere that allows for mistakes as they strive for growth

(C4). This working environment created by leaders, which empowers employees, also reflects a corporate structure that is much more bottom-up than top-down. Simultaneously, the founder's role as a model figure prompts the question of whether idealistic principles are directly directed from above. During our fieldwork, it was evident that managers in Kenya had assimilated the company's values to the extent that they appeared to have memorized them. This bottom-up influence of managers is considered to result from the vital role model function of the founder, which inspires and intrinsically motivates managers. The founder's personal qualities and values inspire and unify the team, encouraging managers to copy these traits in their work (e.g., C10, C11). Interviewees describe the founder as selfless with an energetic and determined mindset toward doing what is right without doubting his intention of creating a business that makes an impact (C8). The fusion of the founder with the company's ideals is also critically reflected by a manager when we talk about how a company can grow sustainably:

"I think when the baby [the business] has been started, it's good to bring in external bosses to say objectively, for example, this product is killing us, it's causing losses, it has to go - that you try to take the emotional side out of the owner, to enable good growth." (C11)

This statement shows that the founder's influence on the company's activities is quite strong and that idealistic convictions should not stand in the way of reality. Whether concerning corporate decisions or team collaboration, our findings show that the founder can be an influencing factor. At CADI, the leaders play a vital role in maintaining organizational stability and in bridging two contexts by showing a commitment to cultivating a work environment that is both supportive and caring.

Connecting this feeling of belonging despite differences experienced by CADI managers to the broader degrowth discourse, our findings reflect the sense of conviviality and participation. Managers perceive the team as family, which according to them means that each member wants to realize their own ideals. This family is characterized by the fact that it offers each member the space to live out these ideals as they harmonize with the aims of the whole team. As in most families, a family is recognized by a sense of belonging, while each member can still be seen as an individual, which means that differences in certain aspects will always exist. As the family construct implies that the founders of each family will always have a supporting and influencing role, this can also be observed in the CADI family. The observation that the leadership within CADI emerges as an influential factor in the collaborative dynamics within the organization aligns with theoretical perspectives that highlight the importance of effective leadership in

organizational contexts, emphasizing the role of leaders in creating a conducive atmosphere for collaboration and growth (Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018). However, Khmara and Kronenberg (2018) also state that the role of leaders in the context of degrowth practices still needs to be explored in existing literature. In the context of CADI, managers acknowledge the leaders' role in guiding and supporting team members through personal and professional challenges, reflecting an environment characterized by belonging, empathy, and care.

Bothness implies that despite being physically separated, German and Kenyan managers function as a unified unit, each playing a crucial role in delivering value to the entire chain. Both sides are required to fulfill customer demands and generate profit to maintain a company's position in the market without prioritizing the pursuit of profit. Giving value to the entire chain in the context of CADI means customers, the local community (including farmers and their families, local schools, and residents of neighboring towns), and the environment, which are other stakeholders. The following chapter will analyze the collaboration practices of managers with these stakeholders.

4.1.3 External Market: Engaging in Values-Based Business Relations

Engaging in values-based business relations is relevant, particularly within a company that embraces bothness between North-South entities. Bothness as our concept extends beyond internal structures, permeating the entire value chain – from the Kenyan farmer to the European or US customer. CADI employees are committed to impacting the supply chain, from production to the assurance of a positive customer experience. Working collaboratively creates value for other stakeholders since high-quality products can be delivered to customers (C6), innovative solutions can be developed (C3), and the scale of responsible behavior toward environmental resources is increased (C10). In this analysis, we will delve into examples of managers' external interactions with, e.g., customers and external partners, focusing on the pattern of Engaging in values-based Business Relations (P3) that aims to transcend a narrow market logic (Froese et al., 2023). Examining how mutual collaboration is infused with degrowth values requires understanding the market and supply chain dynamics in which CADI operates. Internal collaboration between the German and Kenyan entities is crucial, fostering bothness to address the diverse external market requirements. We expand the understanding of the degrowth values to include the terms authenticity, fairness, transparency, and ecological sustainability, which our interviewees mentioned as central themes.

CADI managers want to establish an authentic and reliable business appearance, which seems particularly important for an African company, as Western business partners often

project negative attributes onto African companies. CADI needs to be perceived as a trustworthy and professional company to uphold a positive image and align words with actions, as manager C2 describes:

“There are many [Kenyan] competitors who play unfairly; that are corrupt [...]. I have realized that Kenya, or Africa in general, often has a bad reputation in the sense that they are not reliable. [...] We have to do more than a Western European company because, unfortunately, Africa’s image has often been damaged by such market players. We must prove to customers that this is not the case for us, and that is hard work.” (C2)

Recognizing Kenya’s and Africa’s reputation for unreliability highlights the impact of negative perceptions on business operations. This places an added burden on companies in these regions to counteract stereotypes and gain customers’ trust. By acknowledging these challenges, businesses can develop effective strategies to overcome biases and establish a positive reputation based on ethical conduct and genuine dedication to customer satisfaction. Hence, bothness implies that CADI Kenya and Germany depend on each other to create authenticity. For example, given that the primary market and customer base are located in Germany and the USA, it is necessary to consider the customers’ respective cultural backgrounds and perceptions in daily operations to appear authentic as a company. The narratives also indicate challenges arising from the need to achieve authenticity while simultaneously balancing German and Kenyan colleagues’ expectations, experiences, and standards, which are different due to different cultural backgrounds. CADI must navigate these cultural nuances tactfully, adapting certain aspects of its business to meet Western customer expectations without compromising the corporate identity of a Kenyan-German company. This underscores the complexity of navigating north-south dynamics in business operations. One factor that appears to be helpful for CADI in navigating these challenges is the large proportion of customers who share similar values and ideals to those of the company itself, as manager C11 explains:

“I have quite high values, and I want to be able to practice them at all times. These values fit well with organic customers. Most organic customers also have certain values and would also like to do business, but based on the ‘good for everyone’, which means it is pretty easy for me to move and communicate in the organic sector. Most of them are also very relaxed. You can also work on a first-name basis.” (C11)

This narrative suggests that not only the values of the individual manager are aligned with those of the company but also with those of the customers. As these customers from the organic sector do business, the actions are also based on achieving an impact for the greater good. Therefore, shared social and environmental considerations drive the business relationship, facilitating the mutual goal. Despite facing market challenges, managers at CADI proactively seek to transcend the narrow market logic by cultivating relationships with customers and partners who share their values. This strategic approach allows them to translate these shared values into actionable practices, fostering trust, transparency, and authenticity in their collaborations.

