



Surveys

Buzzword or breakthrough beyond growth? The mainstreaming of the Wellbeing Economy

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ABSTRACT

A wellbeing economy (WE) has been promoted by many advocates of a post-growth economy. Drawing on the growing WE literature, including detailed case studies of Wellbeing Economy Governments (WEGo), the article asks: does growing support for a WE represent a breakthrough for post-growth economic ideas? Or has mainstreaming the WE concept emptied it of radical post-growth content? The WE experience is interpreted in light of an earlier debate in the international development community over the mainstreaming of radical concepts that were purged of transformative meanings – becoming buzzwords that did not fundamentally alter existing practices. Wellbeing and the WE similarly risk becoming buzzwords: feel-good ideas that are hard to oppose, but which users can fill with their own meanings and political agendas. The WE's post-growth roots are contrasted with the pro-growth meanings given to it by organizations including the OECD and WEGo nations. The WE has nevertheless shown some promise in enabling *limited* steps in a post-growth direction in WEGo nations (within a broader context of continued pursuit of growth). The article presents – and invites debate on – some possible responses to resist dilution of the WE concept and advance a transformative post-growth vision.

1. Introduction

The wellbeing economy (WE) has been gaining momentum. In 2018, the Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEAll), the main advocacy group promoting the concept, was created. That same year, WEAll was involved in the creation of the Wellbeing Economy Governments (WEGo), with Iceland, New Zealand, and Scotland becoming founding members.¹ The Council of the European Union (2019a) subsequently endorsed an “economy of wellbeing,” and Finland and Wales joined WEGo in 2020. The World Health Organization's Geneva Charter for Wellbeing emphasized the “urgency of creating sustainable ‘well-being societies’” (WHO, 2021), while in 2022 the World Wellbeing Movement – a coalition of business, civil society, and academic leaders that also speaks of a WE as a goal (WWM, 2023) – was launched. At the May 2023 Beyond Growth Conference in Brussels, the WE was one alternative prominently discussed (McLeod and Dixon-Declève, 2023). The following month, Iceland hosted the first Wellbeing Economy Forum – with the second of these planned annual gatherings in 2024 – creating the intriguing prospect of Reykjavik and the wellbeing economy as a

rival to Davos and the growth economy (Jackson, 2023).

However, before supporters of a post-growth WE (this author included) get their hopes up too high about the WE's progress, a reality check is needed. Although many WE proponents emphasize its post-growth character, there are multiple understandings of the concept and potential routes to it. In addition to those seeking a more ecologically-sound economic paradigm, supporters include health advocates looking to address the broad structural determinants of health; activists who prioritize poverty reduction, greater equality, and citizen participation; business leaders seeking a more motivated and productive workforce; and even governments aiming to accelerate economic growth, among others. It is important to emphasize that there is no consensus definition of a WE. And, of course, the concept's meaning can change as it moves from the hands of its original proponents into those of governments and major international organizations. Indeed, based on experiences with concepts such as “sustainable development,” discussed below, one should not be surprised to see political actors shifting the term's meaning to better align it with their interests and priorities, potentially undermining the degree to which it offers a radical challenge

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¹ An anonymous reviewer notes that WEAll's involvement in WEGo's creation could have been an opportunity to build shared, and eventually more radical, understandings of the WE concept.

to the status quo.

This survey article addresses the following questions: Does growing support for a wellbeing economy represent, as some observers have claimed, a long-sought breakthrough for a post-growth economic vision? Or has mainstreaming the WE concept emptied it of radical post-growth content, leaving it as little more than a buzzword that political actors can fill with their own, often status-quo-oriented meanings? Facing evidence that the concept is being watered down, how can a transformative, post-growth WE vision be maintained and strengthened? This article draws on the growing WE literature, including two recent articles that provided detailed case studies of WEGo nations examining the first and third questions above.² One of those articles examined WEGo founders New Zealand, Scotland, and Iceland (Hayden and Dasilva, 2022), while the other focused on more recent members Finland and Wales plus non-member participant Canada³ (Hayden, 2024). The experience documented in those articles is interpreted here in light of an earlier debate over the mainstreaming of concepts that originally offered a radical challenge to conventional international development practice. Paralleling concerns over the WE's recent evolution, critics at the time argued that these concepts had become buzzwords purged of their radical meanings. Similar issues with other ecologically-oriented concepts are also evident.

