CHAPTER 7

From Fantasy to Transformation: Steps in the Policy Use of "Beyond-GDP" Indicators

Anders Hayden

Introduction

Many supporters of alternative indicators of well-being, prosperity, or societal success—that is, "beyond-GDP" metrics—have been motivated by hopes of considerable policy change and, indeed, wider social change. For many supporters of the beyond-GDP movement, new indicators are linked to a broader goal of *transformation*—that is, changing core features of society, notably a shift from the prioritization of growth in production and consumption to an emphasis on well-being, equity, and sustainability. Among those with transformative goals, different emphases are possible, including challenging the growth paradigm and a consumerist vision of well-being, or significantly redistributing resources and power within society. For others, including many mainstream political actors, the goal is limited to *reform*, that is, using more comprehensive and direct measures

A. Hayden (✉)
Dalhousie University, Halifax, NS, Canada
e-mail: Anders.Hayden@dal.ca

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of well-being to inform policy choices and produce better policies—without questioning the growth paradigm or other core features of the economic and social system (Hayden et al. Forthcoming; Hayden and Wilson 2017). That said, the boundaries between transformative and reformist perspectives can be somewhat blurred within the nuanced spectrum of steps beyond GDP that is evident in recent national and local experiences.

This chapter integrates findings from recent research that I have conducted on beyond-GDP initiatives in Canada, Britain, Bhutan, and the US states of Maryland and Vermont (Dasilva and Hayden Forthcoming; Hayden 2015; Hayden and Wilson 2016, 2017, 2018) and lessons from other case studies including New Zealand. It also draws on the existing literature on indicator uses. It examines various steps in the use of beyond-GDP metrics in policy, starting at one end of the spectrum with the "indicators fantasy"—which assumes that it is enough to produce new indicators and policy impacts will follow—and genuine transformative change at the other. Intermediate steps in the direction of greater policy impacts are also discussed, including political use of indicators in policy debates, conceptual use that is contributing to changing understandings of well-being and prosperity, and actions to embed indicators into the policy process (enabling "instrumental use"). Such steps have expanded the possibilities for policy reform. While there is still a considerable way to go to achieve transformative goals, the transitional objective of downplaying the centrality of GDP and economic growth, without abandoning either, may now be within reach.

The Indicators Fantasy

While alternative well-being indicators have considerable value in making visible key issues that conventional measurements ignore, producing them is only a first step, and provides no guarantee of policy impact. Beyond-GDP initiatives have often been based on what one can call the "indicators fantasy,"[1] that is, the assumption that simply producing new measurements will, on its own, lead governments to take notice, resulting in policy change—perhaps even transformative change. This expectation is based on a rationalist-positivist perspective in which indicators are assumed to feed directly into evidence-based policymaking and influence decisions

[1] I first encountered this idea in an interview with Charles Seaford, New Economics Foundation (NEF), in July 2014.

(Scott 2012; Rinne et al. 2013; Lehtonen et al. 2016). However, the influence of indicators on decisions is rarely so direct and mechanical. Influences on policymakers include ideology, interests, information, and institutional constraints—and information is frequently not the most important of these four “I’s” (Bell and Morse 2011). Meanwhile, Durand and Exton (2019, p. 142) point out that “it is not sufficient to rely on the adage ‘what gets measured gets done’ since in several cases, national efforts to measure well-being remain largely disconnected from policy practice.”

