

The Regenerative Economy: Linking Theory and Practice

By Wayne Visser

What is the Regenerative Economy? Is it a new concept and practice, or just the recycling of existing ideas under a new label (“old wine in new wine skins”, as the biblical parable puts it)?

To answer this question, I was pleased to deliver a presentation on “The Regenerative Economy: Linking Theory and Practice” at the Innovation, Sustainability and Regeneration (INSURE) Hub 5th annual conference at UCP in Porto, Portugal.

It’s a little more “scholarly” than I would normally post here, but I think determining the intellectual underpinnings of concepts and terms that are coming into vogue is always a useful exercise. I chose the metaphor of a tree to present my findings. Here are my key takeaways (see also a selection of slides attached):

1. ROOTS: Theoretical Foundations

A genealogical analysis found 36 antecedent theories which have contributed to an emergent theory of the regenerative economy, across 5 clusters: socio-ethical, organisational, systems, ecological and integrative theories.

2. TRUNK & BRANCHES: Theory Development

Drawing on these theoretical roots, I derived a synthesis definition of the regenerative economy, 34 related concepts and 6 emergent principles: circularity, resilience, equity, purpose, thriving, and integration.

3. LEAVES: Macro Applications

I identified 5 categories of government policy / market incentives consistent with the definition and principles of the regenerative economy: circular resources, nature regeneration / ecosystem payments, wellbeing economy, green finance and just transition.

4. FRUIT: Micro Applications

I identified a set of credible regenerative companies and 8 categories of business practices consistent with the definition and principles of the regenerative economy: closed-loop materials, carbon-negative products, repair and reuse at scale, regenerative agriculture sourcing, renewable energy, circular business models, living-wage commitments, and ecosystem & biodiversity restoration.

5. TREE: Theoretical Completeness

I tested and concluded that the emerging theory of the regenerative economy passes 5 of the 8 criteria for theoretical completeness, with progress still to be made on: predictive/generative power, operationalisability, and falsifiability and revision.

I ended on a creative note - as those who have heard my speak know it is my habit to do. Here is my poem, "Regeneration".

Find out more about the INSURE.Hub here.

Interested in furthering your education in this space? See the UCP Postgraduate Programme in Sustainability and Regeneration.

Source:

First published on Purpose Inspired, October 30, 2025. Available at:
<https://purposeinspired.substack.com/p/the-regenerative-economy>