Whether a WE remains a post-growth perspective depends, in part, on what one means by post-growth. The key distinguishing factor emphasized in this article is that post-growth perspectives aim to move beyond the pursuit of economic growth as a societal priority, at least in high-income nations (going beyond GDP as a prosperity indicator is one part of a move beyond growth, but insufficient on its own). Well-known perspectives that meet this criterion include degrowth toward the radical end of the post-growth spectrum (Hickel, 2021; Kallis et al., 2020) and a-growth – which emphasizes agnosticism and indifference toward growth (van den Bergh, 2011) – at the more moderate pole. Among other post-growth approaches and concepts are a steady-state economy (Daly, 1996), doughnut economics (Raworth, 2017), and ecological-economic analyses of managing or prospering without growth (Jackson, 2017; Lange, 2018; Victor, 2019). Some WE formulations unquestionably belong to the wider post-growth family, but whether that is the case once the concept moves into the mainstream is less obvious.

2. Post-growth roots of the wellbeing economy

Many contributors to the WE's emergence have clearly sought to move beyond pursuit of economic growth as a societal priority. One early call for a wellbeing economy appeared in “A Well-Being Manifesto for a Flourishing Society” from the London-based New Economics Foundation (Shah and Marks, 2004, pp. 2, 8–10). In addition to going beyond GDP to “measure what matters” (p. 8), the manifesto highlighted the limits of further income growth in improving wellbeing in high-income nations (pp. 4, 6), advocated using productivity gains to give people more free time as an alternative to ever-more consumption (p. 2, 10–11), and urged action to “discourage materialism” due to its negative environmental and wellbeing impacts (pp. 3, 15).

A tributary of WE thought runs through Bhutan, with its concept of Gross National Happiness. In 2012, Bhutan hosted a high-level meeting at the United Nations on “Happiness and Well-Being: Defining a New Economic Paradigm,” where Prime Minister Jigmi Thinley (2012)

² The case studies were based on analysis of documents (e.g. statements by government leaders, government budgets and fiscal plans, official documents outlining new beyond-GDP wellbeing measurements, programs of government, ministry web pages, etc.) to assess whether commitment to a WE has affected government priorities, particularly the orientation toward economic growth.

³ Canada is often included in WEGo member lists, and has participated in some WEGo meetings, but has not formally joined.

proclaimed: “The GDP led development model that compels boundless growth on a planet with limited resources no longer makes economic sense.” Following this event, Bhutan convened an International Expert Working Group (IEWG), resulting in a report to the UN advocating a new paradigm, centred on the pursuit of happiness within planetary boundaries, to replace the “doctrine of limitless growth” (SNDP, 2013, pp. vi, 7).

Bhutan's international promotion of a new economic paradigm faded after a change in government, but some IEWG members sought to continue the work through a new Alliance for Sustainability and Prosperity, which was one group behind the Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEAll).⁴ According to WEAll (2024a), “Rather than treating economic growth as an end in and of itself and pursuing it at all costs, a Wellbeing Economy puts our human and planetary needs at the centre of its activities” A recent narrative analysis concluded that WEAll “[e]xplicitly questions economic growth as the main political goal and advocates a prioritization of wellbeing and ecological outcomes over economic growth” (Mason and Büchs, 2023, p. 6). (The latter quotation, incidentally, provides a succinct summary of core elements of a post-growth WE vision, with other quotations in this section adding some additional layers and slightly varying interpretations.)

The EU Wellbeing Economy Coalition (2023, p. 1), which includes many national-level WEAll branches, states that a WE is one “in which everyone can thrive, within planetary boundaries” and “an economic system that is no longer structurally dependent on economic growth.” Its highly critical approach to a growth-based economy is evident in statements such as: “There is no empirical evidence that economic growth can be sufficiently decoupled from its environmental impacts to the scale needed to address the climate breakdown” (p. 1). Indeed, many WE proponents share a deep scepticism about the prospects for decoupling economic growth from environmental impacts (e.g. Coscieme et al., 2019; Fioramonti et al., 2022, p. 2). Variations on a post-growth WE vision have also been presented by other groups (EEB and Oxfam Germany, 2021; WWF EU, 2020).

A key argument made by supporters of a post-growth WE is that it should not be confused with a new and improved growth model. Fioramonti et al. (2022) write: “While rejecting any attempt at making conventional economic growth more socially or environmentally acceptable (as is the case with ‘inclusive’ or ‘green’ growth), [the WE framework] calls for completely refocusing the debate away from growth” (p. 3). In a WE, they add, “the goal is no longer growth, but balanced sufficiency, equity, and sustainability as drivers of wellbeing” (p. 5).