Some supporters of beyond-GDP measurement, including this author, confess to having been guilty of the indicators fantasy to some degree in the past (see, e.g., Dasilva and Hayden Forthcoming). As Ronald Colman (Forthcoming), who has made important contributions since the 1990s to efforts to move beyond GDP in Canada, New Zealand, and Bhutan, puts it:

> [W]hat brought many of us to this work was our belief that governments were making such bad decisions on environmental, social, health, education and other key constituents of wellbeing largely because they weren’t getting the full story. They were being deceived by the dominant GDP-based measures that equate how well we are doing as a society with economic growth. … All we had to do, my colleagues and I naively believed, was tell the whole truth and governments would see the necessity of urgent action to improve societal wellbeing and—without being overly dramatic—to save humanity.
>
> Twenty-five years later … I have to conclude that our new progress measures have failed to make a significant dent in the policy arena or to shift policy in any fundamentally transformative or meaningful way. … On the contrary, the economic growth imperative at huge (and now well-documented) ecological and social costs, is more dominant and powerful than ever.

Three points stand out in response to Colman’s assessment. First, there are many measurement initiatives without significant policy impacts (Bleys and Thiry Forthcoming; Whitby et al. 2014; Bleys and Whitby 2015; Hayden and Wilson 2016, 2018; Durand and Exton 2019, p. 142), which support the idea that is insufficient to provide more accurate information through beyond-GDP metrics and expect results. Second, whether or not new progress measures have made a “significant dent” in the policy arena is partly a matter of subjective interpretation; some recent developments, discussed below, can be interpreted more positively in terms of the degree of impact and increasing opportunities for policy reform. Third, despite such advances, transformative goals have not yet been achieved and the obstacles hindering their achievement remain substantial, a point returned to below.

Political and Conceptual Use, and an Emerging Narrative of Sustainable Well-being

One step beyond simply producing new indicators is "political use" (Hezri 2004; Rinne et al. 2013)—that is, political actors' use of well-being and sustainability indicators as "ammunition" to defend policy positions and attempt to persuade others. Even where direct policy impacts are not evident, political use is common, such as referring to beyond-GDP metrics and well-being evidence to urge action to reduce income inequality and poverty, cut greenhouse gases (GHGs), expand public provision of psychological therapies, or reduce working hours—or, more generally, critique the limits of neoliberal economics (e.g., APPGWE 2014; Hayden and Wilson 2018). Such political use is obviously not guaranteed to determine policy outcomes—and it will often encounter opponents wielding their own indicator evidence—but it is one avenue through which impact may occur. It also draws our attention to the political nature of indicators, which, behind an appearance of objective, neutral data, reflect normative understandings of what matters most and what we ought to focus our attention on (McGregor 2015).

The possibility also exists that, aside from any direct policy impacts, indicators may have indirect impacts over time through "conceptual use," that is, introducing new ideas, reshaping frameworks of thought, and enabling people to see the world differently (Hezri 2004; Rinne et al. 2013). Participants in indicator initiatives often express considerable hope for longer-term conceptual use, even when immediate policy impacts are disappointing. For example, in Canada, interviewees pointed to the spread of the idea that "well-being is not exclusively about the scale or scope of the Canadian economy" as a development that "opens up a possibility for the future" (Hayden and Wilson 2016), while participants in Maryland's Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) initiative spoke of "changing the thinking" that will ultimately result in changes in policy (Hayden and Wilson 2018).

More than a hope for the future, there are indications that decades of work questioning the primacy of GDP and developing alternative measurements have resulted in shifts in thinking, with growing acceptance that GDP is not an adequate measure of well-being or national success. This is evident from the international level—the work of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in this area (e.g., Stiglitz et al. 2018)—down to more localized contexts. According to a senior public official in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, across a range of policy issues, "we're all having conversations where our measure of success is not more jobs created, or GDP contribution made. There's a greater level of layering and complexity of what people understand successes in policy to be." He added that, at the senior management levels within government, "it's almost now the orthodoxy that GDP is not the way to measure progress and success—it is one of many indicators."[2]

