

“The End of the GDP-Only World”: Distraction, Dystopia, or Step Beyond the Growth Paradigm to a Green State?

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Abstract

The green movement and academics sympathetic to it have been among the main sources of the critique of Gross Domestic Product as a prosperity indicator and demands for alternatives. For many greens, critique of GDP is part of a wider questioning of a society geared to production and consumption growth. In recent years, GDP’s limitations have increasingly been recognized by the political mainstream and there has been a proliferation of efforts to introduce new prosperity and wellbeing indicators. These developments have raised hopes in some circles of “dethroning” GDP; indeed Britain’s former top civil servant has proclaimed “the end of the GDP-only world.” But does the emergence of new wellbeing measurements and the related politics of wellbeing actually imply, as many greens have hoped, a transformative shift in the dominant economic narrative and societal priorities away from growth and ever-rising consumption, and a step toward a green state? Although the use of “beyond-GDP” indicators is still in its infancy, the early experience can be assessed to gain a sense of the impacts to date, obstacles and challenges, and possibilities on the horizon. This paper draws on interviews with individuals who have been involved in producing, using, and advocating the use of beyond-GDP indicators in Britain, a country with an advanced program of national wellbeing measurement. A transformative vision linking new indicators to a vision of a post-growth society with greater equity has, to date, been overshadowed by a more limited vision of using wellbeing data to produce better policy “at the margins.” This has led to concerns that the agenda has been coopted or become a “distraction.” The potential for the new wellbeing agenda to take a dystopian turn, as the onus is put on individuals to improve their own wellbeing—by changing thought patterns and lifestyles rather than social conditions, while under increasing government and corporate monitoring—is also be considered. The paper conclude with thoughts on the types of changes needed alongside beyond-GDP indicators, and argues that they offer no shortcut to a very challenging process of a post-growth transition.

Introduction

In recent years, questioning of Gross Domestic Product as an economic prosperity and wellbeing measure has intensified (e.g. Fioramonti 2013; Philipsen 2015; Stiglitz et al. 2009). The green movement and academics sympathetic to it have been among the main sources of the critique of GDP and demands for alternatives. They have been among those to highlight GDP's core flaws, notably its failures to reflect the environmental costs and unsustainability of much production, as well as inequality in distribution and the value of non-market economic activity (Costanza et al. 2014; Daly & Cobb 1989; Kubiszewski et al. 2013; van den Bergh 2009). They have also pointed to evidence that, beyond a threshold where core material needs are met, little if any link exists between further per-capita GDP growth and happiness, life satisfaction, or broader wellbeing measures (Donovan & Halpern 2002; Easterlin 1974; Easterlin et al. 2010; Layard 2005; Max-Neef 1995).¹ Core elements of the green critique of GDP were evident in one recent study, which found that while global GDP has increased more than three-fold since 1950, a more comprehensive wellbeing measure, the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI), has fallen since 1978 and global ecological footprint has surpassed sustainable levels during this time (Kubiszewski et al. 2013).

For many greens, critique of GDP as a prosperity indicator is part of a wider questioning of a society geared to production and consumption growth (Anderson 1991; Daly & Cobb 1989; Jackson 2009; Meadows 1998; O'Neill 2012). Meanwhile, some have argued that a shift to new prosperity indicators could have transformative impacts, directing societies toward sustainability, less consumption-intensive sources of wellbeing, and greater equity. New indicators would be a "short, sharp statistical shock to the system," in the words of Jonathan Porritt (2007, p.255), then-chair of the UK Sustainable Development Commission. Meanwhile, *Limits to Growth* report co-author Donella Meadows (1998, p.5) wrote: "changing indicators can be one of the most powerful and at the same time one of the easiest ways of making system changes—it does not require firing people, ripping up physical structures, inventing new technologies, or enforcing new regulations. It only requires delivering new information to new places."

Calls to move beyond GDP have not been limited to green critics of economic growth and consumerism. Growing mainstream interest was evident in the 2007 Istanbul Declaration, when the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and other international organizations acknowledged an "emerging consensus on the need to undertake the measurement of societal progress in every country, going beyond conventional measures such as GDP per capita" (OECD 2007). That same year, the European Union launched its "beyond GDP" initiative. Other key initiatives have included French president Sarkozy's establishment of a Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (Stiglitz et al. 2009), the OECD's Better Life Index and "green growth indicators" (OECD 2014), and the quasi-annual *World Happiness Report* (Helliwell et al. 2016). Meanwhile, at the Rio+20 conference on sustainable development, heads of state and government acknowledged "the need for broader measures of progress to complement gross domestic product in order to better inform policy decisions...." (UN 2012, Para. 38).

As interest in beyond-GDP measurement has grown, so too has the number of possible alternatives. Some alternatives adjust GDP by counting a wider range of costs and benefits; a "green GDP" includes environmental externalities and resource depletion costs (Boyd 2007; Li & Lang 2010), while the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW) and its successor, the

¹ Some researchers contest this point (Stevenson & Wolfers 2008), or see a more complex relationship (Kahneman & Deaton 2010).

GPI, incorporate monetary estimates for a range of social and ecological factors (Daly & Cobb 1989; Talberth et al. 2006). Composite indices, such as the Human Development Index, the Social Progress Index, and Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index, aggregate several social and/or ecological indicators into a single number. Rejecting that approach, some favour a dashboard of multiple measures (Stiglitz et al. 2009). Another option is to survey individuals about their subjective wellbeing (Layard 2012). While many alternatives are presented as complements to GDP and do not directly challenge the prioritization of economic growth, some proposed indicator systems are designed to guide “de-growth” toward a sustainable, steady-state economy (O'Neill 2012; 2015). Indeed, a distinction is evident between a radical or transformative vision of alternative indicators as a way to shift societal priorities away from GDP growth and a less expansive, reformist vision of alternative indicators as a tool for better policymaking without challenging the growth paradigm. Also evident, as discussed below, are efforts that would take the beyond-GDP issue and the broader politics of wellbeing in a more conservative or business-oriented direction.

Development of alternative indicators has reached the point that there is now an opportunity to ask: what effect are they having in practice? Is there any evidence to date that alternative indicators have shaped policy and public priorities in ways that live up to the expectations of those seeking reform or radical transformation? What are the obstacles to fulfilling those expectations? What conditions and further changes would be needed for progress toward a transformative green vision of alternative indicators? Some work addressing similar questions has been conducted by looking at several cases in Europe (Bleys & Whitby 2015; Whitby et al. 2014); we examine these issues by looking specifically at the situation in Britain, which has gone further than most in adopting beyond-GDP measurement with its Measuring National Well-being program. We draw on some existing work examining the British case (Bache & Reardon 2013; Bache 2015), but have a different emphasis, focusing on the links between the beyond-GDP debate and the green challenge to a growth-based economy.

To answer these questions, we conducted 16 semi-structured interviews (2 preliminary interviews in 2014 and the remainder in 2015) with elite respondents in Britain—political leaders, senior public servants, academics, NGO researchers, and activists—involved in developing and applying new indicators or advocating their use. Interviewees were identified based on: existing contacts that the authors have with people working in this field, a review of websites and documents produced by organizations involved in these issues, and snowball techniques as initial interviewees provided new contacts. The study also draws on analysis of relevant documents from governmental and non-governmental agencies involved in producing, using, and advocating the use of alternative indicators.²

Alternative Indicators and the Environmental / Green State

While the beyond-GDP agenda includes more than environmental issues, we consider it in the context of the emergence of an environmental or green state (Barry & Eckersley 2005; Dryzek et al. 2003; Duit et al. 2016; Eckersley 2004; Kronsell & Bäckstrand 2015; Meadowcroft 2012). Like others, we distinguish between an “environmental state,” which is a widespread, existing phenomenon, and a “green state,” a normative ideal yet to be attained (Duit et al. 2016).