However, the post-growth dimension is not always so prominent. At the time of writing, WEAll (2024b) home page does not mention “growth” and describes a WE as “an economy designed to serve people and planet, not the other way around.” Other WEAll definitions of a WE include “an economy that delivers social justice on a healthy planet” and “an economy that delivers on five universal needs for a good life,” which are connection, dignity, fairness, participation, and nature (Abrar, 2021, pp. 159, 160). None of those formulations necessarily imply a critical perspective on growth. To be fair, if one digs deeper into WEAll's website, or into the context surrounding such definitions, one finds more growth-critical language, some of which is cited above (WEAll, 2024a). However, others may not dig deeper or may simply repeat such WE descriptions without any growth-critical context (e.g. Improvement Service, n.d., p. 3). Meanwhile, civil-society organizations that have joined WEAll put varying emphases on moving beyond growth; in their membership applications, some use narratives that focus on other concerns (Waddock, 2021). It should also be noted that there has been more than one path to the idea of a WE (along with different understandings

⁴ Other groups contributing to WEAll's creation included the US-based Leading For Wellbeing and the New Economy and Social Innovation Forum (Abrar, 2021, pp. 162–163).

once one gets there). In Finland, where a more growth-oriented WE vision predominates, an “economy of wellbeing” emerged prior to WEAll’s advocacy; the concept was introduced in 2012 by the Finnish Federation for Social Affairs and Health (SOSTE), an umbrella organization for social affairs and health NGOs (Ahokas and Rouvinen-Wilenius, 2019). These points underline the fact that, despite having some post-growth roots, a WE is something of a chameleon concept that can take on many different meanings.⁵

3. Buzzwords and the erasure of radical content

Experience in various spheres raises questions about the ability to maintain a concept’s more politically challenging elements as it is mainstreamed. First, we will consider potential lessons from an earlier debate over the incorporation of once-radical concepts into the official discourse of global development organizations such as the World Bank, where they became “buzzwords” cleansed of transformative content and did not substantially alter development practice (Cornwall, 2007; Cornwall and Brock, 2005). The literature at that time is of particular relevance to this article for identifying key characteristics of buzzwords and the processes by which radical oppositional concepts can become coopted for more conservative agendas, all of which has echoes in the WE experience. Ongoing contestation over concepts with a more direct ecological dimension, including “sustainable development” and “sustainability” also show similar factors at play.

“Participation” offers a stark example of the above-mentioned transformation: from a radical challenge to inequitable power structures into a buzzword buttressing neoliberal policies (Cornwall, 2007; Leal, 2007). With roots in Paulo Freire’s radical approach to pedagogy and neoMarxist Participatory Action Research, participation’s main goal was “the transformation of the cultural, political, and economic structures which reproduce poverty and marginalisation” (Leal, 2007, p. 540). According to Leal (2007, p. 542), global development institutions later embraced participation to “put a ‘human face’ on inhumane policies” of structural adjustment; these institutions needed to show “they were not indifferent to the suffering inflicted upon the poorest of the poor by the new neoliberal shock treatment.” However, in the World Bank’s hands, participation no longer meant enabling people to overturn an oppressive status quo. Instead, neoliberal policies would liberate people from an interventionist state, while participation in market economies and development projects would allow them to “take fuller charge of their lives” (Leal, 2007, p. 542). Participation thus became a rhetorical buttress for neoliberal policies.

A similar transformation occurred with “empowerment,” whose prominence in reports by the United Nations Development Programme, World Bank, and International Fund for Agricultural Development led Moore (2001, p. 321) to comment: “The language of liberation theology is infiltrating the big multilateral development agencies.” However, this language’s use did not mean that that multilateral development agencies were promoting strategies to empower people in the sense of “visibly making more powerful” (p. 324). Instead, they emphasized that empowerment involves improving people’s material conditions, thereby providing greater freedom and autonomy, which authorities were already pursuing through “pro-poor growth” policies. The concept of

⁵ Besides the post-growth question, there are disagreements within WE circles on other key issues, such as how to measure wellbeing and, relatedly, whether one must distinguish wellbeing from “happiness.” Economist Richard Layard (2020) is among those who treat wellbeing and happiness as essentially synonymous – and argue that the best way to measure wellbeing is through surveys gauging people’s degree of “happiness” (more precisely, life satisfaction). Others see wellbeing or quality of life as a multi-dimensional concept requiring multiple indicators (e.g. Stiglitz et al., 2010) or see wellbeing as primarily a matter of identifying and meeting human needs (e.g. Gough, 2017), among other perspectives.

“empowerment” thus paradoxically provided a licence “to continue as before” (p. 324; see also Cornwall and Brock, 2005, p. 1046).

Silencing radical elements of concepts often says the most. The mainstreaming of “gender” into development discourse involved a “resounding silence around words such as *feminism* and *feminist*,” according to Smyth (2007, p. 583), who wrote: “real women and men, power and conflict all disappear behind bland talk of ‘gender’” (see also Cornwall, 2007, p. 474). Similarly, while “poverty reduction” could be understood to require redistributing power and resources, the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers of international development institutions remained silent on power – notably, pervasive inequalities in market power – leading critics to see them as tools that preserved the economic interests of the powerful (Cornwall and Brock, 2005; Craig and Porter, 2003, p. 55).