New well-being and sustainability indicators have challenged existing understandings of the success of the United States, for example. Although critics have long pointed to specific failings of the US social model—such as deep-seated racial inequalities, millions without health insurance, high incarceration rates, and high GHG emissions—the size of US GDP (and its related military capacities) was long sufficient to maintain the idea that the country was "number one." While some observers undoubtedly still believe that to be the case, this claim can increasingly be questioned in light of many indices and indicators showing middling or poor outcomes in the United States compared to other nations. For instance, the United States ranks number 15 in the world according to the Human Development Index (28 when adjusted for inequality),[3] 28 on the Social Progress Index,[4] 18 on the Legatum Prosperity Index,[5] 10 on the OECD Better Life Index (with equal weightings), 31 on the Sustainable Development Goal Index,[6] and 18 on *World Happiness Report* life evaluations.[7] The fact that all of these metrics have a Nordic country in the number one spot—and a number of them have multiple Nordic countries at or near the top—reinforces

[2] Interview, July 2020. See Dasilva and Hayden et al. (Forthcoming).
[3] 2018 data from UNDP (2019, pp. 300, 308).
[4] 2020 rankings: https://www.socialprogress.org/index/global/results.
[5] 2019 rankings: https://www.prosperity.com/rankings.
[6] 2020 rankings: https://sdgindex.org/reports/sustainable-development-report-2020/.
[7] 2020 rankings from Helliwell et al. (2020b, p. 19).

the impression that US "free market" capitalism is failing to serve the well-being of its people as well as Scandinavian social democracy.[8]

Of course, none of the above-mentioned indices offers the final word on well-being or prosperity. One can raise legitimate questions about what each of them shows or does not show, how they are constructed, and weightings of different factors incorporated into them. Meanwhile, there are other indicators and indices that emphasize the dependence of human development and well-being on ecological sustainability—and highlight the overall environmental impacts linked to a nation's resource consumption and GHG emissions, including those beyond its borders—on which neither the United States nor Nordic countries fare particularly well, such as the ecological footprint or Sustainable Development Index. The latter (not to be confused with the SDG Index) aims to measure the "ecological efficiency of human development."[9] It concludes that Cuba, Costa Rica, and Sri Lanka are the three top performing nations in delivering high human development while respecting planetary boundaries. Of course, as noted above, each metric reflects different normative and political stances about what matters most (McGregor 2015). For our purposes here, the key point is that beyond-GDP indicators have made a considerable conceptual contribution in challenging GDP as the dominant measure of national success—and the related idea that well-being is equivalent to income and the capacity to consume. Although debate continues over which alternative metrics ought to be prioritized, there is at least increasing pluralism in understandings of prosperity and success.

One important illustration of changing understandings of national success is the emergence of the Well-being Economy Governments (WEGo), which include New Zealand, Iceland, Scotland, and Wales. According to First Minister Nicola Sturgeon (2020), Scotland is "redefining" what it means to be a "successful country" and "putting well-being at the heart of what we are doing." Although not abandoning GDP growth as a goal, Sturgeon stated that GDP "cannot be … the only measure of national progress"—indeed, the country has a dashboard of multiple indicators,

[8] For an analysis of factors behind the Nordic countries high happiness levels, see Martela et al. (2020).

[9] It divides each nation's HDI score by the extent to which consumption-based CO_2 emissions and material footprint exceed "per-capita shares of planetary boundaries." See https://www.sustainabledevelopmentindex.org.

the National Performance Framework.[10] Meanwhile, Icelandic Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir (2020) has written that "well-being is the measure of our success," and—hinting at more transformative possibilities—referred to the "attempt to develop a new economic model, which is centred on well-being rather than on production and consumption." Time will tell to what degree such statements are followed by substantive policy changes, but there are initial signs that these changing understandings of national success are beginning to impact policy through "well-being budgets," discussed below.