An environmental state is one that includes environmental management among its key functions (Duit et al. 2016; Meadowcroft 2012). Environmental state theorists argue that, in

² This paper is part of a wider research project looking at a number of other cases, with initial work on Canada (Hayden & Wilson 2016) and a comparison of Canada and UK (Hayden & Wilson forthcoming).

developed democracies, the environment has joined security, the economy, and the welfare state as a core domain of state activity. The state's environmental role, from regulating pollution to negotiating global environmental accords, has greatly expanded in recent decades and will likely continue evolving (Duit et al. 2016; Meadowcroft 2012). Beyond-GDP indicators, which incorporate environmental costs and benefits or include sustainability measures as a main component, can be seen as another step in the environmental state's evolution. Alternative indicators are closely linked to a key environmental-state task: addressing problems caused by the negative environmental externalities of economic activity, i.e. environmental costs not reflected in market prices (Duit 2016; Sommerer & Lim 2016). As states increasingly take on that task, GDP becomes more limited as a measure of success since it does not account for those external costs. That said, measurement reforms, like other steps that expand the state's environmental role, need not lead to any downplaying of the pursuit of economic growth. Many environmental states have tried to pursue environmental goals and GDP growth through (weak) ecological modernization, i.e. "green growth," that relies on improved technology and efficiency to decouple growth from negative environmental impacts (Christoff 2005; Mol 2011; Mol et al. 2009; Tobin 2015). Such efforts are consistent with the reformist vision of alternative indicators, discussed above, as new indicators that complement GDP could guide pursuit of "green growth" (Global Commission on the Economy and Climate 2014, pp.19–20; OECD 2014).

Emergence of a green state would involve a more radical transformation than in actually-existing environmental states (Duit et al. 2016; Eckersley 2004; Tobin 2015). Christoff writes that a green state's features would include commitment to "strong ecological modernization" based on "a driving and predominant moral purpose in directing social and economic activity toward ecologically sustainable (and socially just) outcomes" (Christoff 2005), p.41. Duit adds that a green/ecological state is one that has reversed the priority between economic growth and environment, and consistently favours the latter when they conflict (Duit 2016). A green state thus has an affinity with a transformative vision for alternative indicators. Beyond-GDP measures could be part of a green state's prioritization of ecological sustainability and less consumption-oriented ways of achieving wellbeing (Barry 2015; Frugoli et al. 2015). A green state would also need new sustainable wellbeing measures to show that alternative choices, such as work-time reduction over income growth (Coote & Franklin 2013; Hayden 1999), have social benefits that GDP's monetary focus fails to capture.

A transformative vision for beyond-GDP measures, like the wider transition to a green state, faces daunting obstacles as it clashes with what is widely considered a core political imperative of contemporary states. Economic growth is perceived to be essential to raise revenue to carry out other core functions, such as ensuring security and legitimizing the social order through social spending, in addition to its role in creating jobs and enabling profit-making and capital accumulation (Dryzek et al. 2003; Dryzek 1996; Hayden 2014). A transformative vision of beyond-GDP measures, which seeks to shift priorities away from growth, thus faces far greater obstacles than more limited formulations of new indicators as a tool for better policy and greener growth. At the same time, the indicators issue has opened up space for discussion about society's end goals and how to achieve them, creating opportunities for those who question the focus on economic growth. The beyond-GDP debate thus represents intriguing terrain as it is constrained by contemporary political imperatives and yet offers a platform upon which some political actors are trying to re-define those imperatives.

Background to National Wellbeing Measurement in the UK

As noted above, the green movement and environmentally-motivated critics of economic growth have been some of the most important sources of demands for new wellbeing measures; this was the case in Britain in the years leading up to the national wellbeing measurement program. For example, Victor Anderson (1991, Intro.), an academic with links to the Green Party, wrote a book on *Alternative Economic Indicators* whose starting point was the question: “If the maximization of growth is to be rejected as the central aim of economic policy, what aim should replace it?” The New Economics Foundation, which has long questioned the link between growth and happiness, highlighted the need for new wellbeing measurements in their 2004 “wellbeing manifesto” (Shah & Marks 2004) and produced its own new measures, such as the Happy Planet Index (Marks et al. 2006);³ indeed it continues to be a key player in Britain’s beyond-GDP debate (Jeffrey & Michaelson 2015). New prosperity measures were also a core recommendation in Tim Jackson’s (2009) influential “prosperity without growth” report.⁴ The GDP critique’s centrality to the green movement was evident in the Scottish Green Party’s (2005, p.5) Westminster Election Manifesto, which opened with an oft-cited quotation from Robert F. Kennedy (1968) concluding that gross national product “measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.” At the time, Greens could say that they were “the only party to challenge the measurement of economic well-being as Gross Domestic Product” (p. 5). It would not be long, however, before David Cameron (2007) was quoting the same Kennedy speech as the Greens.

Other sources of the critique of GDP included the international social indicators movement, which emerged in the 1960s during the first wave of interest in alternative wellbeing measures and called for a wider set of objective quality-of-life measures (Allin & Hand 2014, pp.53–55; Bache & Reardon 2013, pp.900–901). In Britain, this led the Central Statistical Office to begin annual publication in 1970 of *Social Trends*, a compilation of economic, social, and environmental statistics that gave a more complete picture of life in Britain than did GNP or GDP (Allin & Hand 2014, pp.218, 221). More recently, the growing academic literature on the determinants of wellbeing and happiness—much of which has called into question the link between rising incomes and wellbeing in affluent nations, as noted above—has been a key driver of the second wave of interest in new wellbeing measures (Bache & Reardon 2013, p.902). Economist Richard Layard’s (2005) book *Happiness* brought findings from happiness research to a wider public audience, had considerable influence on government.⁵ Growing interest in alternative indicators at the European and international level, discussed above, was also an important factor bolstering interest within Britain.⁶

Although many people came to associate new wellbeing measurements with David Cameron, much of the groundwork was done during the governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Among the New Labour initiatives was the identification in 1999 of 15 “headline indicators” of sustainable development, chosen from a wider set of 147 indicators; this “quality of life barometer” had GDP at the head of the list, supplemented by other measures related to

³ The HPI measures efficiency in converting resource consumption into long and happy lives; it consists of average life satisfaction in a country multiplied by average life expectancy, divided by per-capita ecological footprint.

⁴ Jackson’s (2004) earlier work in the area included a composite Measure of Domestic Progress for the UK, modelled closely on the GPI and ISEW.

⁵ Interview, July 4, 2014-2.

⁶ Interview, July 13, 2015. See also Allin & Hand (2014, pp.221, 227–8) and Bache & Reardon (Bache & Reardon 2013, pp.903–904).

issues such as employment, education, healthy life expectancy, housing quality, crime, greenhouse gases, air quality, and wild bird populations (HM Government 1999, ch. 3; Defra 2002). These indicators—along with an initial commitment to develop a wellbeing (i.e. life satisfaction) indicator—were part of the government’s Sustainable Development Strategy.⁷ In his foreword to the strategy, Tony Blair stated that “money isn’t everything ... But in the past, governments have seemed to forget this. Success has been measured by economic growth - GDP - alone.” That said, the strategy was clear in emphasizing that “our economy must continue to grow,” while proposing an ecological modernization approach of “cleaner growth: doing more with less” (HM Government 1999, ch. 3).

