

## 24. Creating a Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEAll) to motivate and facilitate the transition

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### WHY DO WE NEED A BROAD ALLIANCE AROUND THE SHARED GOAL OF WELLBEING?

Humanity's grand challenge of our time is to create a sustainable and desirable future – one that achieves the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In today's 'anthropocene' world, human impacts on ecological life-support systems are increasingly complex and far-reaching. At the same time, there are increased demands on the planet's life-support functions to maintain living standards in developed nations and to reduce poverty in developing nations. In this 'full' world, the emphasis in research, education and policy needs to shift from addressing problems in isolation to studying whole, complex, interconnected systems and the dynamic interactions between the parts.

Our current economic systems have become addicted to 'growth at all costs', as measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Costanza et al. 2017; Fioramonti 2013, 2017a). The general assumption is that GDP growth is synonymous with increased wellbeing and prosperity. However this approach has led to growing inequality, an escalating climate crisis and the depletion of natural and social capital. We are no longer generating genuine progress (Costanza et al. 2014). Our approach to economics and development needs fundamental transformation, which is what ecological economics has been advocating since its inception (Costanza 1991).

These are 'wickedly complex' problems because they incorporate both biophysical and social dynamics, which makes them impossible to address from within the confines of any single discipline. We are currently exceeding safe planetary biophysical boundaries (Rockström et al. 2009): economies are growing in terms of gross domestic product (GDP), but rising income inequality, loss of natural capital and decreasing ecosystem services have stagnated improvements in overall quality of life and create an existential risk to sustainability (Kubiszewski et al. 2013). While these problems are well-known (and often ignored), the solutions require fundamentally new approaches. So, what are the next steps?

To achieve the SDGs, we need to shift from a narrow focus on GDP growth to a broader understanding and measurement of wellbeing – the integrated wellbeing of

humans and the rest of nature – and develop creative ways to envision and achieve the future we all want. Research and practice, from medical studies to social analysis, have demonstrated that human wellbeing is the result of strong social connections and healthy ecosystems (Fioramonti 2017b). We are indeed social animals who thrive in community with each other and with the surrounding natural environment.

In order to make substantial progress, scientific research is not enough. We need a broad global alliance, one that can enable a new level of collaborative, transdisciplinary research, teaching, communication, innovation and action that shifts both policies and practices.

A global movement is coalescing among a large number of individuals and organizations around the need to shift economies away from a narrow focus on material production and consumption to one more broadly focused on ‘sustainable wellbeing’, linking it directly with United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which go far beyond GDP growth, and include eliminating hunger and poverty, reducing gender disparities and overall inequality, urgent action on climate change, and restoring marine and terrestrial ecosystems. The Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEAll) is aimed at facilitating, coordinating and amplifying this movement.

### **What is a Wellbeing Economy?**

A wellbeing economy is an economy based on the fundamental premises of ecological economics (Costanza et al., Chapter 1, this book). It has the goal of achieving sustainable wellbeing with dignity and fairness for humans and the rest of nature. This is in stark contrast to current economies that are wedded to a very narrow vision of development – indiscriminate growth of GDP.

A wellbeing economy recognizes that the economy is embedded in society and the rest of nature. It must be understood and managed as an integrated, interdependent system of social relations that pursues balance and prosperity, rather than the maximization of production and consumption (Fioramonti 2017b). It is an economy that values both social and natural dimensions as fundamental components of national wealth as critical factors in determining wellbeing.

Wellbeing is the outcome of a convergence of factors, including good human mental and physical health, equitable access to government and community institutions, racial and social justice, good social relationships and a flourishing natural environment. Only a holistic approach to prosperity can therefore achieve and sustain wellbeing. A system of economic governance aimed at promoting wellbeing will therefore account for all the impacts (both positive and negative) of economic activity. This includes valuing goods and services derived from a healthy society (social capital) and a thriving biosphere (natural capital). Social and natural capital are part of the commons. They are not (and should not be) owned by anyone in particular, but instead make significant contributions to sustainable wellbeing.