Conceptual use is linked to the storytelling role that indicators can play. Corlet Walker and Jackson (2019) distinguish between indicators that act mainly as narrative or storytelling devices and those that primarily act as decision aids for policy (although many indicators have been created with aspirations to do both). A key aspect of indicators in their storytelling role is that they reflect a new vision of societal progress. For example, the Happy Planet Index shows that nations with high per-capita GDP are frequently far less efficient than others in converting resource consumption into longer, happier lives (Jeffrey et al. 2016). The GPI typically tells a story of "genuine progress" trailing behind GDP growth (Kubiszewski et al. 2013), while specific national versions have their own stories, such as the New Zealand GPI's illustration of a sharp decline in well-being during the neoliberal reform and austerity of the 1980s and 1990s (Patterson et al. 2020). Meanwhile, measurement of subjective well-being and analysis of the variables associated with it can tell a variety of stories, including the importance of trust and social connections in improving life evaluations (Helliwell et al. 2020a), and the greater potential of such non-material factors to enhance well-being compared to increases in material consumption (Barrington-Leigh and Galbraith 2019). Such stories not only help to challenge the narrative that GDP growth is the key to social progress, they may also provide some hints about the types of policies that would be helpful or harmful (or at least point toward policy areas needing attention). However, further steps are needed to integrate alternative indicators into the policy process to ensure they are taken into account in decision-making.

[10] Some proponents of a well-being economy have argued that Scotland's government needs to go further in its economic recovery strategy by moving beyond "strong economic growth" as a core goal and reducing dependence on growth as a means to generate well-being (WEAll Scotland 2020).

Instrumental Use: Embedding Indicators into the Policy Process

"Instrumental use" involves a direct link between indicators and decisions (Hezri 2004). This fundamental step has often been elusive, as noted above. In response, there is growing recognition of the need to go beyond merely producing new metrics to taking active steps to integrate them into the stages of the policy process (Stiglitz et al. 2018; Durand and Exton 2019)—as emphasized at the OECD's October 2019 conference on "Putting Well-being Metrics Into Policy Action." Many options are available, such as integrating indicators into national development strategies, creating new institutions with responsibility to monitor well-being indicators, further expanding the evidence base on the determinants of well-being and the policies that can enhance it, and capacity building and guidance for public servants in the use of well-being metrics (Durand and Exton 2019). This section focuses on a sub-set of available options: using new tools for cost-benefit analysis and policy assessment, using alternative indicators in "well-being budgeting," and requiring use of new indicators through legislation or mandates issued to public bodies.

New Cost-Benefit Analysis and Policy Assessment Tools

One challenge with alternative indicators is that "it's not always immediately obvious how to take the information … and apply it to decision making," according to a state official in Maryland (Hayden and Wilson 2018). Fortunately, there has been progress in developing tools that allow policymakers to do so. In Maryland, the state took preliminary steps, on a pilot basis, to bring the spirit of the GPI into cost-benefit analysis (CBA) through Net Present Value Plus (NPV+) analysis, which counts previously uncounted social and environmental considerations.[11]

Other approaches to beyond-GDP measurement have seen their own cost-benefit analysis innovations. Advances in subjective well-being measurement have led to techniques using life satisfaction as a benefit measure in cost-benefit analysis (Layard and O'Donnell 2015), which have seen

[11] Such analysis showed, for example, that it made more economic sense for the state to purchase and protect wetlands and forests, and continue to enjoy ecological services such as water treatment, than to allow revenue-generating but environmentally damaging suburban development (GFN 2015).

some initial application in Britain and Canada, resulting in quite different rankings of policy options and understandings of the return on investment compared to conventional CBA (Helliwell et al. Forthcoming; Shi et al. 2019). Meanwhile, use of indicator dashboards can benefit from tools such as New Zealand's CBAx, which allow conversion of various non-monetary impacts into monetary units for use in cost-benefit analysis (Ng Forthcoming; see also Durand and Exton 2019).