Transformation of radical challenger concepts into mainstreamed buzzwords typically involves depoliticization, which can be followed by re-politicization in the service of more conservative ideological projects. “Participation,” for example, had to be “purged of all the threatening elements” including any notion of social confrontation before it could serve a neoliberal project (Leal, 2007, pp. 543–544). In this process, politicized words are “spun into an apoliticized form that everyone can agree with,” resulting in “sanitised, consensual meanings” (Cornwall and Brock, 2005, pp. 1043, 1051). Indeed, many buzzwords “admit no negatives” and “evoke Good Things that no-one could possibly disagree with” (Cornwall, 2007, p. 472) – a characterization that, incidentally, fits “wellbeing” to a T. Such buzzwords are “intended to invite automatic approval” (Standing, 2007, p. 514); with their “feel-good factor” being a key element of their appeal (Cornwall, 2007, p. 475). Terms like participation, poverty reduction, and empowerment “connote warm and nice things, conferring on their users that goodness and rightness that development agencies need to assert the legitimacy to intervene in the lives of others” (Cornwall and Brock, 2005, p. 1045). Relatedly, many buzzwords have a post- or “trans-ideological” appeal, although analyzing specific uses of such words can reveal ideological commitments behind them (Cornwall, 2007; Fox, 2007, p. 663).

In addition, buzzwords often substitute for more challenging concepts that dominant narratives cannot so easily absorb. For example, “social capital” came to have “discursive power as a feel-good catch-all Good Thing” (Cornwall, 2007, p. 475). Although it can refer to almost any type of social relationship, in practice, conceptions of social capital have tended to avoid the state, class, labour unions, political parties, and political organizations (Fine, 2007, pp. 567–568). In contrast, other terms – e.g., redistribution in the context of development debates and degrowth in environmental debates (discussed below) – cannot be so easily purged of challenging meanings.

Relatedly, mainstreamed buzzwords allow for multiple agendas and for users to fill them with their own meanings. By sheltering multiple agendas, buzzwords provide “room for manoeuvre and space for contestation” (Cornwall, 2007, p. 474). Such ambiguity can be constructive in allowing concepts to do “boundary work” in “bridging discursive worlds and the actors who animate them” (Cornwall, 2007, p. 474), as argued with respect to “sustainability” (Scoones, 2007), a concept discussed in more detail below. However, this same ambiguity makes words “vulnerable to appropriation for political agendas that are far from those that the social movements that popularised their use had in mind” (Cornwall, 2007, p. 474). Adoption of ambiguous buzzwords also allows organizations and other political actors to appeal to those with more radical perspectives, suggesting a commitment to transformative goals, while simultaneously reassuring others that no radical change is forthcoming (Moore, 2001, p. 323). The multiple potential meanings of buzzwords do, however, mean that their appropriation by dominant actors is never complete; possibilities remain to hold onto or recuperate more radical meanings.

While mainstream actors’ adoption of concepts with radical origins might suggest progress and a step in “changing the terrain of discourse” (Cornwall, 2007, p. 480), substantive change in policy and practice is

often not the end result. Leal (2007, p. 540) characterizes the incorporation of new buzzwords into development discourse as reinventing “discourse and practice enough to make people believe that a change has, in fact, taken place and to make these adjustments while maintaining intact the basic structure of the status quo on which the development industry depends.” The result of such maneuvers can be a “thin veneer over... business as usual” (Cornwall, 2007, p. 475). Similarly, Moore (2001, p. 323) characterized the World Bank’s adoption of “empowerment” – which it linked to the feel-good concept of “community” to create “community empowerment” – as “cheap talk ... that one can happily say in the knowledge that it will have no significant consequences.”

As for concepts with a more direct ecological connection, a voluminous literature on “sustainable development” and the related term “sustainability” exists. Fully reviewing that literature is beyond this article’s scope, but one can point to some of the same issues evident with other buzzwords. Scholars have traced sustainable development’s evolution from an oppositional concept to one that “now takes the capitalist economy pretty much for granted” (Dryzek, 2022, p.158). Carruthers (2001) writes that in the 1970s, growing awareness of the environmental limits to growth, impossibility of universalizing mass-consumption lifestyles, and failures of growth-oriented “development” to benefit the poor majority prompted the search for sustainable alternatives, under various names such as grassroots, eco-, or people-centred development. Meanwhile, leaders of Southern nations demanded a more equitable New International Economic Order. The Brundtland report (WCED, 1987) responded to such challenges by acknowledging environmental limits, but suggested that improved technology and social organization could push back limits and enable a new era of economic growth in line with the global South’s legitimate development aspirations, while calling for greater emphasis on equity (inter- and intra-generational) and poverty reduction. Indeed, it identified poverty as a driver of environmental degradation. By the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, economic growth had been “recast from villain to hero” (Carruthers, 2001, p.99), as it promised to eliminate the poverty that undermined people’s capacities to use resources sustainably. How best to deliver that sustainable growth? The dominant thinking of the day pointed to a lean state, free trade and an export orientation, competitive markets, and expansion of global capital flows. For many governments, international organizations, and business leaders, the quest for sustainable development had become another justification for neoliberal globalization.