Another theme that expands our understanding of degrowth in practice and, thus, our bothness concept is fairness. Fairness involves recognizing existing inequalities (e.g., unfair payment of suppliers) and actively working toward addressing them. Manager C12 reflects:

“It is sustainable if we allow people in the value chain to participate fairly. And the next question could also be, what is fair? I do not know [...], I do not think it is finally fair because I know if you look at the euro per kilo price in the supermarket afterward, the ratio that the farmers get for this [product] is still lower - I am sure of that. But I also think that moving the world - the journey is the reward.” (C12)

According to this narrative, fairness is subjective and context-dependent. The fact that farmers receive a smaller share of profits than the product’s retail price highlights an inequity in the value distribution along the chain. For manager C12, fairness involves ensuring that stakeholders receive just compensation for their contributions. Further, the statement displays the ongoing journey toward achieving fairness as worthwhile. It demonstrates that players within the value chain should realize the fairness value on an equal footing. For manager C5, fairness means the following:

“Fairness in the sense that the welfare of the employees is well-taken care of [and] that we support the farmers. They get training, they get seedlings, they get a lot of support through the company.” (C5)

This illustrates how fairness is integral to the operations and understood along the value chain, starting with the farmers. This narrative shows that CADI’s approach to engaging with suppliers extends beyond mere transactions to encompass comprehensive support such as training and seedling provision. By prioritizing fair participation in the value chain, CADI

reflects the degrowth value of local and global equality as they strive to establish equal treatment within business relationships. Equality is linked with notions of conviviality and participation, wherein fairness fosters greater equality and encourages equitable participation within market structures. In exercising fairness, it is crucial to consider that sensitivity to one's surroundings is required. Recognizing inequalities demands an ability to perceive and respond to these nuances with empathy and awareness.

As a strategy to counteract market complexities, meet customer demands, and move toward a fairer future, the company values transparency (C2) to sell its high-quality products (C5). CADI managers want to ensure outward transparency by meeting certification requirements (C9). For instance, with the Fair for Life certification, CADI demonstrates its commitment to fairness within the supply chain, a central value throughout its organizational culture and operations (C5). While walking through the facilities in Kenya, we noticed that entire walls were covered with certifications that CADI had received. This observation underscores CADI's commitment to transparency, which positively impacts its reputation and relationships with clients, partners, and the broader community. By aligning the company's operations with customer expectations, CADI strengthens its position within the global marketplace. Transparency is not only integrated into business operations at CADI in the form of tangible certificates but is also practiced in the day-to-day dialogue between managers. Internal transparency is achieved by maintaining consistency in storytelling, requiring managers to be informed about ongoing events, and ensuring an accurate representation of facts with as few distortions as possible. Manager C8 explains:

“We need to tell the same story. [This requires] everybody to know what is happening at all times [...] At CADI, we have not reached a point where we disagree about a fact because we always represent it as it is. We do not make something that is not there.” (C8)

This commitment to truthfulness prevents disagreements over facts, as information is consistently represented as it truly is. Transparency and accuracy in storytelling foster trust within an organization and ensure reliable narratives to external stakeholders. Prioritizing integrity and truthfulness in communications establishes a foundation for effective decision-making, stakeholder engagement, and reputation management, ultimately contributing to long-term credibility. Transparency is a crucial principle that permeates internal operations and external interactions to drive degrowth.

Last but not least, the theme of ecological sustainability plays a significant role for every CADI manager and determines the focus of their actions. CADI managers strive for innovation and further engage in values-based business relations by collaborating with external partners to drive impactful change for ecological sustainability. These partnerships allow for the pooling of resources and expertise to achieve shared goals (C3). For example, manager C3 shares a collaborative effort between CADI and another start-up, underscoring how values-based partnerships enable CADI to enhance its ecological sustainability efforts:

“We can generate insect protein from our [food product] waste. With a small insect farm, we can use our waste for a useful purpose and, at the same time, produce insect protein, which can then be given to farmers as animal feed. The plan is that our farmers will use it.” (C3)

This narrative stresses that CADI wants to create infrastructures that enable actors to counteract environmental problems and go beyond their core business to generate more value from the resources. Managers value collaborative engagement with external partners to remain competitive in the current business landscape. Their dedication to innovation and collaboration in pursuit of ecological sustainability demonstrates a proactive stance toward reducing environmental impact and promoting ecologically sustainable practices. As previously analyzed, ecological sustainability closely connects degrowth and sustainable growth. Therefore, bothness proposes an understanding of degrowth that is, to a certain degree, intertwined with sustainability.

4.1.4 Doing Business in Local Actor Networks

The following analysis delves deeper into CADI’s relationships within the local community, consisting of the farmers and their families who grow the raw materials. Current anonymous and complex markets pose challenges, emphasizing the imbalance of power and low levels of accountability for social and environmental impacts. A solution for resource redistribution is to support the regional economy (Froese et al., 2023).

CADI strategically distributes production units across five decentralized sites to maximize impact within local communities (C8). This impact can be achieved through long-term and meaningful relationships with the surrounding community. One of our field experiences can illustrate this kind of relationship. While walking with a manager toward the nursery, we passed several farms. At each farm, the manager shared a story or an anecdote, such as *“This farmer was one of the first we bought raw materials from - he believed in CADI from*

the beginning.” At another farm, the manager told us that “*a family member died a few days ago, and preparations are currently being made for a ceremony that will be attended by many CADI employees*” (C5). What surprised us on this walk was witnessing how close the manager was to the lives of the surrounding local farmers to form personal connections.

CADI managers shared that their primary goal is to uplift rural areas by prioritizing farmers’ livelihoods instead of solely focusing on profits. They deliberately reject the common practices that prioritize profitability but emphasize uplifting these communities by actively engaging in practices that support the livelihoods of local farmers. The respondents’ answers reflect that uplifting livelihoods and achieving welfare entails three main aspects: redistributing profits by reinvesting them and paying adequate and stable prices for raw materials, supporting the local community, and expanding individual knowledge by offering training. In essence, these three aspects are aimed at the goal of empowerment. manager C1 addresses the overall aim of empowerment:

“[CADI] is not only thinking of profit, but the key thing is the empowerment [...] To improve the livelihoods. You can move around our facilities, and you will notice one thing: there is growth in those regions” (C1)

CADI’s business model extends beyond profit generation to encompass broader socio-economic goals. As evidenced by the noticeable growth observed in the regions surrounding the facilities, prioritizing empowerment and livelihood enhancement contributes to local communities’ well-being and fosters sustainable development. Rather than relocating individuals from rural areas to urban centers, the proposition is to establish factories and businesses in rural areas, providing local residents with employment opportunities and a source of income. This approach challenges the conventional migration patterns from rural to urban areas by advocating for developing rural economies. It addresses rural poverty and unemployment, contributing to balanced regional development. Managers share that, for example, infrastructural development improved local living conditions by providing better roads, water, electricity, and job opportunities (C8). Additionally, by providing training and support in agricultural growth for farmers, high-quality products are cultivated that benefit the farmers, their community, and the CADI business due to enhanced product quality. In our conversations, it becomes clear that the welfare of the farmers is one of the highest concerns for the managers, as C9, for example, shares:

“What matters most to me as I work besides happiness is that we are taking care of the farmers. They are the main stakeholders for our business. If they fail to supply us, we are out of business. We give them a lot of service and try to understand their lives and how we can support them. That has grown over the years. We have introduced projects to support them, to make their lives better, to make the farmers happy.” (C9)

Farmers’ well-being is prioritized, recognizing that the farmers’ success directly impacts CADI’s success.

Empowerment can be seen in knowledge expansion as managers closely engage in primary school programs. For example, they train students on composting techniques and practical farming skills (C4). This initiative demonstrates a proactive approach to community engagement and education, utilizing partnerships with primary schools to instill environmental consciousness and agricultural proficiency in young minds.