While such policy tools frequently involve debatable monetization techniques to estimate the full range of costs and benefits in comparable units, Bhutan developed an instrument for non-monetized, multi-criteria analysis of policy options. Decision-makers use the Gross National Happiness (GNH) Policy Screening Tool to assess proposed policies' impacts on some two dozen variables, which are related to GNH's nine domains[12] (Centre for Bhutan and GNH Studies n.d.). A proposal's likely impact on each variable is given a score out of four; proposals with total scores below a minimum threshold need revision before they can be approved. The GNH Policy Screening Tool is noteworthy for its role in arguably the most significant decision ever made using beyond-GDP metrics and related tools. In 2008, application of the screening tool led most of Bhutan's policy planners to reverse their previous support for joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) and reject membership (Hayden 2015, p. 168). Applying new approaches to policy analysis can clearly lead to substantially different choices; however, such examples are still far from the norm when it comes to beyond-GDP approaches.[13]

Well-being Budgeting

Another important step is integration of well-being and sustainability indicators into government budgeting. Use of alternative indicators to inform budget decisions has been an aspiration of many supporters of

[12] The domains are health, education, living standards, ecological diversity and resilience, good governance, psychological well-being, time use, community vitality, and cultural diversity and resilience.

[13] Colman, who highlights a lack of policy impact from beyond-GDP metrics, acknowledges the significance of Bhutan's WTO decision, but sees little discernible influence of GNH on recent policies.

beyond-GDP initiatives.[14] Indeed, there have been a growing number of efforts to do so—albeit with varying "shades of sincerity" (Laurent Forthcoming).

A prominent example is New Zealand's 2019 "well-being budget" (NZ Government 2019). It builds on the country's Living Standards Framework (LSF), which draws heavily on the OECD's well-being approach. The LSF includes a multidimensional dashboard of economic, social, and environmental indicators to assess "intergenerational well-being." The LSF dashboard includes indicators in 12 domains[15] of current well-being, as well as indicators for four forms of capital—natural, human, social, and financial and physical. In addition to national-level data to measure the state of "our country," individual-level data allows comparisons across social groups, that is, "our people," while data on the four capitals help to assess the ability to sustain well-being in "our future" (Treasury 2018a).

The New Zealand Treasury used the LSF and related tools for diagnostic and proposal assessment purposes in the 2019 budget process, that is, helping to identify important issues requiring the government's attention and assessing how intervention options would affect well-being domains and capitals. Information from the LSF dashboard was used—along with evidence from sectoral experts and input from government agencies—to determine the budget's five priorities: mental health, child well-being, supporting indigenous (Māori and Pasifika) people, supporting a thriving nation in the digital age through innovation, and the transition to a sustainable, low-emissions economy (Ng Forthcoming; Treasury 2018b). The five priorities were included in guidance to public agencies about the budget process and criteria for assessing proposed spending initiatives. In their budget bids, agencies had to show how proposed expenditures aligned with the five priorities and refer, where applicable, to the well-being impacts of their initiatives. Agencies also had to describe how they collaborated with others in developing their initiatives—with the aim of transcending agency boundaries. The LSF was then used as part of the process to assess and rank spending proposals for decisions about budget

[14] Such hopes have not always been fulfilled, as in the case of Maryland's GPI (Hayden and Wilson 2018).

[15] The domains are civic engagement and governance, cultural identity, environment, health, housing, income and consumption, jobs and earnings, knowledge and skills, safety, social connections, subjective well-being, and time use.

allocations (Ng Forthcoming; Treasury 2018b; NZ Government 2019). The budget ultimately included record levels of spending on mental health along with significant investments in efforts to address family and sexual violence, venture capital to help start-ups expand, low-carbon innovation, railways, and fixing hospitals, among other items.

How different is a well-being budget from a conventional budget? The answer will become clearer over time, as examples proliferate. New Zealand's initial experience shows both continuity and change. While some spending decisions, such as substantial investment in mental health, reflect a well-being orientation and the growing evidence base about contributors to well-being, some observers have noted that, on the whole, the priorities are not so different from previous budgets (Schumacher 2019). While transforming the economy toward sustainability was a major budget theme, it is not clear that such intentions are backed by sufficiently large shifts in spending to accelerate GHG reduction (McLachlan 2019; Baisden 2019). Meanwhile, as discussed in more detail below, dependence on economic growth to generate revenues for spending on well-being-enhancing programs and ensure high employment levels meant that GDP remained an important consideration.