With reference to later developments in the context of global climate governance, Klinsky and Gupta (2019) analyze the “taming” of sustainable development’s equity dimension, which has shifted from addressing systemic global inequities toward capacity building in developing countries. Meanwhile, Dauvergne (2016, p.387) argues that multinational corporations have assimilated the narrative of sustainability, “turning what was once a powerful critical discourse of environmentalism into a strategy to expand business...”.

These concept’s meanings and uses continue to be contested and to evolve. In recent years, there has been growing reference to “inclusive green growth” – or “sustainable and inclusive growth” (e.g. McKinsey and Company, 2023) – as “the pathway to sustainable development” (World Bank, 2012). These formulations continue to sideline post-growth ideas, but aim to smooth neoliberalism’s rough edges – one can debate by how much – through broader access to growth’s benefits. While many critical observers lament the failure to put global development onto an ecologically or socially sustainable path since Brundtland (e.g. Meadowcroft et al., 2019, pp. 2–3), not all are prepared to abandon sustainable development and sustainability as concepts, seeing potential for them to take on or recover more potentially transformative meanings or usefully bridge boundaries between different discourses (e.g. Dauvergne, 2016; Scoones, 2007). Indeed, growth-critical approaches to sustainable development, although far from dominant, persist in the debate (e.g. Borowy, 2019).

Other ecological concepts including “planetary boundaries” and

“Anthropocene” have also been critiqued as buzzwords, with Kelman (2024) emphasizing these concepts’ limits in generating ethical, evidence-based action, while suggesting that we now live in the “buzzwordcene.” Meanwhile, the concept of “sufficiency” – which, as seen above, is used by post-growth WE supporters, but has arguably not yet made enough mainstream inroads to merit buzzword status – has also taken on a variety of different meanings, some of which offer a more limited challenge to a growth-oriented capitalism than others (Fuchs et al., 2023).

With such experiences in mind, there is no reason to expect a priori that endorsement of a “wellbeing economy” by governments and international institutions would imply acceptance of a post-growth agenda, regardless of the post-growth aspirations of many of the concept’s supporters. One lesson from development discourse is the need to look beyond what one thinks or hopes a concept to mean and examine what is actually done in its name, i.e., to look at “actual social practices rather than wishful thinking” (see also Cornwall, 2007, p. 481; Rist, 2007, p. 490). Does a rhetorical emphasis on participation, empowerment, or poverty reduction – or, for that matter, wellbeing – lead to “real differences in practice” or is it “simply the appropriation of nice-sounding words to dress up ‘business as usual’” (Cornwall and Brock, 2005)?

4. The wellbeing economy meets the political mainstream

Many points in the previous section are also evident in the WE’s move from the political margins into the mainstream. Some leading WE advocates have argued in this journal that the WE concept has much greater potential to bring post-growth ideas and policies into the political mainstream than ideas such as degrowth that have had negligible influence on policymaking to date (Fioramonti et al., 2022). Reminiscent of the “feel-good factor” of buzzwords, these writers highlight the WE’s use of “a ‘positive language’ of abundance, wellness and conviviality, with a view to building a forward-looking narrative of opportunities for human creativity, thus inspiring collective action and making governments more amenable to policy change.” This positive language contrasts with more austere post-growth approaches that “project an image of contraction, parsimony and deprivation” (Fioramonti et al., 2022, p. 2). In addition, the “WE’s language and concepts tend to be more adaptable to different social and economic contexts” (p. 1), with applicability both to the global North and South: “Unlike degrowth, the concept of wellbeing ... resonates the world over...” (p. 4). While using an appealing language has obvious benefits, these statements are consistent with the tendency of buzzwords to invite automatic approval and, as discussed, “evoke Good Things that no-one could possibly disagree with” (Cornwall, 2007, p. 472).⁶ Indeed, it is hard to be against wellbeing – at least until one sees the meanings people give to it, which may be very different from what one had in mind.