However, one manager also expresses a critical view concerning empowerment. Manager C12 says:

“I would say this cooperation toward a sustainable world and the empowerment of small-scale farmers and the Kenyan population thrives me in my daily activities. But I always think it is so condescending to say that, especially as a white Muzungu⁵.” (C12)

The interviewee shares an uncomfortable feeling associated with empowering local farmers. Uplifting a local community can have negative connotations and create a feeling of discomfort, possibly also due to the deeply rooted historical past between the Global North and the Global South, indicating that contextual influences affect a north-south relationship.

CADI managers provide insights into the organization’s commitment to community welfare, resonating with Froese et al.’s (2023) call for engagement with local actors to strengthen regional economies and foster community embeddedness. Based on the narratives, we tend to consider the term welfare to capture a multifaceted approach, encompassing financial stability, social well-being, and individual knowledge expansion. Manager narratives highlight strategic decisions, such as decentralizing production units to increase community impact and emphasizing a vision of empowerment prioritized over profit. These initiatives reflect a deeper

⁵ Muzungu is a term used in East Africa, typically used to describe a foreign person.

understanding of values-based business relations, wherein the welfare of the local community is linked to the organization's long-term success and sustainability. CADI's operations show similarities to relocalization, as the company enhances local and global equality by rejecting highly centralized, globalized, and economized structures that undermine collective, local, and direct participation (Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018; Lizarralde & Tyl, 2018; Wells, 2016; Wiefek & Heinitz, 2018). Therefore, bothness between the Global North and South uses relocalization as a strategy to foster the redistribution of resources and, thus, contributes to the degrowth value of local and global equality. In addition, the organization contributes to promoting equality by striving to empower the local community's livelihoods, as Froese et al. (2023) suggested.

4.2 A Story of Moving From Otherness to Bothness

From a more analytical level, our analysis of collaborative practices outlines the concept of bothness as a journey of moving from otherness to bothness. Otherness, as we learned from our case study, refers to differences that exist and are perceived in day-to-day collaborations, whether geographical, cultural, behavioral differences, or differences in working styles. Bothness recognizes and celebrates multiple identities or perspectives within oneself or a team. It is important to note that these two terms are not mutually exclusive. In fact, striving for bothness does not mean dismissing or erasing otherness. Instead, it involves recognizing and embracing the diversity of human experience and acknowledging the value of different perspectives. By embracing bothness, one can create more inclusive and respectful communities where differences are embraced and transformed into a stronger sense of unity.

The findings illustrate that various contextual factors influence social interactions within north-south collaboration practices, which may create a sense of otherness. Our interviews have revealed two primary dilemmas that highlight these disparities (physical and cultural): distance and dependency. Besides the geographical distance, manager C2 reflects that the enduring cultural divide can create a subconscious distance between individuals, indicating a sense of being perceived as different or unique due to this cultural construct. The manager expresses discomfort with this perception and notes the barrier it creates in fostering equal interactions:

“There is still this unconsciously very cultural thing, light, dark, unfortunately, this thing that we still stand on a different pedestal. Unfortunately, where we don't belong, because I don't feel like that. But I think it's still unconsciously the case that people perceive you as something special. There's also an inhibition to deal with you on an equal footing.” (C2)

This excerpt addresses the complex problem of racial and cultural biases deeply rooted in society. It sheds light on the lasting impact of historical ideas of ‘lightness and darkness’, which still affect how people interact and prevent equality. The speaker’s self-reflection encourages a critical examination of how established biases shape perceptions and interactions, highlighting the ongoing need for awareness and efforts to overcome such obstacles. Our analysis of incorporating degrowth in a contextual perspective aligns with the existing literature on degrowth. We found that power dynamics, inequalities, and disparities significantly impact mutual collaborations between North and South contexts (Dengler & Seebacher, 2019; Escobar, 2015; Gräbner-Radkowsch & Strunk, 2023). By acknowledging these biases and reflecting on their implications, a critical examination of power dynamics and inequalities is inherent in such collaborations.

Because of these deeply rooted differences, transferring from a degrowth understanding in the Global North to the Global South is impossible and can have opposing effects. In an interview that directly addressed the topic of degrowth, manager C12 argues that while degrowth may be necessary in the over-consuming Global North, imposing the same idea on the Global South might be difficult:

“In the Global South, there will also be - and already is this oversaturation. In Germany, we have already experienced this oversaturation, luxury, and prosperity and we have experienced that it leads us in the wrong direction. But just like small children, you can not take away the experience, but [the Global South] has to make them itself.” (C12)

This narrative highlights the intricate nature of development and globalization, underscoring that models of prosperity that have worked in the North may not be universally applicable. It stresses the significance of considering different regions’ distinct socio-economic and cultural environments when devising solutions. Furthermore, it contemplates the consequences of overconsumption and advocates for sustainable approaches to development that prioritize well-being over material excess. Accordingly, the North’s tendency to mentor the South has been a controversial topic (Gräbner-Radkowsch & Strunk, 2023; Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019), highlighting the complexities of global collaborations. These discussions are consistent with the degrowth literature, emphasizing the importance of a nuanced understanding of collaboration within diverse contexts.

The challenges faced by CADI highlight the importance of collaboration practices that reach beyond geographical and cultural boundaries. The slogan ‘One Team. One Goal’ represents a

shared vision of unity and a common purpose within the team, providing an initial understanding of the qualities that define and unite the managers in a north-south context. During our on-site presence in Kenya, we noticed several posters on the facility walls illustrating the mission, vision, and core values. The high visibility serves as a constant reminder, indicating that it holds a prominent place in the daily interactions of managers and serves as a guiding principle in their work.

The idea of bothness draws from a pool of values, which reflects their shared dedication to collaborative efforts despite cultural and geographical differences. For instance, establishing a culture of care and engaging in values-driven networks are practical examples of improving bothness. Our findings align with existing literature on north-south collaboration, emphasizing mutual learning opportunities inherent in such partnerships (Dengler & Seebacher, 2019; Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019). As noted by Dengler and Seebacher (2019), these collaborations offer the North insights into sustainable livelihoods and community care organizations while providing the South with valuable perspectives from the Global North to navigate challenges and contradictions within the degrowth discourse. The central approach is collaborating and creating secure spaces and infrastructure that enable participants to tackle external challenges, implement shared values, and adopt sustainable practices (Froese et al., 2023).

5 Discussion

Bothness aims to provide a theoretical and practical understanding of degrowth valid in both the Global North and South (as detailed above in Figure 1). This chapter discusses bothness and its influential factors and is structured to explore the infusion and intertwining of the degrowth values of conviviality and participation, local and global equality, and ecological sustainability with mutual collaboration practices. The following sections illustrate the links between these three degrowth values necessary for north-south organizations' socio-economic activity. Mutual collaboration practices aim to establish safe environments and structures that enable participants to address external challenges and implement shared values and sustainable practices. Consequently, individuals within and across organizations recognize shared core values, combine resources, and leverage synergies to achieve their goals (Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018; Lizarralde & Tyl, 2018; Manley & Aiken, 2020; Öz & Aksoy, 2019; Schmid, 2018). With this collectivity in mind, we aim to gain insights into how mutual

collaboration infuses with degrowth and, subsequently, develop a greater understanding of the opportunities for bothness and a degrowth future.