That said, there are important innovations. The budget document's inclusion of an overall well-being outlook for New Zealand—alongside a conventional economic and fiscal outlook—is one indication that a genuinely new approach is at play (NZ Government 2019). A commonly expressed goal of supporters of beyond-GDP measurements is to use new overarching goals such as well-being to break down silos and create more cohesive, "joined up" policies (APPGWE 2014, pp. 15–16; Hayden and Wilson 2017, 2018; Durand and Exton 2019). New Zealand has shown a way to do so by using well-being as a common "language" across departments, while requiring ministries and agencies to collaborate in developing well-being-enhancing initiatives (Ng Forthcoming; NZ Government 2019, pp. 3, 5, 7). The budget also advanced the idea of treating public spending as investment (e.g., early intervention to address mental health) that generates positive social returns and reduces future costs (Mintrom 2019)—an approach buttressed by the LSF's emphasis on maintaining key forms of capital needed to generate future well-being.

Most fundamental is the explicit shift away from GDP as the primary indicator of prosperity toward a multidimensional understanding of well-being. While New Zealand is not abandoning pursuit of GDP growth, economic growth is now seen as one means among others to achieve the ultimate objective of well-being (Ng Forthcoming; NZ Government 2019, pp. 2, 5). While not transformative in the sense of aiming to move beyond growth or changing other core elements of the socio-economic system and the distribution of power within it,[16] New Zealand's approach could be seen as a significant reformist step—one that is potentially "transitional" in helping to "loosen the grip of GDP on the minds of decision makers" (Hall 2019) and open up "space in which more transformational possibilities can be cultivated" (Clarke 2014, p. 9).

The need to focus on the COVID-19 response temporarily set back further exploration of well-being budgeting in New Zealand and elsewhere.[17] Nevertheless, it is one of the most promising methods to date to integrate alternative indicators into policymaking.

Mandating Indicator Use

An additional option is simply to require decision-makers to use alternative indicators and broader well-being approaches through legislation or other types of mandates. Durand and Exton (2019) point to various examples of legislation, such as France's Sas Law, which requires the government to regularly report on a set of well-being indicators. In Wales, where 46 National Indicators are used to measure progress, the Well-being of Future Generations Act requires ministers and other public bodies to work to achieve seven well-being goals[18]—in effect establishing a "legally binding common purpose, overseen by the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales" (Durand and Exton 2019, p. 145). Analysis of the effectiveness of these specific laws is beyond this chapter's scope; indeed, questions exist about how much difference they have made in practice so far.[19] The key point is that legislation represents an increasingly

[16] Some observers may consider well-being budgeting to be "transformative" in the way it changes the process of allocating public resources, although it is not transformative in the way that I am using the term in this chapter, as outlined in the introduction.

[17] New Zealand had intended to deliver a second well-being budget in 2020. In January 2020, Icelandic Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir (2020) stated that a "well-being budget is in the works," while Canada's government was tentatively exploring the idea before COVID-19.

[18] These goals are as follows: a Wales that is prosperous, resilient, healthier, more equal, globally responsible, a Wales of cohesive communities, and a Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language.

[19] Laurent (Forthcoming) argues that although France's Sas Law is useful, the government's response has involved manipulation, as it selected indicators that put its record in a favorable light. Stewart (2020) raises questions about the Welsh approach's impact.

common option to embed alternative indicators in the policymaking process—and further variations are undoubtedly forthcoming.