In 2002, senior government advisers in the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit released a review of evidence on life satisfaction and its implications for government (Donovan & Halpern 2002). Among the evidence it highlighted was the unchanged level of life satisfaction in Britain since the 1970s despite large increases in per-capita GDP (p. 17). It also pointed to an association between per-capita GDP and life satisfaction in cross-national comparisons, but noted that the association appeared to break down once per-capita incomes reached US\$10,000 per year—a level the UK reached in the 1950s (pp. 9, 17).

In its 2005 update of the Sustainable Development Strategy, the government announced a new core of 20 “framework indicators”—part of a wider set of 68 indicators—to assess progress on sustainable development (HM Government 2005, pp.21, 167–175). The strategy also included a shift toward seeing “promoting personal well-being” as a key element of sustainable development (p. 16), along with a renewed commitment to develop personal wellbeing indicators and “to explore how policies might change with an explicit wellbeing focus” (pp. 22-23). In the same year, the Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (Defra) set up the Whitehall Wellbeing Working Group and the Wellbeing Indicator Group to coordinate work across departments on these issues. The Sustainable Development Commission, an advisory body, conducted its own work on “redefining progress” that included consideration of alternatives to GDP as a wellbeing measure (SDC 2006). Meanwhile, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) also began to emphasize the wellbeing issue, which emerged as one its analytical priorities in 2007 (Allin 2007; Thomas & Evans 2010, p.30).

During the New Labour years, opposition leader David Cameron played a key role in increasing the public profile of wellbeing measurement and politics. Cameron (2006a; 2006b) spoke of the need to look beyond GDP, stressed that “there’s more to life than money,” and called for a focus on “General Well-Being that goes beyond economic prosperity.” Cameron’s statements generated enthusiasm among some environmentalists, such as Peter Madden (2006), chief executive of the sustainable development organization Forum for the Future, who wrote: “Many of us in the British environmental movement have been campaigning for wider measures of progress for years. Few of us would ever have expected a Conservative to be the first leader of a major political party to propose this.” This was in the same period that Cameron (2006c) was embracing “green growth,” “hugging a husky” in the Arctic, and “hugging a hoodie” on public housing estates with the aim of “decontaminating” the Conservative Party’s brand, shedding its “nasty party” label, and making it electable again (Carter 2009).

Cameron also established the Quality of Life Policy Group to “investigate all aspects of the quality of life agenda” and make recommendations to the party on how to achieve “sustainable” and “green” economic growth (Conservative Party 2005). The Group’s report

⁷ These sustainable development indicators represented a revision to the original set, first introduced in 1996 under John Major’s Conservative government.

contained a surprisingly radical critique of economic growth (Quality of Life Policy Group 2007; see also Hayden 2014, pp.311–315). It criticized “a way of life which is out of step with the long-term health of the planet” (p. 10), the failure of material prosperity to produce “a contented society” (p. 8), and the contemporary malady of “affluenza” (p. 41). The report—and the party’s messaging around it—ultimately settled on a vision of “green growth” decoupled from environmental impacts (pp. 22, 24, 25), while emphasizing that wellbeing needed to be measured by new indicators (pp. 21-22, 54-57), but its more radical elements caught some observers’ attention.⁸ Greenpeace UK director John Sauven (2007), for example, praised the report for “trying to change the mentality of world economics” and challenge the idea “that the only way for people to improve their lot in life is to earn more, own more and consume more. It is radical stuff, but vitally important.”

Wellbeing Measurement in the Cameron Years

As prime minister, Cameron instructed the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in 2010 to develop new wellbeing measures to complement GDP. During his announcement, Cameron (2010) noted—like many critics of growth—that GDP had risen steadily while “levels of contentment have remained static or even fallen.” He added that the new measurement initiative “will open up a national debate about what really matters” and “reaffirms the fact that our success as a country is about more than economic growth.” However, Cameron also sought to calm fears that “government is somehow sidelining economic growth as our first concern,” stating, “let me be very, very clear: growth is the essential foundation of all our aspirations.”

An initial step in the Measuring National Wellbeing program was a national consultation process from November 2010 to April 2011 to “gather views on what matters to people and what influences their wellbeing” (Matheson 2011, p.3). The process, which included 175 events attended by over 7000 people, and 34,000 mostly-online public responses, contributed to the identification of domains and indicators for wellbeing measurement (Allin & Hand 2014, p.223). While acknowledging the value of the consultation and the work the ONS put into it, a number of interviewees felt that it fell short of a full society-wide debate about “what really matters,”⁹ with one limitation being that “it wasn’t taken up by the media as a massive theme.”¹⁰

In 2011, the ONS began including in regular household surveys four subjective wellbeing (SWB) questions,¹¹ which have garnered the most attention and are the most novel aspect of the Measuring National Wellbeing program.¹² The program also includes many objective measures among its 41 indicators within ten domains.¹³ Several policy-specific surveys (e.g. on housing, health, crime, food, and youth) have incorporated the ONS’s SWB questions, helping to build the

⁸ Days before the report’s release, *The Sunday Times* reported that it would include a recommendation to replace GDP with the New Economics Foundation’s Happy Planet Index (HPI), while also citing “insiders” who said party chiefs feared that such ideas might be too “woolly” and “easily lampooned” (Leake 2007). In the end, the HPI recommendation was dropped in favour of a more general call to use broader measures of progress.

⁹ Interviews, July 7, 2014; July 6, 14, 22, 23, and 24, 2015; September 2, 2015.

¹⁰ Interview July 6, 2015.

¹¹ The four questions are: “Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?” “Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?” “Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?” “Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?” (Evans et al. 2015, p.8; see also Allin & Hand 2014, pp.224–225).

¹² Interview, July 16, 2015.

¹³ The ten domains are: economy, education and skills, governance, natural environment, personal wellbeing (i.e. subjective wellbeing), “our relationships,” health, “what we do,” “where we live,” and personal finance (Evans et al. 2015).

evidence base on how the quality of housing, experience of crime, etc., affect wellbeing.¹⁴ The SWB questions have also been used to assess the impact of some programs; for example, analysis showed that participation in the national citizen service—in which teenagers work on community projects—increases life satisfaction and lowers anxiety.¹⁵ Meanwhile, the “Green Book,” which guides public-sector bodies in evaluating policies and proposals before committing public funds, was updated to include the possibility of using SWB measures in cost-benefit analysis (HM Treasury 2011, p.58); however, the methodology remains a “work in progress.”¹⁶

With regard to environmental measurement, to better recognize the economic value of nature, the government committed in 2011 to include natural capital in national accounts by 2020 and created a National Capital Committee to advise government on the sustainable use of natural assets (HM Government 2011, pp.35–36). The set of sustainable development indicators (SDIs) was also streamlined in 2013 (Defra 2013), prompted in part by the need to align them with the national wellbeing measures produced by the ONS, which took over responsibility for the SDIs.

The advances in wellbeing measurement have stimulated work among academics, parliamentarians, civil servants, think tanks, and NGOs on how wellbeing research and measurement could be used to guide policy-making (APPGWE 2014; HOCEAC 2014; O’Donnell et al. 2014; Wallace & Schmuecker 2012; Wallace 2013). The government has also provided funding for a What Works Centre for Wellbeing, which gathers and synthesizes research on factors that improve wellbeing, and provides guidance to policy-makers and others on actions to increase wellbeing.¹⁷ Government interest in wellbeing has had a “twin” in efforts to promote behaviour change using the insights of behaviour economics;¹⁸ in 2010, the coalition government set up a Behavioural Insights Team (the “Nudge” unit).