True freedom and success depend on a world in which we all have the opportunity to prosper and flourish. Institutions serve humanity best when they foster our individual dignity while enhancing our interconnectedness. To thrive, all institutions (including businesses and society) must pivot towards a new purpose: shared wellbeing on a healthy planet.

To achieve such a shift, a major transformation of our worldview, society and economy are needed. These changes have been espoused by ecological economics from its inception (Costanza 1991; Daly 1992):

1. Stay within planetary biophysical boundaries – a sustainable size of the economy within our ecological life-support system.
2. Meet all fundamental human needs, including food, shelter, dignity, respect, education, health, security, voice and purpose, among others.
3. Create and maintain a fair distribution of resources, income and wealth – within and between nations, current and future generations of humans and other species.
4. Have an efficient allocation of resources, including common natural and social capital assets, to allow inclusive prosperity, human development and flourishing. A wellbeing economy recognizes that happiness, meaning and thriving depend on far more than material consumption.
5. Create governance systems that are transparent, fair, responsive, just and accountable.

There are many individuals and groups who have espoused versions of these basic ideas for decades. They may have used different approaches and different languages, but all share a common goal. Perhaps more important are the many individuals and groups already putting the ideas of a wellbeing economy in practice. These include millions of activists and social entrepreneurs of various types from around the world.

The challenge is to acknowledge these many diverse initiatives and to connect them so that the total is more powerful than the sum of the parts, while enabling a diversity of language so as to communicate with a variety of audiences. WEAll is fundamentally an effort to do just that – to catalyse a cooperative, harmonized and effective approach to creating a wellbeing economy.

## WHAT HAS HAPPENED SO FAR TO DEVELOP WEALL?

The small Himalayan country of Bhutan was admitted to the United Nations in 1971. It had been relatively isolated from the world for decades but gained prominence when, in 1972, the 4th King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck famously declared that ‘Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product’. Bhutan has been guided by this idea ever since, and it represents a significantly different approach to development.

In July 2011, Bhutan proposed its first UN resolution, which was passed unanimously: Resolution 65/309: *Happiness: towards a holistic approach to development*. It stated that: ‘the pursuit of happiness is a fundamental human goal’, and that ‘unsustainable patterns of production and consumption can impede sustainable development’. The resolution then invited ‘the Secretary-General to seek the views of Member States and relevant regional and international organizations on the pursuit of happiness and well-being and to communicate such views to the General Assembly at its sixty-seventh session for further consideration’.

To follow up on this, the government of Bhutan organized a meeting of more than 600 participants at the UN in New York in April 2012 to further discuss the creation of a new

development paradigm based on happiness and wellbeing. One result of that meeting was the creation of a New Development Paradigm International Expert Working Group (IEWG) at the invitation of the new King of Bhutan and the then Prime Minister, Jigmy Thinly. This 60-member IEWG, led by Robert Costanza and Jacqueline McGlade, met for a week in January 2013 in Thimpu, Bhutan. They were charged with drafting a report to the UN on what this new development paradigm would look like and how to implement it. During the final preparation of the report, the government of Bhutan changed and enthusiasm for the report wavered. However, several of the participants in the IEWG decided to form a new group to carry the ideas forward. This effort was called the *Alliance for Sustainability and Prosperity (ASAP)*.

In the meantime, a parallel group with very similar ideas and agenda was being formed in the US called *Leading for Wellbeing (L4WB)*. In May 2016 Hunter Lovins (also a member of the IEWG and ASAP), Michael Pirson, Chris Laszlo and Andrew Winston convened an L4WB meeting at Fordham University in New York, which included many of the ASAP members.