Beyond legislation, government leaders can mandate use of alternative indicators by ministers, their departments, senior bureaucratic officials, and their agencies, although procedures and possibilities differ depending on each country's institutional context. In Canada, ministers receive mandate letters from the prime minister (or provincial premier) outlining the core policy objectives they are to pursue. An initial, exploratory step toward integrating alternative indicators into the policy process took place when Prime Minister Trudeau's (2019) mandate letter to the Minister of Middle Class Prosperity directed her to lead work to "better incorporate quality of life measurements into government decision-making and budgeting, drawing on lessons from other jurisdictions such as New Zealand and Scotland."

An example of a stronger mandate requiring monitoring and action to improve indicators—albeit with an important qualification—comes from Nova Scotia. The Canadian province has been the site of a non-governmental Quality of Life Initiative, which has included publication of a Nova Scotia Quality of Life Index, a related dashboard of well-being and sustainability indicators, and a large-scale Nova Scotia Quality of Life Survey (Dasilva and Hayden Forthcoming; Engage and CIW 2018). The Initiative's leaders have been conscious of the need to go beyond simply producing new indicators and hoping that change will result. One step has been the establishment of local teams to analyze quality-of-life data from the survey and develop priorities for actions that respond to it. Another hope has been that action to monitor and improve a core set of quality-of-life indicators could be embedded in the mandates of top-level bodies within the province's public service.

Nova Scotia already offers a relevant example: the mandate of its Office of Strategic Management, which works across departments to ensure implementation of the government's policy priorities, includes responsibility to "manage, measure, and publicly report" on progress toward a set of core goals tracked through an indicator dashboard (Nova Scotia 2019, pp. 2, 4). Unfortunately for those seeking a greater emphasis on well-being and sustainability, the indicators prioritized in the Office's mandate are not the Quality of Life Initiative's beyond-GDP metrics, but the conventional growth-oriented OneNS dashboard[20] that grew out of the Nova Scotia Commission on Building Our New Economy (Ivany et al. 2014). That Commission emphasized urgency in uniting around the drive for economic growth and outlined a mostly neoliberal agenda to do so. Similar integration of quality-of-life and sustainability indicators into the Office's mandate or ministers' mandate letters would signal a new well-being orientation, but for now more conventional economic goals reign supreme in the province.

Beyond Reformism to Post-growth Transformation

The Nova Scotia example brings us back to the reality that despite growing questioning of GDP as an indicator of national success and efforts to integrate alternative indicators into policy, established economic priorities are indeed deeply rooted. While some policy impacts are becoming evident, beyond-GDP measurement and the related emphasis on well-being has not yet been the transformative force that many proponents have hoped for (e.g., Quick 2019). One interviewee expressed disappointment that rather than broad changes in economic and social policy such as income redistribution justified by well-being evidence, the agenda risked being reduced to "let's do things a bit better."[21] Meanwhile, for those who believe that the "GDP-led development model that compels boundless growth on a planet with limited resources no longer makes economic sense" (Thinley 2012), and that alternative indicators can be a key part of the creation of a "new economy suited to the reality of a finite planet" (e.g., Zencey 2018, p. 8), there remains a long way to go.

Even in countries that have declared themselves "well-being economies," GDP growth is still pursued as an important means to achieve the overriding goal of well-being (NZ Government 2019, pp. 2, 5; Sturgeon 2020) and the perceived political imperative of economic growth remains strong (Richters and Simoneit 2019; Wiedmann et al. 2020). Choosing another indicator or end goal to prioritize does not, in itself, reduce governments' reliance on growth to generate the revenues needed for public

[20] The dashboard includes indicators that can all be seen as related to the overriding goal of economic growth, such as inter-provincial migration, international immigration, business start-ups, export value, labor-force participation, venture capital, tourism expansion, net debt to GDP, among others. See Dasilva and Hayden et al. (Forthcoming) and https://www.onens.ca/.