Hopes and Motivations

A number of interviewees, who had been involved in developing and promoting alternative wellbeing indicators, spoke in ways that were consistent with a transformative green vision that challenges the growth paradigm and consumerist vision of wellbeing. (Others saw the transformative potential of beyond-GDP measurement largely in social terms, believing it would strengthen the case for greater equality, poverty reduction, and a shift in focus from “financial assets” to “human and social assets.”)¹⁹ “We are trashing the planet for a failed way of making people better off,” said one interviewee, whose organization was promoting a shift from “economic growth to growth in wellbeing.”²⁰ Another added, “High levels of wellbeing don’t come from high levels of consumption, rather they come from more environmentally friendly things, such as relations between people, closer-knit communities, healthy lifestyles”²¹

However, in line with the dominant mainstream framing of wellbeing measurement, most interviewees did not see it as a way to challenge a consumerist, growth-based system. A former British civil servant argued that it was a “mistaken understanding” to link the wellbeing agenda to “anti-consumerism.” He maintained that “in general, increases in economic growth tend to go

¹⁴ Interview, July 16, 2015.

¹⁵ Interview, July 16, 2015. See also Booth et al. (2015, p.41).

¹⁶ Quotation from interview, July 14, 2015. Also interview, July 16, 2015.

¹⁷ Interviews, July 7 and 16, 2015.

¹⁸ Interview, July 14, 2015.

¹⁹ Quotations from interview, July 3, 2015. Similar ideas in interview, September 2, 2015. See also APPGWE (2014).

²⁰ Similar ideas expressed in interviews on July 14 and 23, 2015.

²¹ Interview, July 8, 2015.

hand-in-hand with increases in wellbeing.”²² When governments in the UK have linked wellbeing measurement to sustainability, it has been in the context of a “green growth” rather than de-growth or anti-consumerist vision, as evident in the discussion of sustainable development indicators above. In addition, in Wales, new national indicators under the Well-being of Future Generations Act are linked to the government’s “green growth” agenda,²³ while Scotland’s National Performance Framework, which includes 55 national indicators, states that “increasing sustainable economic growth” is a central element of the government’s purpose.²⁴

Rather than seeking ecological or social transformation, many actors in the debate emphasize the goal of better policymaking. “The big objective is to help make more rounded decisions focused on wellbeing of people,” said one British civil servant. “It’s about better decision making—thinking about what really matters to people.”²⁵ That framing was consistent with Prime Minister Cameron’s (2010) statement, when launching the new wellbeing measures, that “this information will help government work out, with evidence, the best ways of trying to help to improve people’s wellbeing.”²⁶

Many proponents of new indicators emphasize the goal of a better balance between economic goals and other objectives. A report for the Carnegie UK Trust referred to moving away from “overreliance on GDP to a much wider understanding about what makes for a stronger and fairer society,” and to the potential of using a wider concept of wellbeing that includes economic, social, and environmental factors to “help rebalance decision making” (Wallace 2013, p.4). An interviewee similarly expressed a desire for policymakers to “broaden their gaze.”²⁷ Meanwhile, a public servant spoke of hopes that when people ask how the UK is doing, “the measures of wellbeing and the measures of sustainable development will be as important as the economic measures that we’ve traditionally looked to.”²⁸

One way that new wellbeing measures offered hope for better policy was by overcoming policy “silos” and enabling “joined-up” government (APPGWE 2014, pp.15–16). A civil servant noted that, when implementing policy, it is not possible to measure all 41 indicators in the Measuring National Wellbeing dashboard each time: “They’re clearly not relevant to every single policy area. But people’s experience [subjective wellbeing] is relevant to every policy area, so it’s of cross-cutting relevance.” He added that, unlike other measurement domains “owned” by a specific government department, the “personal wellbeing domain” is “owned by everyone, so it’s a force for integration.”²⁹ Another interviewee pointed out that joined-up action is difficult “when you’ve got preventative actions that involve spending in one particular area” while the benefits or savings “accrue to another area,” before adding that “wellbeing starts to allow you to do that.”³⁰ With such issues in mind, a cross-party group of MPs proposed that budget allocations take into account departmental contributions to wellbeing, even if the outcomes occur outside a department’s own issue area (APPGWE 2014, p.15).

²² Interview, July 14, 2015.

²³ Interview, July 20, 2015. See also Welsh Government (2016).

²⁴ Interview, September 2, 2015. See also Scottish Government (2016).

²⁵ Interview, July 16, 2015.

²⁶ Meanwhile, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Wellbeing Economics (APPGWE 2014) report concluded by stating: “the prize is policy and public services which are more efficient and effective at improving people’s lives” (p. 42), although it also proposed transformative shifts in social priorities, discussed below.

²⁷ Interview, July 3, 2015.

²⁸ Interview, July 15, 2015.

²⁹ Interview, July 16, 2015.

³⁰ Interview, July 7, 2015. Similar point made in Interview, July 24, 2015.

In a context of deep public spending cuts, an additional hope was that wellbeing measurement could improve resource allocation at a time of scarcity³¹—allowing policymakers to get “more bang for their buck” by identifying spending that is most effective in improving wellbeing (APPGWE 2014, pp.2, 14). A related hope was that spending on initiatives known to improve wellbeing could reduce demands on public services; for example, there are estimates that the National Health Service could save £675 million annually from measures to promote cycling and walking, and that providing mental health services could save money by helping people to move from benefits to paid work (APPGWE 2014, pp.14–15).

An emphasis on wellbeing could also provide new ways to choose among political parties and evaluate their performance. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Wellbeing Economics urged all political parties to outline their approach to improving wellbeing in their election manifestos—and for governments to similarly outline a wellbeing strategy (APPGWE 2014, p.3). Meanwhile, some proponents of a wider set of wellbeing indicators argue that they could help the electorate assess a government’s performance (Allin & Hand 2014, p.230).

Some interviewees working in the state sphere hoped that wellbeing measurements could help improve people’s experience of public services—in the spirit of former Cameron advisor Steve Hilton’s (2015) plea to make government “more human.” One interviewee spoke of “small changes” so that people are treated like “real human beings,” adding that “it’s about being a bit better about how we help people as a state.”³² Another explained that hospitals, for example, should be concerned not only with treating illness, but also with factors that affect subjective experience such as warmth of rooms or making nighttime feel “more like nighttime at home.”³³ A related possibility was to design policy to include elements known to improve subjective wellbeing, such as “a sense of control, esteem, autonomy, agency, and altruism,” which could have some transformative possibilities.³⁴ More radical variations on such ideas include re-designing public services to enhance users’ autonomy and competence, and give them a role in “co-producing public services”—to “really change the power dynamics,” in one NGO researcher’s words.³⁵

As for Cameron’s motivations in championing wellbeing politics and measurement—at least at certain moments—the standard explanation is that it was part of Conservative Party’s “detoxification” effort, discussed above, that involved presenting a progressive side for electoral gain. While many interviewees thought that was part of the explanation, a number believed that Cameron—and other Conservatives such as advisor Steve Hilton and MPs Oliver Letwin and David Willetts—also had a genuine interest in wellbeing.³⁶ Wellbeing politics had an affinity with the “Big Society” narrative of the coalition government’s early days,³⁷ and with a more socially and environmentally-oriented strand of “compassionate conservatism.”³⁸ It could also connect to other conservative ideas such as devolving power away from the central state—which can find support in research showing that wellbeing is greater when people have more control

³¹ Interview, July 24, 2015.