Another factor cited to explain the WE’s potential political appeal is wellbeing’s perceived “post-ideological” character (Fioramonti et al., 2022, p. 3), again reflecting a quality of many buzzwords. However, wellbeing is only post-ideological or trans-ideological – with near-universal appeal across ideological categories – to the extent that it is purged of its more contentious redistributive and post-growth elements. If wellbeing is part of a post-growth vision that is not silent about the need to break with capitalism’s relentless expansionary drive and redistribute resources, power, and ownership to enable all to meet basic needs and live good lives in a non-growing economy, then ideology is back on the table. At the same time, wellbeing’s post-ideological shell can be filled with other ideological content; it is a relatively progressive concept in the hands of WEGo nations, as discussed below, but it could

⁶ Based on Finland’s WE debate, Jalonen and Korhonen (2021) similarly identify a “risk that wellbeing becomes a formless virtue that is impossible to oppose.”

also be linked to a neoliberal agenda.

Concerns over neoliberal cooptation have been raised, for example, in response to calls for the state's role to shift from "wealth creation" to "wellbeing creation" based on evidence that social relationships and mental and physical health are the keys to happiness (Clark et al., 2016). While such ideas sound broadly consistent with a post-growth WE vision, specific proposals in Britain to shift the state's focus to mental health treatments generated fears that, in a political climate of austerity, they could be used to justify neglect of poverty and other societal causes of misery (Gayle, 2016). That, of course, is not the world most WE proponents seek, but it is not hard to imagine some cost-cutting governments being tempted by that combination. Similarly, Davies (2015) pointed to the emergence in neoliberal Britain of an atomized and depoliticized understanding of wellbeing that sought to address unhappiness by changing individuals' behaviour and thoughts rather than transforming society. Followers of British politics may also remember that Conservative David Cameron was both a proponent of focusing "not just on GDP but on GWB – general wellbeing" (Stratton, 2010) and a leader who implemented harsh austerity.

The danger or neoliberal cooptation has been more evident with the word "wellbeing" than with the full term "wellbeing economy," which to date has been embraced mainly by "progressive" centre-left governments. However, with recent electoral shifts to the right in WEGo nations Finland and New Zealand, one can wonder whether a more neoliberal or otherwise right-leaning variation of a WE awaits. In today's political climate, one can imagine limits on immigration, for example, being linked to wellbeing, i.e. the wellbeing of those already considered part of a given national community.

So far, the greater danger from a post-growth perspective is abandonment of the WE's growth-critical content as it is mainstreamed. One key mainstream breakthrough is the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's WE work. Fioramonti et al. (2022, p. 5) highlight an OECD (2019, p. 4) working paper on "The Economy of Wellbeing," which pointed to wellbeing's increasing relevance "as a 'compass' for policy...." Meanwhile, OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría (2019) told a WEGo symposium that the organization was acting "to help countries build 'economies of well-being'." Indeed, the WEGo network was launched at the OECD's World Forum in South Korea in 2018, prompting Fioramonti et al. (2022, pp. 2, 4) to write that it "is the first time that a variety of national governments, also with the support of an intergovernmental institution like the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development ... openly unite on the basis of a post-growth agenda." The problem here is assuming that the OECD – and the governments – share a post-growth understanding of a WE; in fact, the organization explicitly and unambiguously links wellbeing to economic growth. According to the OECD Secretary General, the "Economy of Well-Being" highlights the need for "a growth model that is equitable and sustainable from the outset" (Gurría, 2019). The OECD also broadcasted its growth-oriented vision in the above-mentioned working paper's full title: "The Economy of Well-being: Creating opportunities for people's well-being and economic growth." That paper "defines an economy of well-being around the idea of a 'virtuous circle' in which individual well-being and long-term economic growth are mutually reinforcing" (OECD, 2019, p. 4).

Similar ideas have been embraced in the EU. The economy of well-being was a major theme during Finland's presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2019 (MSAH, 2020). The Council's endorsement of the concept came with the understanding – shared by the OECD and Finland – that wellbeing reinforces economic growth: "Taking wellbeing into account in all policies is vitally important to the Union's economic growth, productivity, long-term fiscal sustainability and societal stability" (Council of the European Union, 2019a).

Other WE formulations emphasize neither critique nor pursuit of economic growth – shifting the focus to issues such as introducing and using other indicators in addition to GDP, which, as discussed in more detail below, does not necessarily imply deprioritizing economic

growth. A report for the Nordic Council of Ministers offers this definition: a "Wellbeing Economy means allowing subjective and objective wellbeing indicators to inform government priorities and/or guide policy decisions." In other words, in a WE, "governments must 'go beyond measurement' and give wellbeing metrics an active role in government" (Birkjær et al., 2021, p. 14; see also WWM, 2023). Meanwhile, the World Health Organization's Geneva Charter for Wellbeing (WHO, 2021) emphasizes the "urgency of creating sustainable 'well-being societies'" (p. 1). The charter contains numerous terms reminiscent of the developmental buzzword debate, such as "empowerment, inclusivity, equity, and meaningful participation" (p. 2), alongside an emphasis on the full range of social determinants of health and health inequities (pp. 2, 5). Notable for this article's purposes is the absence of the words "growth" or "GDP," other than a call for "[n]ew indicators of success, beyond gross domestic product" (p. 2). While silence about economic growth might in some contexts be a step forward for a post-growth agenda given that GDP growth has often been seen as the end goal – and social and economic policies must often be justified through their contribution to such growth – it could also be interpreted as avoiding discussion of a core goal of more radical WE formulations.