[21] Interview, Juliet Michaelson, NEF, July 6, 2015.

spending and to ensure high employment levels, both of which are important for well-being. Nor does changing indicators affect the pursuit of profit by business in capitalist economies, which is a fundamental driver of economic growth and a source of pressure on governments to maintain an economic climate conducive to expansion.

While adopting new indicators and integrating them into the policy process are important, a post-growth transformation will require many other steps, some of which will confront very substantial obstacles. These include a new narrative of sustainable and equitable well-being—"the sustainability–justice nexus" (Laurent Forthcoming)—supported by beyond-GDP indicators in their storytelling role. Continued advances in post-growth economics will be essential (Bleys and Thiry Forthcoming) to develop strategies for how to manage and prosper without growth (e.g., Jackson 2017; Lange 2018; Victor 2019), and achieve goals such as employment creation and economic security that currently depend on growth. Possibilities include policies such as work-time reduction, a job guarantee, and variations on a basic income, and more fundamental shifts to economic institutions to ensure more widely shared asset ownership and more equitable taxation so that a greater share of production can be devoted to meeting core needs. Meanwhile, researchers have questioned the need for economic growth to finance social policy and sketched outlines of a post-growth welfare state (Hirvilammi 2020; Laurent 2020). While advocates of beyond-GDP measurement have often sidestepped the issue of political conflict—focusing on the information in alternative indicators to convince governments of the need for change—overcoming resistance to change from vested interests and building support for a shift in priorities will require a key contribution from social movements. Particularly important are the efforts of the climate justice movement to build public and political support to address the climate emergency and crisis of inequality. Stronger connections between beyond-GDP researchers and such movements are needed (Colman Forthcoming)—as part of a broader effort to build the political coalition necessary for post-growth transformation.

Conclusion

The belief that simply producing alternative indicators will inevitably lead to policy reform, and perhaps even transformation, is clearly flawed. Fortunately, this "indicators fantasy" is not the end of the story. Political use of indicators to defend policy positions and attempt to persuade others is one step toward policy impacts, although it is far from guaranteed to succeed. Also uncertain in its impact, but potentially quite significant, is conceptual use that results in new understandings and frameworks of thought. Such conceptual use is evident in the changing understandings—and emerging new narratives—of prosperity and national success. As for instrumental use in which indicators are directly linked to policy decisions, there is growing awareness of the need to take active steps to integrate alternative indicators into the policymaking process, and a growing number of possibilities to do so, such as the use of new cost-benefit analysis and policy assessment tools, well-being budgeting, and legislating or mandating indicator use.

These steps forward have generated considerable optimism within the beyond-GDP community about the possibilities for further advances and policy reform, yet there is also disappointment among some researchers and practitioners over the fact that the transformative goals that originally motivated many contributors to the field have remained elusive. If transformation is seen not only in terms of moving beyond GDP as the dominant indicator of national success, but beyond growth as a policy priority, then the requirements for such a transformation amount to a very tall agenda, one that will not be achieved overnight. Nor is it an agenda shared by all supporters of beyond-GDP measurement, some of whom insist that beyond-GDP thinking should not be seen as "anti-growth" (Stiglitz et al. 2018, p. 14).

In the interim, a transitional step with potential appeal both to those seeking post-growth transformation and more limited reform is to downplay the centrality of GDP and downgrade economic growth from an overarching goal to one means, among others, to achieve more important ends. That is, the step taken by the Well-being Economy Governments, and a similar message appears in a recent report to the OECD by the Secretary General's Advisory Group on a New Growth Narrative (2019).[22] This appears to be the "next iteration of what's possible"[23]—another step toward an economy focused not on ever-expanding production and consumption, but on sustainable and equitable well-being.

[22] This "Beyond Growth" report does not reject growth as an objective, but no longer sees it as the primary goal, highlighting four paramount objectives for economic policy: environmental sustainability, rising well-being, falling inequality, and system resilience.

[23] Interview, Danny Graham, Engage Nova Scotia, June 2020.

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