5.1 The Bothness Foundation: Welfare

This section argues that fostering a supportive welfare culture that focuses on well-being is essential for promoting common ground between the North and South. Our analysis of G3 “is primarily about conviviality and participation but relevant to all three core values of degrowth” (Froese et al., 2023, p. 8). Our findings stressed that mutual support lays the basis for managers and that maintaining a positive mindset without being deterred by external power imbalances and inequalities is crucial for fostering genuine collaboration and progress. The findings reveal that themes like family, friendship, care, and the individual’s striving for self-improvement all contribute to conviviality and participation, critical components of bothness to unite the team. However, for instance, engaging in values-based business relations in practice interrelates with supporting the other, e.g., looking after the well-being of employees, farmers, and the surrounding community.

The fusion of mutual collaboration practices and the conviviality value is encapsulated in the bothness concept, as a sense of belonging and care became evident in CADI through the perception of family. The bothness concept understands family in a positive sense, which means that the family construct is characterized by joy, harmony, and cohesion to enhance well-being, creating a comfortable work environment for colleagues and employees. The workplace is seen as a home, a sentiment surprisingly shared by German employees working remotely and Kenyan managers working on-site despite the distance. It is surprising because this family-like atmosphere is felt even without physical contact and contextual pressures between German and Kenyan managers (further discussed below). Despite this, it becomes evident that individuals acknowledge differences in working styles but still share a common understanding of supporting each other.

While conviviality is demonstrated through expressions of friendship and joy, participation extends this understanding by highlighting the team members’ intrinsic motivation. Our findings revealed a managerial willingness to participate and a desire to take on challenges to enable meaningful practices that, in turn, foster enjoyment. This highlights the mutually reinforcing connection between care, fulfillment, and joy at work, resulting in a degrowth understanding that defines conviviality in terms of caring and participation as an internal strive toward achieving change and progress, guided by the ideals and values of individual managers.

This inner ambition of every manager receives sufficient support at CADI by allowing managers to take responsibility and giving them the trust to achieve the best in their day-to-day work. Therefore, bothness suggests that intrinsic satisfaction is received from positive progress and self-directed work practices, resulting in well-being, aligning with the argument made by Deci and Ryan (2000) that autonomy-supportive environments foster positive motivation and psychological well-being.

Especially with Kenyan managers, we noticed that the term welfare was synonymous with well-being, mainly enhanced by care and support. Therefore, welfare plays a central role as an alternative concept for degrowth in the Global South. In alignment with the argument of Rodríguez-Labajos et al. (2019), who advocate for an organizational degrowth understanding that entails the joint participation of diverse actors, we also propose that the term welfare, especially for the Global South, partly includes what the Global North understands by degrowth. By including welfare as terminology in understanding degrowth, a more common understanding can be created that entails fair participation in degrowth practices and understanding actors from the Global North and South.

In the broader context, welfare can enhance our ability to achieve long-term social objectives. Jackson (2017) argues that “we cannot change ecological limits. We cannot alter human nature. But we can and do create and recreate the social world” (Jackson, 2017, p. 211). This introduces an understanding of collaborative practices that influence our social coexistence in the environment by aligning diverse perspectives. For example, in the agricultural projects at CADI, local farmers and managers collaborate to implement sustainable farming practices. This collective effort boosts local food production and promotes environmental stewardship and social cohesion. By combining traditional farming knowledge with modern sustainability techniques, diverse perspectives toward the common goal of social and environmental welfare are aligned, demonstrating how welfare-oriented collaborations can drive social and ecological progress. Here, the overlap of the degrowth values of conviviality and participation with ecological sustainability – which will further be discussed below - becomes clear as well-being is used concerning both internal organizational practices and external interactions with the environment.

The bothness concept is based on the idea that a culture of care creates rewarding synergies for both contexts and suggests an organizational degrowth understanding that creates synergies between the Global North and South through mutual support, care, and exchanging knowledge and expertise. The mutual exchange of different perspectives and support describes the

degrowth-value conviviality and participation in a way that resonates with Global North and South actors despite differing developmental priorities across these geographical contexts. Organizations like CADI foster interdisciplinary collaboration that enriches their operations by leveraging diverse perspectives and skills from different geographical locations. This mutual support includes emotional, financial, and work-related aspects. It emphasizes caring for others' well-being and enhancing capabilities for socio-ecological initiatives that benefit both local communities and broader environmental efforts. Bothness captures an approach to organizational degrowth by fostering synergies between the Global North and South. The narrative of endless growth as the sole path to progress has proven unsustainable, necessitating a reimagined vision of prosperity that prioritizes well-being and ecological balance (Raworth, 2024). At CADI, the culture of care and support, which emphasizes conviviality and participation, demonstrates how organizations can thrive without perpetual growth. As we move away from the growth-centric model, organizational practices must focus on initiating economies that enable people to thrive within the planet's ecological limits. Embracing bothness, emphasizing caring and participatory cultures, provides a practical blueprint for achieving this new conception of progress, ensuring a regenerative and distributive economy that fosters well-being.

Furthermore, our results show that founders and leaders play a significant role in shaping degrowth practices. As suggested by Khmara and Kronenberg (2018), our results show that the company founder plays an influencing role in practicing a form of collaboration that reflects degrowth. What initially surprised us was that most individuals seemed to share similar values. One reason is that the founder and senior management considered whether the individual values matched those of the company during the job interviews. Therefore, the influence of leaders is already visible when hiring new employees. During the recruitment process at CADI, individuals with similar mindsets are selected to foster alignment with the company values.

In addition, acknowledging what researchers claim concerning the bottom-up approach in alternative organizational forms (Dahlman, 2021; Cheney & Munshi, 2017; Parker, 2002), our findings are consistent with the research that the inner drive to practice a culture of reciprocal care is not dictated from above. However, the founder's position as a role model raises the question of whether idealistic principles are indirectly imposed from top-down. During our fieldwork, we observed that managers in Kenya had internalized the company values as if they learned them by heart and reproduced them in their daily practices. This internalization may indicate a level of institutionalization where the company's values are deeply embedded within

the organizational culture. While this raises the question of whether such internalization aligns with degrowth values, it also highlights the complex interplay between top-down influence and bottom-up adoption. Therefore, a dichotomy becomes apparent: on the one hand, sustainability values are perceived as valuable and should be integrated to the greatest possible extent as they can create a positive impact. At the same time, the notion of ‘the Global North trains and educates the Global South’ can be recognized here, indicating power imbalances that will be further discussed in the following.

5.2 Bothness Despite Underlying External and Internal Pressures

As in any familial setting, coexisting and having social interactions do not always result in harmony. Our findings show that geographical and cultural disparities, dependencies, power imbalances, and inequalities stemming from the north-south divide pose external barriers to embracing degrowth principles. Internal pressures, characterized by egoistic tendencies and different working styles, also indicate challenges. Tackling these external and internal challenges, which contribute to a sense of otherness, is imperative in fostering the objective of a degrowth-oriented future. Although we acknowledge that pressures are present in internal and external conviviality-driven business relations, bothness strives to view internal managers, external farmers, and customers as equal social beings within cooperative relationships while adhering to community aspects (e.g., Manley & Aiken, 2020; Nesterova, 2021).