³² Interview July 7, 2015.

³³ Interview July 16, 2015.

³⁴ Interview July 16, 2015.

³⁵ Interview, July 6, 2015. Such ideas could also be applied beyond the state sphere; an interviewee saw promise in designing community-led initiatives, such as community-shared agriculture projects, to incorporate features known to enhance wellbeing; interview, July 23, 2015.

³⁶ Interviews, July 3, 6, 14, and 23, September 2, 2015. See also Bache and Reardon (2013, pp.906, 912).

³⁷ Interviews, July 23, 2015.

³⁸ Interviews, July 13, 14, and September 2, 2015.

over their own lives³⁹—and reducing the size of the state by using wellbeing measurement to make more effective use of limited public funds. That said, critics saw contradictions between Cameron’s 2010 launch of the wellbeing measurement program and austerity-driven cuts to key public programs (Toynbee 2010; Williamson 2012), while Cameron’s emphasis on wellbeing did not remain constant—points returned to below.

Impacts

Britain’s wellbeing measurement program is now well-established and quite advanced by international standards; however, overall impacts on policy choices and political priorities are “hard to pinpoint,” as one interviewee put it.⁴⁰ Most interviewees said it was “still early days” or used similar words.⁴¹

Some issues have gained greater prominence alongside the growing interest in wellbeing, such as calls for expanded public provision of cognitive behavioural therapy as a low-cost way to increase wellbeing (Layard & Clark 2014).⁴² Loneliness and isolation, particularly among the elderly, has also gained greater public attention in light of evidence of the very detrimental impact on wellbeing.⁴³ Mindfulness programs have also expanded, including trials of mindfulness training for civil servants,⁴⁴ and there have been recommendations to incorporate mindfulness into teacher and medical training to improve academic achievement, prevent ill health, and provide “whole person care” (APPGWE 2014, p.6; see also MAPPG 2015).

As is evident in the aforementioned issues, the wellbeing agenda can be taken in many different directions. The different ideological orientations of Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, and Green parties can lead to quite different visions of how to improve quality of life (Conservative Party 2010; Liberal Democrats 2011; NEF 2011; Quality of Life Policy Group 2007). Competing NGO and think-tank visions are also apparent. For example, the New Economics Foundation has promoted less material-intensive and growth-oriented ways to promote wellbeing (Shah & Marks 2004; Jeffrey & Michaelson 2015). In contrast, the Legatum Institute, whose slogan is “prosperity through revitalising capitalism and democracy,” established a Commission on Wellbeing and Policy in 2012. Its report challenged a key element of the green critique of growth, arguing that the “effect of income on life satisfaction is significant in almost every good study” (O’Donnell et al. 2014, p.44).⁴⁵ The Legatum Institute also developed its own Prosperity Index, which includes eight domains; two (“economy” and “entrepreneurship and opportunity”) are devoted to conventional economic matters, but none specifically to the environment. According to one interviewee, it is a “beyond-GDP index” that essentially “double counts” the economy.⁴⁶ While some actors are trying to challenge the prioritization of endless economic expansion, others are engaging in the debate in a way that makes the beyond-GDP agenda safe for continued emphasis on economic growth.

³⁹ Interview, July 16, 2015.

⁴⁰ Interview, July 7, 2015. Similar idea in interview, July 6, 2015.

⁴¹ One interviewee expressed some frustration with the “early days” idea, noting that abundant wellbeing evidence already existed to support some shifts in social priorities, such as giving greater attention to reducing poverty and inequality. Interview, July 6, 2015.

⁴² [confirm current state of policy]*

⁴³ Interviews, July 14 and 24, 2015. [add details, sources]*

⁴⁴ Interviews, July 14 and 16, 2015 [Confirm details on public-sector involvement.]*

⁴⁵ The one citation provided to support this point is Stevenson and Wolfers (2008).

⁴⁶ Interview, July 6, 2015.

The wellbeing debate has provided some opportunities to promote socially and ecologically transformative ideas. For example, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Wellbeing Economics put forward several transformative recommendations flowing from the evidence on wellbeing, including: a focus on stable employment, i.e. avoiding boom-and-bust cycles, rather than maximizing growth;⁴⁷ giving greater priority to tackling poverty and reducing inequality than to increasing aggregate income; and work-time reduction to boost quality of life for employees and job opportunities for the unemployed (APPGWE 2014). However, such proposals have made little headway to date. Many voices in the debate have narrower ambitions of “policy change at the margins,”⁴⁸ prompting one interviewee to express disappointment that so far “it’s just seen as a tool of better decision making—let’s do things a bit better—but not the kind of really broad changes that we would say need to happen to economic policy and social policy if you really took the wellbeing evidence seriously.”⁴⁹

Despite the wide range of activity related to wellbeing measurement and politics, interviewees noted that these issues had not yet become a top government priority. Reports by MPs concluded that “wellbeing measures are not yet receiving the same attention as economic ones” (HOCEAC 2014, p.3) and that government had yet to “move from national wellbeing measurement to a national wellbeing strategy” (APPGWE 2014, p.3). Nor had the government adopted improving people’s wellbeing as its ultimate, overarching goal.⁵⁰ One civil servant explained that wellbeing is another objective “alongside” others; wellbeing was not the overriding priority, but wellbeing measurement was seen as a tool for improving decision making and “supporting the big priorities of government.”⁵¹ As another interviewee put it, Cameron “presented wellbeing as something that is parallel to economic policy, not as something which would influence economic policy.”⁵² Meanwhile the Cameron Conservatives have not shown the same level of interest over time.⁵³ Wellbeing is “part of Toryism 2010, but I don’t think it’s part of Toryism 2015,” in the words of interviewee.⁵⁴ One factor was the shift in the political climate; Cameron faced increasing political challenges on his right, both within his party and from the UK Independence Party, creating a context in which “woolly” talk of wellbeing was a liability rather than an asset. Another factor, highlighted by some interviewees, was that the focus on deficit reduction crowded out,⁵⁵ and ran counter to,⁵⁶ a wellbeing narrative. Meanwhile, the call for political parties to “set out their approach to wellbeing in their manifestos” (APPGWE 2014, p.3), allowing voters to choose among them, went largely unheeded in the 2015 election campaign; wellbeing was not a dominant theme, particularly for

⁴⁷ The Legatum Commission on Wellbeing and Policy reached the same conclusion although the overall tone of its report was decidedly pro-growth (O’Donnell et al. 2014, p.66)

⁴⁸ Interview, July 6, 2015.

⁴⁹ Interview, July 6, 2015.

⁵⁰ Interviews, July 14 and 16, 2015. Bache and Reardon (2013, p.898) earlier concluded that “in terms of decisive action there is some way to go before well-being can be described as ‘an idea whose time has come’” in Britain.

⁵¹ Interview July 16, 2015.

⁵² Interview, July 7, 2014.

⁵³ Interviews, July 3, 6, and 24, 2015.

⁵⁴ Interview, July 22, 2015. Similar idea in interview, July 24, 2015.