Of all the examples of the WE's mainstream inroads to date, most significant is the creation of the Wellbeing Economy Governments. A key lesson from development buzzwords is to go beyond wishful thinking about a concept's impact to examine whether its use leads to actual changes in practice. With that in mind, we turn to the WEGo experience.

5. WEGo for growth

Despite some impressions to the contrary, WEGo nations have not moved beyond pursuit of economic growth, nor have they pledged to do so. All five WEGo members, plus non-member participant Canada, openly express their commitment to continued economic growth even if they also acknowledge that GDP growth is not all that matters. For more details, see Hayden and Dasilva (2022) and Hayden (2024); some highlights are included in Box 1 and below.

Behind the shared pursuit of economic growth in all WEGo nations (Box 1), some variation is evident in the approach to growth. The Scottish Government's (2023) desire not only for economic growth, but faster growth is embedded in its beyond-GDP indicator set, the National Performance Framework. The framework's economic-growth indicator compares the latest year's GDP growth with the previous three-year average; GDP growth exceeding that average is deemed an "improving" situation. Finland puts strong emphasis on the aforementioned virtuous circle of wellbeing and economic growth, which are "closely interlinked and mutually reinforcing" (Mattila, 2019; see also, e.g., MSAH, 2021). Wellbeing can thus be understood as "capital for economic growth" and, consequently, "capital for future wellbeing" (Ahokas and Rouvinen-Wilenius, 2019).

More interesting, in post-growth terms, is Iceland, where the coalition government's prioritization of GDP growth (Box 1) clashes with some growth-critical statements by Prime Minister Jakobsdóttir, an ecological feminist. For example, at a WEGo workshop, Jakobsdóttir (2019b) spoke critically of the existing economic model "under which constant growth is not only essential, but also considered positive no matter how it is achieved and at what costs." She pointed to costs including increased inequality, the climate crisis, and "a cycle of wasteful consumption where we need to produce in order to get by and we need to consume so that we can produce more," adding that the "Well-being Economy Governments project differs from this thinking." Reasons for the gap between such statements⁸ and her government's pro-growth priorities are discussed below.

⁸ For other examples, see Hayden and Dasilva (2022, p. 11).

Box 1

Selected Pro-Growth Statements of WEGo Members and Non-Member Participant, Canada.

Canada

“Recognizing the importance of factors beyond GDP does not imply a reduced focus on investing in a strong economy Increasing Canada’s GDP through productivity growth, labour market participation, and investment is crucial”

– Department of Finance (2021, p. 410)

“... the Quality of Life Framework⁷ is about supporting inclusive and sustainable growth ...”.

– Statistics Canada (2023, p. 5)

Finland

“The economy of wellbeing. It’s based on the simple idea that our wellbeing makes our economy grow! And the other way around!”

– Video produced by Finland during its Council of the European Union (2019, 0:43) presidency.

“Strengthening the reciprocal relationship between wellbeing policy and economic growth...”.

– One recommendation of Finland’s Economy of Wellbeing Action Plan (MSAH, 2024, p. 22).

Iceland

“We are going to grow to greater prosperity . . . Growth and prosperity are the government’s guiding lights in economic affairs.”

– The first substantive commitment in the coalition government platform agreement, which refers to Iceland as a wellbeing economy (Government of Iceland, 2021, pp. 5, 58).

“The [WEGo] network is committed to shaping a vision for enhancing wellbeing and inclusive growth ...”.

– Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdóttir (2019a).

New Zealand

“... while economic growth is important—and something we will continue to pursue—it alone does not guarantee improvements to our living standards.”

– Prime Minister Ardern, introducing the first wellbeing budget (NZ Government, 2019, p. 2).

“Sustainable economic growth is an important contributor, but many factors determine people’s wellbeing.”

– Main text of first wellbeing budget (NZ Government, 2019, p. 5).

Scotland

“... yes, economic growth matters—it is important—but it is not all that is important.”

– First Minister Sturgeon’s (2019) Ted Talk on “why governments should prioritize well-being.”

“... we aim to deliver economic growth that significantly outperforms the last decade, so that the Scottish economy is more prosperous, more productive and more internationally competitive.”

– National Strategy for Economic Transformation (Scottish Government, 2022, p. 4), which sets out a plan to achieve “our vision of building a wellbeing economy” (p. 7).