External Pressures: Inequality and Power Imbalances

Exploring the first dilemma, some suggest that the South should not unquestioningly adopt the growth and degrowth-based development trajectory of the North (e.g., Gräbner-Radkowsch & Strunk, 2023; Latouche, 2004). Our findings suggest that this perspective highlights an underlying inequality and power structures, with the North imposing its influence on determining right and wrong. The North has had the chance to learn from its journey, including the consequences of its voracity, and acknowledge its missteps. Conversely, the South has more or less been denied the opportunity to forge its own path, often relying on external influences to navigate development choices. The North’s perceived demonstration of power and unequal interference in other matters could represent a limitation for degrowth, constraining degrowth’s pursuit of equality.

Arguments that counteract the prevailing notion of imposed degrowth ideologies illustrating inequality (although it has undeniably happened in history and the present) are rooted in practical case studies conducted in the Global South. These studies illustrate the significant

influence of Southern ideas on the concept of degrowth in the North because degrowth values resonate with the Global South due to its alignment with indigenous movements and philosophies (Dengler & Seebacher, 2019; Gerber & Raina, 2018; Latouche, 2004; Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019). This tests the perception of degrowth as solely a Northern construct and stresses the importance of the reciprocal nature of idea exchange between regions (Gräbner-Radkowsch & Strunk, 2023). Therefore, embracing bothness leads to diverse perspectives and a deeper understanding of degrowth and fosters a more equitable collaborative relationship, as synergies and mutual learning opportunities can reward both contexts (e.g., Dengler & Seebacher, 2019; Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019). For instance, we observed in our findings that Kenyan and German managers display a complementary relationship - while Kenya emphasizes the empowerment of farmers, Germans prioritize sales strategies, showcasing different learning possibilities. Despite these divergent focuses, mutual fascination and a shared desire for learning permeate interactions in a cultural and operational sense. In business, we observed German managers picking up collective values rooted in Kenyan practices. This integration can influence CADI managers' perception of the team as a family, embodying the spirit of unity and cooperation embraced by Kenyan and German members.

Collaborations must avoid the 'tragedy of the commons', which occurs when shared resources are depleted due to individuals acting in their self-interest rather than considering the common good. This problem worsens when transdisciplinary approaches that integrate knowledge from multiple disciplines are underutilized or viewed as an unnecessary burden. For example, learning about new perspectives requires time and energy, which in turn could slow down business processes. Conflicting interests and power dynamics often prevent the effective use of transdisciplinary methods, hindering efforts to manage shared resources sustainably (Schmidt & Pröpper, 2017). Nevertheless, our findings are in alignment with literature that emphasizes that to manage concentrated efforts across borders, mutual collaborations need to address pressing challenges like climate change, inequality, and power differentials together (Chiengkul, 2018; Dengler & Seebacher, 2019; Escobar, 2015; Gerber & Raina, 2018; Gräbner-Radkowsch & Strunk, 2023). Accordingly, striving for bothness does not mean dismissing or ignoring otherness. Instead, businesses recognize the possible limitations of a degrowth future and address them jointly in a north-south context without getting paralyzed by these challenges.

Internal Pressures: Hard work and Egoism

The insights gained concerning individual egoism and different working styles within CADI offer perspectives on internal teamwork tensions. The following discussion resonates with the

degrowth literature, prompting a critical examination of the compatibility of degrowth with diverse working cultures (Nesterova, 2020).

The close interconnectedness of work, family, and home can be critically examined as it also showcases the hard-working behavior and ambition for more excellent performance. This raises the question of whether the fusion of home and work fulfills an individual by providing meaningful work or leads to an expectation of constant accessibility and availability, thereby exerting (self-imposed) performance pressure on individuals. Kenya's hard-working principles (Aharonovitz & Nyaga, 2010) may conflict with traditional degrowth principles because "the use of the term 'degrowth' [...] goes against the mindset and basic principles of living and working hard" (Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019, p. 170). This consideration is closely linked with the argument of some scholars who advocate for a degrowth society that lives better with less due to a reduction in production and consumption (Banerjee et al., 2021; Jackson, 2017; Rennstam, 2021; Soper, 2023). A reduction may imply a slowdown in production, which raises the question of whether hard-working principles are compatible with such a degrowth idea in the Global South. This dichotomy is particularly significant when examining the social enterprise's operations in Kenya and Germany as it considers both perspectives, striving to balance the need for growth in the Global South and the principles of degrowth. Instead of concentrating on reducing production, which may not be attainable in the Global South, redistributing profits and resources might be a more practical approach to incorporating degrowth values. This is especially viable when the additional aim is to produce high-quality products without undermining the economic growth necessary in certain regions.

Another challenge that collaborative businesses face is that daily work practices are subject to individual egoism and self-interest that might limit a degrowth future. For instance, reactive egoism implies that individuals prompted to empathize with others may paradoxically respond with heightened selfishness (Epley et al., 2006). This means that despite understanding the importance of fairness and collaboration in bothness, managers may prioritize their own interests due to concerns of exploitation or unfair treatment, thus limiting a degrowth future that strives for participation and equality. This dilemma and limitation to degrowth can be counteracted if bothness collaborations combine individual egoism with collective responsibility. This perspective builds upon the notion that collaboration involves individuals working together for shared benefits, even amid conflicting interests or perceived egoism. The concept challenges the assumption that egoistic tendencies are inept at collaborating for mutual gain. Instead, mutual collaboration represents a small cluster of individuals who rely

on reciprocity (Axelrod, 1981). Similarly, to foster bothness, managers leverage individual egoism toward the company's benefit, demonstrating that personal interests can be set aside for the greater good. Each individual's contribution leads to mutual benefits, illustrating how egoism, when harnessed positively, can drive social transformation and foster equality on both local and global scales.

5.3 External Values-based Business Relations

Our findings on bothness align with degrowth literature, as engaging in values-based business relations supports the idea that supply chains can be driven by non-economic values like fairness, cooperation, transparency, diversity, food quality, sustainability, and welfare (e.g., Hardesty et al., 2014; King et al., 2013; Lerman et al., 2012; Peterson et al., 2022; Wiefek & Heinitz, 2018). These values can potentially drive a shift toward degrowth (Büchs & Koch, 2019; Latouche, 2009; Xue, 2014) to achieve a greater good or impact. However, these values are rather broad, possess multiple subjective meanings, and are unlikely to be fully realized in the present or future, so discussing each in detail is beyond our scope. What stands out in our findings and will thus be further discussed in the following is that making an impact or achieving the greater good in the bothness understanding primarily involves two aspects: striving toward change concerning relocalization and ecological sustainability. Specifically, our findings reveal that fairness can be demonstrated through relocalization and redistribution in daily business operations since it enhances the welfare of rural farmers. Furthermore, collaborating with external partners can drive impactful change to improve ecological sustainability measures. In this context, selecting and collaborating with suppliers, economic partners, and customers who share social and environmental values and practices is essential, fostering equal and trusting relationships (Froese et al., 2023)

Toward an Impactful Change: Localization of Suppliers as a Degrowth Strategy

Our findings show that managers' statements about adapting daily activities to the greater good often came up in connection with fairness. By implementing fairness and long-term cooperation over narrow market logic, organizations can build long-term partnerships that yield mutual benefits and contribute to overcoming short-term profit-driven approaches (Froese et al., 2023; Samoggia & Beyhan, 2022). According to our findings, fairness involves recognizing existing inequalities (e.g., unfair supplier payments) and actively working toward addressing them to improve equality and promote relocalization.