⁵⁵ Interviews, July 6 and 24, 2015. See also Jeffrey and Michaelson (2015, p.44)

⁵⁶ Interview, July 6, 2015.

the two main parties.⁵⁷ “I think that just shows we’ve probably still got quite some way to go before this becomes mainstream,” said one interviewee.⁵⁸

Overall assessments of the situation can be starkly different. Awareness of GDP’s limits as a wellbeing measure and advances in measuring wellbeing have reached the point that Britain’s former Cabinet Secretary (top civil servant) could speak of “the end of the GDP-only world” (O’Donnell et al. 2014, p.16). Yet a long-time critic of GDP, Victor Anderson (2013), said it was “rather depressing” to see his 1991 book on *Alternative Economic Indicators* re-issued two decades later; its continued relevance was “an indication of what a short distance the world has come.” In an interview, he noted the proliferation of proposed alternative indicators, growing awareness of them, and advances in data gathering to calculate them, but added, “We are not any closer, I think, to actually dethroning the GDP from its dominant place in decision making.”⁵⁹ Other interviewees seeking transformative change to a growth-driven system expressed concern that the government’s use of wellbeing measurement would amount to little more than “mood music” or “window dressing.”⁶⁰ The differing assessments reflect the fact that it is still unclear where Britain’s beyond-GDP debate is ultimately headed, while it also appears to reflect differing views about whether the goal is simply better policymaking within a society geared primarily toward economic growth or a post-growth transition.

Obstacles and Pitfalls

Although beyond-GDP measurement has made progress in the UK, the hopes of proponents, whether for radical, transformative change or less expansive reforms have yet to be fully realized. A number of obstacles and challenges can be identified.⁶¹

Measurement Challenges

Some challenges faced are related to the production of new measurements, starting with overcoming resistance to the idea that wellbeing measurement is possible to do well. The “number one” obstacle is “people saying you can’t measure it,” said one British interviewee.⁶² Considerable work has, in fact, been done to improve subjective wellbeing measurement; the OECD (2013) now offers international guidelines for how to do it. That said, there remains a “difficulty of accessing high-quality data for all domains” relevant to wellbeing (i.e. beyond just subjective measures), resulting in a need to work with the best available proxies (Wallace 2013, p.12). A related challenge is that, unlike GDP, which is produced several times a year, relevant data are not always available on a timely basis (Jeffrey & Michaelson 2015, p.10; Whitby et al. 2014, pp.5, 29). For example, Wales was using ecological footprint as a sustainability indicator, but updated data were not available each year; as a result it was not possible to assess performance regularly.⁶³

⁵⁷ One interviewee counted the number of references to “wellbeing” in the respective election manifestos: “the Lib Dems had by far the most ... 16 references, the Greens had 13, Labour had about three, the SNP had a few, UKIP had a few, and the Tories had none.” Interview July 6, 2015.

⁵⁸ Interview, July 24, 2015.

⁵⁹ Interview, July 22, 2015.

⁶⁰ Interviews, July 14 and 23, 2015.

⁶¹ For a more comprehensive overview of challenges with beyond-GDP measurement in a number of European cases, see Bleys and Whitby (2015) and Whitby et al. (2014).

⁶² Interview, July 14, 2015.

⁶³ Even GDP is not, at present, an option as a Welsh national indicator since Wales-specific GDP figures are not collected, although Gross Value Added estimates are available Interview, July 20, 2015.

Multiple Alternatives, Multiple Agendas

Another key challenge has been lack of consensus on the best alternative measures—a problem also evident beyond Britain (Hayden & Wilson 2016 forthcoming; McGregor 2015; Whitby et al. 2014, pp.30–31). Some interviewees spoke of the “lack of a clear ‘winner’ among alternative measures.”⁶⁴ The ONS’s subjective wellbeing questions have had the highest profile and some observers see them as the key innovation, particularly the life satisfaction measure.⁶⁵ One civil servant argued that overall life satisfaction, which is related to all the various wellbeing domains, could act as something like a proxy for a single wellbeing index.⁶⁶ However, others believed SWB had taken too much of the “oxygen” in the debate.⁶⁷ One criticism was that SWB measurement could allow marginalization or poverty to appear unproblematic if people had limited aspirations or had adapted to their circumstances.⁶⁸ Critics also expressed other concerns: SWB emphasized the individual over the social level;⁶⁹ the focus on individual satisfaction and fulfillment might reinforce high levels of consumption rather than support a new narrative; and the press and public did not take SWB seriously (discussed below).⁷⁰ Many observers, including some supporters of SWB measures, saw a need to complement them with objective measures on an indicator dashboard.⁷¹ Indeed, the ONS’s Measuring National Wellbeing program has adopted a large dashboard of 41 indicators—some would say too large, as discussed below.

Other groups have developed composite indexes, which reflect different value orientations, such as the aforementioned Legatum Prosperity Index weighted toward conventional economic concerns and Oxfam Scotland’s (2013) Humankind Index, which was motivated largely by concerns that the dominant economic model “failed to address longstanding problems of poverty and inequality” (p.4). Meanwhile Scotland established its own indicator dashboard under its National Performance Framework,⁷² and Wales planned to establish new sustainability and wellbeing indicators under its Wellbeing of Future Generations Act. In addition, driven by concern that the ONS measurement program had not shifted national priorities, the New Economics Foundation proposed five new headline indicators of national success—related to good jobs, wellbeing (i.e. life satisfaction), environment, fairness, and health—as guides for policy-making (Jeffrey & Michaelson 2015).

A related challenge is that the actors involved in the debate are pursuing many different agendas (Cassiers & Thiry 2015; McGregor 2015), ranging from challenging the growth paradigm to more efficient spending of limited public funds, as discussed above. Wellbeing is a “concept that allows people to put different things onto it,” said one interviewee.⁷³ Another noted the advantage that it “brings lots of people to the table,” but said it is “hard to create a conversation that is coherent ... Everyone is coming at wellbeing from really different angles.”⁷⁴

⁶⁴ Interview, July 3, 2015. Similar statement in interview, July 22, 2015.

⁶⁵ Interview, July 14 and 16, 2015. See also O’Donnell et al. (2014).

⁶⁶ Interview, July 16, 2015.

⁶⁷ Interview, September 2, 2015.

⁶⁸ Interviews July 4, 2014 and July 3, 2015.

⁶⁹ Interview, July 3, 2015.

⁷⁰ Interview, July 7, 2014.

⁷¹ Interviews July 14 and September 2, 2015. See also Allin & Hand (2014, p.61) and Jeffrey & Michaelson (2015).

⁷² Scotland was in the unique situation of having its own dashboard, a composite index produced by Oxfam Scotland, and access to ONS’s SWB measurements (Wallace 2013, p.15).

⁷³ Interview, September 2, 2015. Similar idea in interview, July 4, 2014.

⁷⁴ Interview, July 7, 2015.

The multiple agendas at play create some challenges and concerns for those seeking a transition to a greener, more equitable, and less consumption-oriented society. One concern, noted above, is that use of new wellbeing measures could be confined to small-scale change at the margins, leaving intact inequalities and the dominant focus on growth and consumption. An interviewee saw the wellbeing agenda as fundamentally “progressive” in nature, but said that as it becomes more mainstream, “the less progressive people” try to “twist it to serve their own purposes, just as they’ve done with sustainability.”⁷⁵ Another interviewee with transformative hopes saw danger of “co-opting” and “neutralizing” the agenda. She added, “I’m not ready to say yet that that’s what’s happened and it’s a dead end, but I do see that risk being there.”⁷⁶

Terminology, Communication, and Need for a New Narrative

“Sceptical and mocking” media reaction has been an additional obstacle (Bache & Reardon 2013, p.909). The announcement of the wellbeing measurement initiative was greeted with headlines such as “Cameron launches ‘airy-fairy’ £2million quest to measure Britain’s happiness” (Chapman 2010) and references to Cameron as the “messiah of happiness” (Odone 2010). An interviewee explained that the press tend to see it as “a bit of a sideshow” and rather “pink and fluffy.” She added that “quite often it’s called the ‘Happiness Index,’ and then people think, ‘What on earth are they on about? People’s happiness isn’t something that government can dictate. Government should be getting on with the serious business of government.’”⁷⁷