Meanwhile, an initiative known as Global Wellbeing Lab, which was sponsored by the German Development Cooperation (GIZ), the Presencing Institute and the GNH Centre in Bhutan, provided an international platform for Katherine Trebeck and Lorenzo Fioramonti to launch the idea of a global governance innovation aimed at promoting wellbeing in economic practices. Their plan, formalized in 2015, was to develop an international forum for governments interested in advancing wellbeing policies that were similar to the G7 in conventional economic policies (Fioramonti 2016).

In May 2017 Hunter Lovins, Michael Pirson and Chris Laszlo convened a Regenerative Future Summit in Boulder, Colorado. One major outcome of this summit was a commitment to merge ASAP and L4WB into a new organization to be called the Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEAll). Stewart Wallis, former director of the New Economics Foundation, agreed to chair the initiative.

WEAll was intended to be a broad 'network of networks', aimed at bringing together the many organizations, governments, networks, academics, businesses, NGOs and individuals that are already working on elements of the new economy. WEAll was designed to coordinate, facilitate, amplify and catalyse the wide range of ongoing efforts around the shared goal of creating a sustainable wellbeing economy.

While the ASAP and L4WB were developing and merging, in Europe in April 2017, the New Economy and Social Innovation (NESI) Forum, headed by Diego Isabel, convened a global gathering around ideas very similar, it turns out, to those that ASAP, L4WB and the new WEAll were discussing. NESI had strong connections in Latin America and across Europe and had convened the creation of a charter that was based on input from over 700 people. In the spirit of collaboration, NESI became a vital element in the formation and development of WEAll, with Diego Isabel working for the staff team during its critical inception stages.

At a meeting in Glasgow, Scotland, in October 2017, initiated by WEAll members Lorenzo Fioramonti and Katherine Trebeck, hosted by the Scottish government's Office of the Chief Economist, and welcomed by Nicola Sturgeon, first minister of Scotland, a group of governments including Scotland, Costa Rica, Slovenia and New Zealand committed to creating a partnership to share good practice in wellbeing economy policy making and to champion holistic and collective wellbeing as the goal of development. In

time, it is hoped this government component of the wellbeing economy agenda will be as influential as conventional GDP-orientated groupings such as the G7 or G20.

In Malaga, Spain, in June 2018, many of the founding members of WEAll met and debated key aspects of WEAll's operations – from its strategy to its communications plan. This meeting and WEAll's early days were possible due to initial funding from several individual donors and the Velcro corporation. The WEAll website went live in August 2018. In September 2018 a formal launch event was held at Fordham University in New York attended by many WEAll founders and members.

The challenge now is to continue to build this alliance into the social and political force that will be needed to make the fundamental changes necessary to achieve the SDGs and sustainable wellbeing.

## HOW DO WE BUILD WEALL INTO A MOVEMENT CAPABLE OF MOTIVATING AND FACILITATING THE TRANSITION?

How can we expect that WEAll has any chance of success when the ideas it is espousing have been around for decades? A major reason for optimism is timing. Things have changed significantly in the last several years, including:

- There is growing and widespread disenchantment with the current system. Many people around the world are recognizing that the current version of neoliberal capitalism and the blind pursuit of GDP growth is benefiting only the rich, and even they are not improving their wellbeing (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). There is a growing backlash to globalization, and a rise in nationalism. There is a growing interest in alternatives that can provide sustainable wellbeing for all. Of note, in the two fastest growing economies, India and China, that account for as much as a third of the world's economic activity, the national and local governments are beginning to incorporate inclusive and sustainable prosperity models into their economic plans. For example, China's President Xi Jinping has called for a 'green GDP' and building an 'ecological civilization', while India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi has announced a plan to build 100 'smart cities' around the country. WEAll presents the underlying paradigm and vision of ecological economics as the basis for the new wellbeing economy. With the right capacity it can galvanize a critical mass of interest and action.
- For the first time in human history we have the ability to communicate in real time with almost everyone on Earth. Billions of people are able to communicate at virtually no marginal cost and this makes social organizing easier than ever before. Peer-to-peer networking has become a reality, whether sharing information, data, software, goods, services, car rides, accommodation, lending, and/or political strategies. WEAll can explode into a truly global movement literally overnight if it can create a critical mass.
- There is growing recognition that we now live in the 'anthropocene' epoch and the degree of interdependence with the rest of nature that that implies. The growing number of climate-related natural disasters have made it increasingly obvious that the economy and society are embedded in the rest of nature, and we must understand and manage the system as an integrated, interdependent whole.