Relocalization emerges as a strategy for bothness collaborations to foster the degrowth values of equality, participation, and ecological sustainability by rejecting highly centralized, globalized, and economized structures that undermine collective, local, and direct participation (e.g., Froese et al., 2023; Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018; Wiefek & Heinitz, 2018). This approach aligns with the principles of social enterprises, which emphasize creating value tailored to the needs and aspirations of individuals and communities within local actor networks (Froese et al., 2023; Zanoni et al., 2017). Relocalization “is widely accepted as a degrowth approach” (Xue, 2014, p. 130), prioritizing localized production and distribution, shorter supply chains, and knowledge and skill exchange (Liegey & Nelson, 2020).

For instance, our findings demonstrate that by relying on localized suppliers and production, managers emphasize building close, long-term relationships with farmers and empowering them, reflecting the company’s dedication to making meaningful and lasting impacts (e.g., Foese et al., 2023). This commitment is evident in various ways, such as supporting the regional economy, enhancing social well-being, and facilitating the expansion of individual knowledge. Additionally, by establishing decentralized sites, businesses amplify their influence within communities, enabling infrastructural enhancements like access to essential resources and job creation. This approach not only strengthens local communities but also helps to prevent migration from rural to urban areas. Therefore, bothness enterprises can use relocalization to balance resources between the Global North and South and empower local communities to promote equality (e.g., Froese et al., 2023).

Critical viewpoints may argue that emphasizing localized suppliers and production could lead to regions producing homogenous products, given the availability of similar resources (Hendrickson & Heffernan, 2002; Xue, 2014). However, the diversity of products and entrepreneurial opportunities became apparent while walking through the nursery and facilities. Relocalization creates opportunities for innovation, especially regarding ecological sustainability values, e.g., insect proteins can be extracted from food waste and reused as animal food by the farmers. The localization of suppliers and production can pose a chance as re-visiting the same sites several times can offer new perspectives and ideas to foster diversity in production over time, as managers are required to become creative with the resources available. In essence, relocalization does not necessarily imply limited diversity but embracing it in new ways. By encouraging resourcefulness, fostering innovation, and promoting a deeper connection to the local environment, relocalization enhances the variety and quality of products available, exhausting the potential of the full product including food waste.

Another discussion point is based on the argument of Xue (2014), who argues that relocalization means not only producing goods and services on a local basis but also consuming them locally. However, CADI's core emphasis lies in fostering localized production while consumers are not localized since CADI's products are exclusively for export. Therefore, the company's implementation of relocalization can be approached critically, with careful consideration given to power dynamics, global interdependencies, and the diverse needs and perspectives of, e.g., customers worldwide. Northern perspectives influence decision-making since customers are not located in the South, and products and requirements are aligned based on Northern customer perceptions. Although this global market access redistributes profits, it might result in greater control and power over the local production sites or exploit local resources because the South depends on the global market. While this concern is valid, it is essential to recognize arguments that degrowth in terms of relocalization does not reject international trade (Chiengkul, 2018). Degrowth research takes a critical view of international trade solely and primarily because international trade causes negative social and environmental impacts (Xue, 2014). However, in the case of CADI, these negative effects are minimized by, for example, using the most environmentally friendly means of transport possible (reusable pallets, shipping instead of air transport), underlining why CADI's approach can be seen as a form of relocalization in the context of degrowth. The company's efforts to minimize these negative effects are discussed in more detail in the following.

Ecological Sustainability

Environmental concerns, which are inherently global, demand a unified approach toward degrowth (Chiengkul, 2018). Accordingly, collaborating with external partners can drive impactful change to improve ecological sustainability measures. CADI, for example, collaborates with other start-ups, which shows a striving toward more innovation and recognizes joint impactful change and sustainability. In addition, the enterprise implements educational initiatives on, for example, composting and organic farming, with local schools and farmers to promote knowledge and skill exchange among community members to enhance ecological understanding. This highlights a collaborative and innovation-driven mindset. In addition, the company's nursery serves to educate farmers on maintaining high-quality products, emphasizing the importance of skill development in achieving and improving sustainable production practices. Therefore, values-based business relationships at CADI infuse the degrowth value of ecological sustainability (Froese et al., 2023).

Our findings mainly illustrate that improvements are crucial, mostly in enhancing technological solutions to promote innovation. A paradoxical nature of degrowth appears as financial resources are needed to buy machines that promote ecological sustainability and innovations. This raises the controversial question of whether degrowth contrasts with or supports technological innovations. Therefore, one argument opponents raise is that technology can justify neoliberalism and uphold market-driven solutions that prioritize profit over social and environmental well-being (Latouche, 2009; Romano, 2012). Contrary to this, Ibrahim and Sarkis (2020) argue that localized, affordable, and inclusive technology can effectively support the degrowth paradigm, especially in urban settings in the Global South. The requirement, however, is that technological innovations consider the culture and needs of local communities. This is particularly important in urbanized areas of the Global South, which are expected to experience significant growth and are vulnerable to sustainability challenges (Ibrahim & Sarkis, 2020). Accordingly, bothness does not have to reject technological solutions if it prioritizes sustainability, equity, and the well-being of people and the planet.

In sum, the underlying bothness values mentioned above show evidence that success is defined by considering the broader impact on society, thereby fostering degrowth-oriented value creation (Froese et al., 2023). By prioritizing values such as fairness, cooperation, and ecological sustainability throughout the supply chain, bothness can contribute to a more equitable distribution of resources, ecological sustainability, and conviviality and participation.

5.4 An Inclusive Approach to Degrowth in a North-South Context

As the discussion of our data shows, degrowth is challenging to understand in terms of three categories of values. One reason is that these values appear to be closely linked. For example, practicing a culture of care may primarily express conviviality. However, at the same time, it becomes clear that the practices of reciprocal care are also an expression of ecological sustainability. This is because care is defined as caring for the well-being of colleagues and the well-being of the environment and its resources. For this reason, the bothness concept does not differentiate between the three degrowth values. Instead, these values serve as a guideline and appear simultaneously in practice.

In addition, we consider expanding and concretizing these degrowth values with sensitivity. Creating an organizational culture of reciprocal care, building values-based business relationships, and engaging in local actors' networks requires each individual to perceive external circumstances and their needs. We observed that managers need to have a strong sense

of empathy and sensitivity. Being sensitive to the existing societal structures, expectations, and norms is essential when discussing degrowth and its potential impacts on well-being (Büchs & Koch, 2019). Acknowledging and addressing these sensitivities makes it possible to develop more effective strategies for promoting degrowth and fostering sustainable societies. With the concept of bothness, we thus propose a degrowth understanding for the Global North and South, characterized by an active sensibility to do an impactful change. Conviviality and participation are incorporated in the bothness concept for degrowth, thus acknowledging the natural human ability to do good from within.