There are related questions about the most appropriate and effective terminology to use. A major study on “bringing alternative indicators into policy” (BRAINPOoL) in Europe noted the importance of avoiding “taboo” words in different national contexts; in the UK, “happiness” fell into that category as it was “often perceived as woolly, frivolous or non-scientific” (Whitby et al. 2014, p.25). Although “wellbeing” may be less vulnerable to mockery, it has its own problems. One interviewee noted that “a lot of people think about wellbeing purely as a health issue.”⁷⁸ Others have expressed concern about wellbeing’s association with what one interviewee referred to as the “woohoo area ... the aromatherapy, spirit-angel side of things” since the term is used to refer to “everything from beauticians to yoga teachers.”⁷⁹ Another interviewee avoided both happiness and wellbeing, which can imply a focus on individual solutions, choosing instead to speak of “collective prosperity.”⁸⁰ “Quality of life,” a term New Labour governments often used, may still have a future. One interviewee predicted, “We will look back in 10 years’ time and say, ‘the statement that governments should be trying to improve the quality of life of their citizens’ is so blindingly obvious that we will wonder why it was ever questioned.”⁸¹ Of course the terminology is closely related to the political vision. “Happiness” and “wellbeing” lack an explicit ecological or equity dimension, prompting an interviewee with a transformative green vision to speak of the need for “equitable, sustainable wellbeing.”⁸²

Also related to communication is the debate between proponents of a composite index versus a dashboard of indicators. An interviewee explained that the prevailing view has been that

⁷⁵ Interview, July 23, 2015.

⁷⁶ Interview, July 6, 2015.

⁷⁷ Interview, July 24, 2015.

⁷⁸ Interview, July 14, 2015.

⁷⁹ Interview, July 7, 2015.

⁸⁰ Interview, July 3, 2015.

⁸¹ Interview, July 14, 2015.

⁸² Interview, July 6, 2015.

“you can’t reduce wellbeing to a single number.”⁸³ The UK’s wellbeing measurement dashboard has 41 indicators, which provides statistical depth, but not an easily-communicated, overall message. However, some actors have argued for a headline-grabbing indicator, or a limited number of key indicators, that can rival GDP.⁸⁴

A broader communication challenge is establishing an overall narrative with potential popular appeal. A key barrier identified by the BRAINPOoL project was the “lack of strong narrative that engages the public” and is capable of challenging the orthodox narrative that “maximising growth while correcting market failures will ... maximise welfare” (Whitby et al. 2014, p.28).⁸⁵ We return to that challenge below.

Who Leads the Way?

The need for political champions and policy entrepreneurs to take new wellbeing measurements to the next level, giving them a higher profile and greater impact, is also evident. David Cameron did, for a time, play the champion role, although some interviewees spoke of the need for a new political champion to rebuild momentum on the issue.⁸⁶ The mocking reaction of the media and public, discussed above, added to the challenge; an interviewee noted that many politicians are hesitant to get behind the wellbeing agenda, thinking that “I’m not going to stake my political career on this because people will think I’m a joke if I do.”⁸⁷

The need for policy entrepreneurs, or in this case “indicator entrepreneurs,” to take advantage of the existence of new measures and get them used by policy makers was noted by an interviewee (see also Bache & Reardon 2013, p.900). In his words, “If you think of indicators as a product, it needs an entrepreneur to actually get it into the market.”⁸⁸ Indeed, some of that work was happening through the What Works Centre for Wellbeing and a Cabinet Office unit.

An additional factor holding back a higher profile and greater impact for wellbeing measurements was the lack of public pressure on political leaders to make it a priority. New indicators have certainly elicited interest among various groups within society. However, an interviewee noted that “there has never been any real popular buy-in” for new wellbeing measurement,⁸⁹ while the BRAINPOoL project similarly pointed to the “lack of a clear political imperative” since there was “no demand amongst the bulk of the electorate that politicians prioritise the outcomes that Beyond GDP indicators measure” (Whitby et al. 2014, p.29). Analysis for the Carnegie UK Trust of several international cases concluded that “a broad-based coalition of support” was important to maintain momentum behind the use of wellbeing data in policymaking (Wallace & Schmuecker 2012, pp.1, 41); however when asked if such a coalition had emerged in the UK, an interviewee said “no.” Part of the problem had to do with the divisions and multiple agendas discussed above: “we are very good at splitting hairs, and arguing about your definition of wellbeing isn’t my definition of wellbeing.... And we spend a lot of time and energy on this, rather than building that coalition approach.”⁹⁰

⁸³ Interview, July 13, 2015. See also HOCEAC (2014, p.22).

⁸⁴ Interview, July 13, 2015. See also (Jeffrey & Michaelson 2015).

⁸⁵ Also interview, July 7, 2014.

⁸⁶ Interview, July 24, 2015.

⁸⁷ Interview, July 7, 2014.

⁸⁸ Interview, July 7, 2014.

⁸⁹ Interview July 7, 2014. Similar points in interviews, July 6 and September 2, 2015.

⁹⁰ Interview, September 2, 2015.

The Economic Growth Imperative vs. a Transformative Green Vision for Alternative Indicators

While the impact of a vision of alternative indicators as a basis for better policy making has been limited to date, the more radical vision of redirecting society towards priorities other than economic growth and more consumption faces even greater obstacles. The radical green critique of growth remains part of the wider public debate about beyond-GDP indicators, but it is not part of the wellbeing politics that has entered the state sphere. As noted above, there have also been efforts to reframe the beyond-GDP agenda so that is compatible with continued prioritization of economic growth. This has included a pushback against the argument that income growth is not strongly associated with greater wellbeing in wealthy countries like Britain.

In their study of a range of alternative measurement initiatives in Europe, the BRAINPOoL project found “resistance to Beyond GDP indicators to the extent that they are associated with ‘unrealistic’ steady state or de-growth proposals” (Whitby et al. 2014, p.31). Researchers found a widespread view that economic growth is so central to the socio-economic system that GDP needs to retain its central place as a measurement, even if it is a poor proxy for welfare. In their words, “most mainstream actors we encountered could not entertain the possibility of organising economic and societal activities according to an alternative indicator to GDP. A strong belief remains that quality of life improvements – whether social, human or environmental – are impossible without assuming the pursuit of economic growth” (p.20). A related idea is that beyond-GDP measures are redundant, either because, as some actors believe, growth “should always trump other objectives” (p. 33) or because of a belief that the market will deliver optimal outcomes, as long as specific market failures are corrected (p. 34). If a transformative green vision of alternative indicators is to prevail, these entrenched beliefs and the systemic constraints that underlie them will have to be confronted.

Dystopia and Distraction?