- The UN Sustainable Development Goals represent the first time in human history that all countries in the world have agreed on a set of goals aimed at sustainable wellbeing. This is a significant step that has yet to be adequately communicated to the general public.
- As central authorities fail citizens, more states, regions and cities are taking the lead. For example, from Vermont to California, US states have defied Washington's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement by adopting their own climate change response plans. Civil society organizations are taking the lead in pulling together innovative funding to transform urban areas and at the same time achieve the SDGs. Two hundred city regions will be involved by 2022.

At the same time, social experiments and technological advances are showing the way to the new wellbeing economy, including:

- Millions of people are rethinking the economy by introducing alternative currencies, most of them in digital format.
- A number of governments, from Costa Rica to Sweden, Italy and New Zealand have officially introduced wellbeing indicators in managing macroeconomic policies and are regularly measuring the impacts of their economic decisions on human and ecological wellbeing.
- Basic income experiments are underway, in places as diverse as Kenya, the Netherlands, Finland and India.
- Transition Towns have developed a guide for creating resilient local economies and local currencies.
- The European Union has put forward a circular economy policy.
- Renewable energy allows for decentralized systems of production and consumption, turning households into independent nodes of a global network. Costs are now below fossil fuels, despite the \$10 million a minute in subsidies that fossil energy still enjoys. Advanced economies and developing nations are already transitioning to renewable energy. Jobs are being lost in the fossil fuel industry, but are on the rise in renewable energies: the US solar sector employs 77 per cent more people than coal mining, creating employment opportunities 17 times as fast as the job creation of the economy as a whole. By 2015, China alone had created 3.5 million renewable energy jobs. In 2016, renewable energy employment was growing at 5 per cent a year globally.
- California committed to double energy efficiency and generate half of the state's electricity from renewable sources by 2030. They will actually achieve this by 2020. Nine New England states require carmakers to shift to zero-emission vehicles. New York launched an energy plan to help residents produce and share their own energy. Smart villages using off-the-grid solutions are mushrooming in Asia and Africa. Sweden is on track to become fossil fuel-free by 2040. Costa Rica plans to be using 100 per cent renewable energy by 2030. The list goes on.
- More and more countries are joining the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) so that local people can follow the money generated by companies working within their borders.
- Businesses around the world are beginning to protect natural capital and ecosystems and recognize them as key assets.

- Regenerative agriculture, pioneered in Africa, South America and South Asia, promises to offer sufficient food for all using methods that restore ecosystems, capture carbon and increase yield.

The strategy of WEAll is to build upon all the existing positive ongoing activities, organizations and individuals to create a critical mass to enable transformation. In essence, this is often the way movements happen and the way societies are transformed. However, a key challenge is to overcome the territoriality of existing groups. WEAll hopes to do this by providing a neutral, supportive team and venue to articulate and communicate the common goals around which the alliance can form. It envisions its contribution as being the agents (connectors and facilitators), rather than the makers, of change. Its job is to support the makers of change: nurturing their work and its impact, amplifying their reach, and facilitating connections between them. Its agenda is to:

- Connect and convene meta movements from around the world (with both radical participants and those closer to the current system). These meta movements will include; businesses, faith and values groups, academia and think tanks, civil society organizations, governments, practitioners such as cities which are implementing wellbeing economy initiatives at scale, and institutional innovators. WEAll will support their strategy, collaborations, dissemination and replication.
- Encourage a global citizen's movement alongside support for WEAll communities of place in the form of hubs driven by local actors in their communities, cities and countries.
- Work with marketing experts, story tellers and communities to distil elements of and appropriate framing for a new narrative, and creatively and proactively disseminate the new narrative to key audiences in order to bring the wellbeing economy agenda into the mainstream.
- Create and share playbooks (guides) that explain how relevant actors can advance the creation of a wellbeing economy.
- Synthesize various academic and grey literature that informs wellbeing economy analysis and propositions; convene universities, students' movements, think tanks, CSOs and research institutes to distil key dimensions of wellbeing economy theory; and spread, share, communicate and champion this material.
- Having instigated its creation, support the partnership of Wellbeing Economy Governments (WEGo) of countries and regions where policy decisions are being made for wellbeing, in all its dimensions.

Change in the economic system will really take off when people at the local level come together, armed with new narratives, ideas and models to make the wellbeing economy a reality in their own localities. WEAll aims to catalyse the creation of at least 50 WEAll-affiliated hubs at the city, region (or state) and national level. Each hub will:

- Bring key actors together across sectors to influence and inspire changes in policy, values and norms.
- Be supported by WEAll Citizens (The global citizens movement) working together

to implement change in their own communities and pressing for wider system change.

- Build and disseminate new narratives
- Showcase inspiring exemplars and disseminate relevant ‘How to Guides’.
- Determine their own activities to contribute to creating a wellbeing economy, in ways that are meaningful where they are.

Some of these hubs will be created from scratch, but many will build on existing hubs and collaborations of member organizations of WEAll. The focus will be on places either where WEAll members are strong and/or where favourable conditions for systemic change already exist.

## A RESEARCH AND ACTION AGENDA

In seeking to facilitate the transformation, we propose the following research and action agenda related to WEAll.

First, there is a need to identify the barriers of moving from GDP to alternative indicators of wellbeing, as well as the strategies and opportunities for change. For example, Strunz and Schindler (2018) identify a number of important political barriers: What are the political logics that would enable political elites to adopt alternative indicators? How do institutional bureaucracies resist or enable such transitions? And how does a political perception created by GDP contrast with other measures of wellbeing? Moreover, vested interests such as the fossil fuel industry are partly responsible, and lack of clear alternatives are also a barrier (Costanza et al. 2014). Both empirical research and practical initiatives are needed to engage with and overcome these barriers.

Second, WEAll involves and seeks to engage diverse actors, and the membership in WEAll is increasing rapidly. As of this writing WEAll already includes over 100 organizations including: B Corps, the Club of Rome, IUCN, The Next System Project, Finance Watch, The Green Economy Coalition, The Tellus Institute and The Equality Trust. This burgeoning membership poses important questions related to power, legitimacy and influence. For instance, what is the role and responsibility of governments in enabling or leading the adoption of alternative indicators of wellbeing (Bache et al. 2016)?

Third, greater understanding of change processes and dynamics is critical to inform action towards more sustainable futures. What social processes and dynamics lock in and reproduce the growth dynamics of governments? And what are the broader implications of adopting alternative ways of measuring wellbeing? As Szejnwald, Brown and Vergragt (2017) pose the question: What role can the adoption of new ways of measuring happiness and wellbeing play in accelerating cultural transformations towards sustainable societies beyond consumerist lifestyles? For example, in the United States the transition to a consumerist lifestyle occurred within a generation. This was not inevitable, but was led by government, along with organized labour and business. A better understanding of these processes can help inform actions to facilitate the transformation.

Transformative change often happens when a crisis opens the door. WEAll aims to harness the questions now being asked of the current system, which has caused the current economic, financial, equality and ecological crisis. It seeks to galvanize a critical



mass and promote tested alternatives that can achieve our common goals. In order to achieve the transformation to the new economy and society we all want, we need to work together as a unified front. The new *Wellbeing Economy Alliance* (WEAll) is designed to help facilitate that transformation.

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