As outlined above, our findings show that alternative terms like welfare, redistribution, and empowerment contribute to degrowth and are more favored and actively used. This alternative terminology underscores the need for inclusive and contextually relevant approaches to degrowth. By embracing terms rooted in local values and responsive to global challenges, communities in the Global South can actively participate in shaping a more equitable and sustainable future (Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019). As the degrowth discourse acknowledges growth limits, this shift toward alternative terminology represents a linguistic adjustment and a fundamental reorientation toward values of equality at the local and global levels.

6 Conclusion

With the empirical findings, we answered the research question of how mutual collaboration practices infuse with degrowth values in a social enterprise that spans the Global North and the Global South. In the concluding chapter, we summarize our empirical findings and define their contributions to the existing theory. Additionally, we explore the practical implications of our study. Finally, we acknowledge the general limitations of our research, which indicate potential opportunities for future research.

We found that organizational degrowth in research is not a stringent concept that can be applied in any context nor be implemented in a company from one day to the next. For Sulwe and his colleagues, whom we met on the opening page, this means that they will instead need to identify values and principles that unite them and adhere to them. In Sulwe's case, these shared aspirations will not be found in figures that can be presented at the end of a quarter but possibly much more in jointly expanding the business model based on shared values and the potential that the surrounding community, for example, offers.

While maintaining profitability remains crucial for an organization's survival, the significance of profits as a measure of success is diminishing. Despite this, CADI maintains its pursuit of growth, aiming to reinvest and maintain competitiveness in the market. Nevertheless, our analysis suggests that CADI, by partially embracing the principles of degrowth, holds the potential to contribute to a societal shift toward degrowth.

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

Our findings enrich existing literature by providing empirical insights into how organizations operating in a north-south context, like CADI, navigate complex socio-economic challenges while striving for meaningful impact. They underscore the importance of aligning corporate values with broader societal goals and highlight the potential for businesses to drive change within their communities.

Our main theoretical contribution is exploring the role and potential of bothness as a concept in the north-south business context. We introduced bothness to understand mutual collaborations within a north-south business context. While existing literature often focuses on power inequalities inherent in north-south collaborations, we offer a novel perspective that emphasizes the potential for mutual benefit and shared value creation. By introducing the concept of bothness, we call for unity achieved when seemingly divided parts of the world work together toward a shared future based on degrowth principles. Bothness transcends traditional dichotomies and acknowledges the interconnectedness and interdependence of diverse perspectives, values, and experiences from both the Global North and South. It recognizes that mutual collaboration requires operating concurrently in both regions to promote greater social and environmental well-being. Importantly, our bothness concept is rather context-independent and goes beyond carbon colonial approaches, attitudes, and practices. Additionally, bothness means achieving a synergy of degrowth values within mutual collaboration practices. It highlights the interconnectedness of degrowth values with mutual collaboration practices based on ecological sustainability, local and global equality, and conviviality and participation (Froese et al., 2023, p. 2). Furthermore, it acknowledges the need to balance growth aspirations with degrowth principles to achieve sustainable and meaningful outcomes.

Another main contribution is extending Froese et al.'s (2023) framework by expanding the pattern of Joining Forces in Rewarding and Mutual collaboration. This framework provided the lens for investigating bothness to understand middle managers' (inter) actions. It allowed us to reflect on how shared contributions of degrowth, e.g., Doing Business in Local Actor Networks,

are present in practice and to understand mutual collaboration practices infused with degrowth values in a north-south context.

As scholars continue exploring the complexities of degrowth theory and its practical applications, our study underscores the need for a more holistic understanding encompassing theoretical frameworks and real-world organizational dynamics. We found that degrowth can be a viable term in the South despite differences. Further, we considered studying managers' practices a good starting point for making practical contributions. The conversations in the literature review on pragmatic and interdisciplinary approaches are particularly enriching for advancing degrowth literature. By focusing on the role of both individual and organizational actors in promoting degrowth principles, scholars can move beyond theoretical debates toward actionable frameworks that foster sustainable and equitable global development. Investigating these conversations reveals how degrowth principles are operationalized within various company departments (e.g., marketing, supply chain, finance) and how they manifest in daily business practices and decision-making processes, providing concrete strategies that other organizations can follow. This can provide valuable insights and reference points for degrowth research seeking an enhanced global and practical understanding.

6.2 Practical Contributions

Our findings demonstrate how mutual collaboration practices reflect degrowth values valid for a German and Kenyan business environment. From this, we can provide different practical implications for management lifeworlds.

Firstly, companies seeking sustainable growth resilient to external circumstances can build on our key finding that a sense of belonging and a working environment of care is central. These insights are beneficial for designing intra-organizational collaboration within contemporary organizations that embrace principles of equity and ecological balance to build more resilient and adaptive systems better equipped to navigate uncertainties and disruptions (Islar et al., 2024). Our on-site observations reveal that organizational degrowth cannot be captured as a fixed corporate strategy expressed merely in numbers and figures. Instead, our time on-site showed that degrowth is more accurately reflected in the quality of interpersonal relationships. During our field research, we identified specific business practices aligned with degrowth principles, illustrating how each company may exhibit varying pockets of degrowth characteristics influenced by the individuals within the organization. Organizations like CADI exemplify how degrowth values can be operationalized to promote sustainable and equitable business practices by fostering a culture of reciprocity, care, and shared responsibility.

Additionally, our findings demonstrate the practical benefits of collaboration by integrating perspectives from different contexts to address ecological challenges. Degrowth emphasizes the importance of collaboration to maintain ecological boundaries. Our results highlight the key aspects that facilitate such collaborations and suggest that expanding these efforts can drive systemic change toward a more sustainable future. We have identified that these elements include a genuine connection to the values that an individual stands for within a team. The type of collaboration can take different forms, depending on the industry and context. However, strong team cohesion, caring within the team, and value-driven motivation in performing day-to-day tasks are the critical building blocks that each organization can incorporate in its own way. By integrating this and thereby expanding these practices, not only other companies are inspired but also customers, colleagues, and other networks that have touchpoints with such corporate practices.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of this study should be acknowledged to provide an understanding of its scope and implications. The composition of the research team, consisting of two German researchers, presents a limitation regarding cultural proximity and distance. Cultural barriers may have hindered the depth of interaction and understanding achieved during the interviews with Kenyan managers, as participants may have felt only somewhat comfortable and open within a short timeframe. Despite one of the authors having prior knowledge of some interviewees, establishing trust could have been challenging due to cultural differences. The absence of linguistic and cultural diversity within the research team limits enhanced cross-cultural understanding. Additionally, the study focused on one specific pattern group out of seven identified by Froese et al. (2023). While this approach provided valuable insights into mutual collaboration, it only captures part of the spectrum of degrowth patterns.