Critics have imagined that a political emphasis on happiness and wellbeing could produce dystopian futures, of the *Brave New World* variety, based on happiness pills and aspiration engineering to ensure people accept their station in life and the wider social order. But a different sort of dystopia is already upon us, according to the distinct but overlapping critiques in *The Happiness Industry* (Davies 2015) and *The Wellness Syndrome* (Cederström & Spicer 2015). Davies expresses concern over the growth of top-down, technology-enabled data-gathering and surveillance by government, business, and researchers aiming to identify and quantify what makes people happier, at the expense of listening to people’s own accounts of their lives and social experiences, while Cederström and Spicer take aim at the ideology of “wellness” that increasingly pervades contemporary culture. Drawing on both books, a composite picture emerges of a world in which wellbeing is not, as some had hoped, an overriding goal that provides an eco-social alternative to the dominance of economic values, but is seen as an attribute of more productive and engaged post-industrial employees, i.e., a resource to generate wealth and profit. Corporations have thus expanded efforts to monitor and influence employee lifestyles and attitudes, while individuals are compelled to present an image of health, happiness, and productivity to find work and remain employable in precarious, neo-liberal labour markets. At the same time, contemporary work generates high levels of stress that erode wellbeing and threaten productivity, leading to strategies such as mindfulness training, coaching, healthy eating, and exercise to help employees cope and re-energize. Instead of unhappiness serving as a basis for social critique and political-economic reform, attention centers on depoliticized efforts to transform individuals, their thought patterns, and behaviours.

Some interviewees shared some of these concerns. For example, one referred to the “toxic” resilience agenda that emphasizes individual coping skills to achieve wellbeing.⁹¹ Although it is important to recognize the dangers of a depoliticized, atomizing variation on wellbeing politics, it is clear that many of those involved in promoting it continue to see it as a way to work for progressive social transformation.⁹²

A different sort of danger is that new indicators could distract those seeking a green transformation from the need for a wider and more challenging set of changes.⁹³ “I’ve come to regard the measurement debate as, in some ways being, another distraction,” said Tim Jackson, who has long been involved in developing alternatives to GDP. “All these economists coming late to the table talking about better measures, without questioning the underlying model isn’t really advancing things” (Confino 2012). One interviewee who did question the underlying model and saw a need to “radically reengineer the economy”—to move beyond neoliberalism and “probably beyond capitalism”—explained that indicator changes on their own “are not going to get us a long way along that journey.” He had shifted his hopes towards grassroots efforts—such as Transition Towns, the new cooperatives movement, efforts to rebuild the commons, etc.—that aim to construct a new economy from the ground up.⁹⁴

One can still make the case that new wellbeing measures are a necessary part of a transformation to a post-growth, post-consumerist society, but they are far from sufficient. Interviewees pointed to a range of related changes that are needed. These include promotion of a new economic narrative with potential popular appeal,⁹⁵ which might include emphasis on sustainable and equitable wellbeing, and a focus on economic security rather growth and rising consumption (Barry 2015). Having the right indicators that “support that narrative” is important.⁹⁶ It is not obvious, for example, that the UK’s wellbeing measures, particularly the subjective wellbeing questions, serve an alternative narrative of the kind mentioned⁹⁷—hence the continued work by the New Economics Foundation and others to promote new headline indicators for good jobs, life satisfaction, environment, fairness, and health (Jeffrey & Michaelson 2015). Work is also needed to convince political leaders that public support exists for the new narrative and the policies that would go with it.⁹⁸ Governments would need not only to adopt the new indicators, but also prioritize the core goals of the new narrative. In addition, just as the creation of GDP in the 1930s was accompanied by a theory, Keynesianism, about how to respond to changes in GDP and by structures established to respond to the data, today we need “theories about how do we actually improve wellbeing and what policy do we change, and what sort of structure of government would you have.”⁹⁹ Beyond that, for a transformative green vision of alternative indicators to fully come to fruition, it is necessary to “disentangle” the current society from its dependence on economic growth to solve problems such as

⁹¹ Interview, July 3, 2015.

⁹² Interview, July 6, 2015. See also Michaelson (2015).

⁹³ Interview, July 7, 2014 and July 23, 2015.

⁹⁴ Interview, July 23, 2015.

⁹⁵ Interview, July 7, 2014.

⁹⁶ Interview, July 7, 2014.

⁹⁷ Interview, July 7, 2014.

⁹⁸ Interview, July 7, 2014.

⁹⁹ Interview, July 22, 2015. Similar points in interview, July 7, 2014.

unemployment, and “then you can run things on the basis of some other [non-GDP] indicator.”¹⁰⁰ The overall challenge is, as one interviewee noted, a “non-trivial task.”¹⁰¹

Conclusion

The “end of the GDP-only world” has not been what many proponents of new wellbeing measures had hoped for, at least so far. The advances in wellbeing measurement in Britain have yet to have a strong impact on policies on priorities, with obstacles including: challenges in producing new measurements; lack of consensus on the best alternative measures and on the ultimate goals of using them; challenges related to terminology and communication; and the need for political champions, policy entrepreneurs, and stronger public demand to give new wellbeing measures a higher profile. Nevertheless, interesting possibilities for better policymaking are apparent in the debate: public services that are more “human,” greater public efforts to address loneliness, new forms of cost-benefit analysis based on wellbeing impacts, more effective use of limited public funds, opportunities to overcome silos and achieve more joined-up government, etc. None of these possibilities should be dismissed as insignificant; however, many greens and others have had more hopes of more transformative change.

Measurement of environmental conditions has been an important and well-established element of the National Wellbeing Measurement program—and the beyond-GDP agenda more generally. In fact, Britain has had sustainable development indicators since the 1990s and they continue to evolve, while the government has committed to further steps to incorporate the value of natural capital into the national accounting system. These efforts to better account for environmental benefits and costs, which are not fully reflected in market prices, are consistent with an environmental state’s role in addressing the negative environmental externalities of economic activity. Indeed, the need to address externalities and other market failures is by now part of the dominant narrative that maximizing growth, while correcting market failures, maximizes welfare. Such ideas are in line with an ecological modernization vision that highlights the possibilities for green growth, which has been the approach taken by New Labour, the Cameron Conservatives (at least in their “detoxifying” moments), and the devolved administrations of Scotland and Wales.

But what many in the green movement have sought is a shift away from economic growth as the dominant social priority and a less consumption-oriented vision of wellbeing; adopting alternatives to GDP has been seen as a key step in that direction. Such a transition would be consistent with the emergence of a green state, which would prioritize the attainment of ecologically sustainable and equitable wellbeing over economic expansion. In a green state, new indicators would be important to measure progress towards those goals, and to show the societal benefits of alternative policies and community initiatives that do not prioritize monetary values. Although talk of “General Well-Being that goes beyond economic prosperity” and a “debate about what really matters” (Cameron 2006b; 2010) has hinted at the possibility of a shift in societal priorities—and there has been some opportunity to put forward ecologically and socially transformative proposals—so far the mainstream wellbeing debate has been largely contained to seeking small-scale policy change at the margins, with little sign that is helping to make a break from “a way of life which is out of step with the long-term health of the planet” (Quality of Life

¹⁰⁰ Among the changes the interviewee discussed to disentangle society from its dependence on growth were a shorter working week policy and changes in company law to reduce the emphasis on profits and make it “easier for companies to just maintain themselves.” Interview, July 22, 2015.

¹⁰¹ Interview, July 7, 2014.

Policy Group 2007, p.10). Meanwhile, there are concerns that the wellbeing agenda is moving in an atomizing, depoliticized direction, in which individuals face increasing surveillance of their lifestyles and pressures to present themselves as happy, productive, and thus employable.

The transformative green vision of alternative indicators continues to run up against the perceived economic-growth imperative, and the related idea that is not possible to organize contemporary societies around indicators other than GDP or some similar measure of economic output. Challenging that imperative will require change on multiple levels, including winning support for a new narrative societal narrative that is no longer focused on consumption growth, grassroots initiatives building alternative economic institutions, and overcoming the dependence on growth to solve core problems such as unemployment. Developing new indicators can be a useful step, but it is only a small part of what is needed, and offers no shortcut to a very challenging process of green transformation.

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