Future research is essential to further validate and expand upon the findings of our study, particularly in diverse organizational contexts. Based on our findings, we suggest that future research should broaden the focus to examine leadership and founder influence on organizational degrowth practices. Investigating the role of leaders in shaping mutual collaboration practices that align with degrowth values can provide valuable insights into how organizational culture and decision-making processes contribute to sustainable practices. Additionally, future research needs to investigate how reward is connected to degrowth values, how cultural influences shape perceptions of organizational degrowth practices, and whether

organizational degrowth understanding differs depending on the industry beyond the food production sector. Furthermore, we suggest broadening the research focus on organizational degrowth in practice by including other pattern groups of the Froese et al. (2023) framework that goes beyond manager collaboration to gain a comprehensive understanding of organizational degrowth processes. While this study focused on mutual collaboration practices among managers, there is a need to explore how consumers need to be included in organizational practices to shift toward sufficiency-oriented consumption. Investigating consumer behavior and attitudes toward degrowth values and the effectiveness of strategies promoting sustainable consumption practices can provide insights for practitioners to foster more environmentally and socially responsible consumption patterns. Additionally, future research should address the challenges of cross-cultural communication within degrowth organizations. Exploring strategies for improving communication among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds in the context of degrowth-oriented enterprises can help identify barriers and facilitators to effective cross-cultural collaboration

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Appendix

A. Overview of Interviewees

No.	Position	Name	Location
1	Operations	C9	Production Facility 4
2	HR	C1	Production Facility 3
3	Operations & Marketing	C8	Production Facility 4
4	Special Products	C4	Nursery
5	Food Safety Manager	C5	Production Facility 2
6	Quality Control	C7	Production Facility 2
7	Traceability	C6	Production Facility 2
8	Supply-Chain	C12	Zoom
9	Sales	C11	Zoom
10	Marketing	C2	Zoom
11	Internal Sales	C10	Zoom
12	Innovation	C3	Zoom

B. Short Introduction for Interviewees

Short introduction & overview



Dear Interviewee,

We are excited to invite you to participate in an interview for our Master's thesis. The purpose of this interview is to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges, strategies, and experiences encountered by managers in a cross-cultural social enterprise. Your perspective will provide valuable insights contributing to the academic discourse in the field of sustainable growth and mutual collaboration.

We sincerely appreciate your participation in this study. Your time and insights are immensely valuable to our research, and we are grateful for your contribution. If you have any questions or concerns before the interview, please don't hesitate to contact us at ri0233be-s@student.lu.se / +49 175320 620 2. We look forward to our conversation and the opportunity to learn from your experiences.



Duration: Approximately 30-45 minutes.

Format: Conducted in person with everyone present in Kenya, and online in Germany

Question Format: Consists of open-ended questions to encourage thoughtful reflection and discussion.

Participation: Encouraged to speak candidly and openly about experiences, opinions, and perspectives.



Greetings! I'm Ricarda, your "interviewer", blending Munich charm with a touch of Kenyan spirit. When I'm not immersed in interviews, you'll find me exploring the serene Alps or hitting the jogging trail. I'm constantly inspired by the incredible achievements of Kenyan marathon runners, though I know I'll never quite reach their level of mastery! Looking forward to our chat!



Sasa? I'm Ladina. I like to travel and get to know new cultures; Therefore, I have lived 4 years abroad – among others one year in Kenya. I always carry Kenya in my heart. I will be happy to meet you and have a chat.



Interview Structure:

- Begins with general questions about background and middle management role.
- Delves into specific topics related to the main themes of the research.
- Welcome to ask questions or seek clarification at any point.



Confidentiality: All shared information will be strictly confidential and used for academic purposes only.

No need to prepare anything beforehand! Just bring your authentic self. Let the conversation flow naturally.

Post-Interview: Opportunity to review a summary of the discussion for accuracy and clarity.



At Lund University in Sweden, we are studying for a Master's degree in "Managing People, Knowledge, and Change". We will complete our studies this year by submitting our Master's thesis on the topic of German-Kenyan organizational collaboration aiming for sustainable growth.



C. Interview Guideline

Start the interview		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brief personal introduction (names, program, our personal get-to-know and connection to the company and Kenya) • Explanation of the topic and indication of the research objective (we are not here to evaluate, only to learn how it works in practice) • Clarification of the interview process (we ask open questions, and please feel free to ask if something is unclear; period 45 min, etc.) • Confidentiality (name, company, projects, etc. will be anonymized), permission to record (After transcription: audio file deletion), fill out of consent form. • Clarify open questions (start recording) 		
Category	Questions	Follow-up questions ⁶
<u>Introduction:</u> Biographical narration		
1	How does a typical working day look like?	
	What does the collaboration with your colleagues look like?	How do you perceive the collaboration with your colleagues? Are there differences when interacting with German and Kenyan colleagues? How does it feel?
<u>Main questions:</u> Mutual collaboration practices		
<i>Culture of Reciprocal Care and Mission-driven Networks</i>		
2 & 3	How do you show care for your coworkers?	Can you describe a situation where you cared for one of your colleagues/employees?
	How do you feel cared for within the organization?	What are you doing when you need help?

⁶ The qualitative and explorative research approach led to slight variations in the sub-questions. However, a list of these variations in sub-questions, adapted to the respective interview context, would go beyond the scope of this guideline.

		Who do you consult and contact?
	What do you strive for in your daily operations?	
	What do you consider to be your greatest success within the last few weeks?	
	What did the last corporate meeting at CADI look like?	Did you all meet in person? How would you describe the overall mood? What factors contributed to the (success) of the meeting?
	Could you provide an example of recent difficulties among you and your colleagues?	How do you ensure agreement among colleagues?
<u>Closing question:</u> Focusing on interviewees' selves		
4	Is there something else on your mind that you have not yet been able to address?	One final question regarding a more future-oriented perspective: What are you looking forward to? (Regarding your career, within the next week,...)
End: Thank you for this interesting conversation and your time.		

Glossary

Ubuntu movement – The culturally rooted Ubuntu philosophy is characterized in research as a humanistic approach based on compassion, respect for human dignity, and personal interaction (Aliye, 2020; Littrell, 2011). The term originates from the language of the Bantu people in South Africa and means *I am who I am through others* (Littrell, 2011). In academia, opinions differ on whether the Ubuntu philosophy should be considered absolute or limited to a few neighboring countries in South Africa (Aliye, 2020).

Buen Vivir – The concept of Buen Vivir (Good Life) offers an alternative approach to development. It is characterized as a holistic and non-commercialized perspective on social life, prioritizing collective well-being in line with culturally relevant ideas. Buen Vivir proposes a solution to the significant criticisms of postdevelopment. The concept has its roots in indigenous movements and is intertwined with the social change efforts of diverse groups. It is advocated as a chance for the communal creation of a new lifestyle where economic goals are secondary to ecological standards, human dignity, and social equity. Originating from Andean cultural-political frameworks, Buen Vivir draws from critical streams of Western philosophy and seeks to influence global discussions on alternative ways of living (Escobar, 2015).

EJ Movement – The Environmental Justice (EJ) Movement has roots in various social justice movements, including the Civil Rights Movement in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, emerging in response to the disproportionate exposure of marginalized communities to environmental hazards and pollution. The EJ Movement is a socio-political movement that addresses the unequal distribution of environmental burdens and benefits, focusing on low-income, minority, and indigenous populations communities. The movement seeks to rectify environmental injustices by advocating for fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, in environmental decision-making processes (Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019).