Wales

“... we would certainly want to see, a growing economy—a cake that grows so that you can share out the proceeds of growth...”.

– First Minister Mark Drakeford (Welsh Parliament, 2023, par. 51).

“... this Government’s mission is: economic growth in a sustainable manner, and a genuine fair-work nation.”

– Economy Minister Vaughan Gething (Welsh Parliament, 2022a, par. 70).

⁷ Canada uses the term “quality of life” over “wellbeing.” The framework is Canada’s beyond-GDP indicator dashboard.

Most intriguing is Wales, where continued commitment to economic growth remains clear (Box 1; see also, e.g., [Welsh Government, 2023a, 2023b](#), p. 22); however, some elements of its WE project move further, albeit inconsistently, in a post-growth direction. These include notable silences on growth in *some* government documents where one might usually expect full-throated devotion to the growth paradigm,⁹ as well as in the country's innovative Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, which aims for a "prosperous Wales," but not necessarily a growing one ([Welsh Government, 2015](#)). Wales also stands out for the range and significance of policies reflecting an ethic of sufficiency, which do not in themselves represent a move beyond growth, but help expand practices consistent with a post-growth future. Among them are policies to establish a default 20-mph urban speed limit, discourage second-home ownership, encourage re-use, repair, and sharing of goods, and – most notably – curb road-network expansion as part of a sufficiency-oriented shift in transport policy that includes actions to reduce the need to travel and shift to more sustainable transport modes ([Welsh Government, 2021](#)).¹⁰ However, when British Prime Minister Liz Truss (2022) pointed to such policies and accused Welsh First Minister Mark Drakeford of belonging to an "anti-growth coalition," he responded by defending his pro-growth credentials, boasting of faster economic growth in Wales than any other UK nation, and attacking Truss's own "disastrous" growth record ([Welsh Parliament, 2022b](#); see details in [Hayden, 2024](#)).

Although Wales appears to go furthest in a post-growth direction, all WEGo nations have taken some limited post-growth steps, despite their continued pursuit of economic growth. Moving beyond GDP to measure wellbeing and prosperity is not sufficient to move beyond growth, but it is necessary. All WEGo nations acknowledge GDP's limits as a wellbeing indicator and have recently introduced more comprehensive measurement frameworks – or, in Finland, plan to do so. However, WEGos do not ignore GDP to the extent post-growth theorists would like to see (e.g. [van den Bergh, 2011](#), p. 888). Their broader measurement frameworks still include GDP or related indicators¹¹ and, more fundamentally, economic growth remains a political priority, as discussed above. Most WEGo indicator frameworks also risk obscuring the global ecological impacts of their countries' growth and consumption by focusing on narrow indicators of national environmental conditions and territorial emissions. Again, Wales goes further than others by including measures of consumption-based GHGs and global (i.e. ecological) footprint.¹²

Limited movement also exists, at least in some WEGo nations, toward the de-prioritization of GDP growth that post-growth theorists have argued is necessary in high-income nations to respect planetary boundaries ([Corlet Walker et al., 2021](#), p. 2; e.g. [Koch, 2020](#), p. 123). If wellbeing becomes the overarching goal, then GDP growth is

downgraded (at least conceptually) to one means among others to achieve it – a step evident, for example, in statements from New Zealand (Box 1). WEGos have also taken some steps in aligning policy with the end goal of wellbeing, as in New Zealand's wellbeing budgets, Iceland's establishment of wellbeing priorities to guide budget allocations and fiscal strategy, and, perhaps most significantly, the Welsh Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, which institutionalizes a commitment to an integrated, long-term approach to wellbeing. Relegating growth to a means rather than an end could also open space for more emphasis on other means (e.g. greater equality and a stronger sense of community belonging, social support, and fairness) that can achieve wellbeing in less environmentally impactful ways. However, the impact of this development has been limited given the continued commitment to and perceived dependency on economic growth as a means to achieve wellbeing. Finally, although a post-growth transition is not the goal, there has been some experimentation in WEGo nations with policies that frequently appear in post-growth thinking about maintaining employment and economic security without growth, such as work-time reduction, basic income, and variations on a job guarantee ([Hayden and Dasilva, 2022](#); [Hayden, 2024](#); [Vogel et al., 2024](#)).

Tackling growth dependency is – in addition to "measuring what matters" and acting "to align government policy as fully as possible with the goal of achieving societal wellbeing rather than with the narrow pursuit of GDP growth" – the third step that [Jackson \(2020\)](#) identifies in moving beyond growth. There is little sign that WEGos have acknowledged this challenge, let alone acted with the intention of addressing it. Much more evident is concern over maintaining and even accelerating growth rates to help address key intermediate goals, such as employment provision and financing state activities including wellbeing-enhancing welfare-state programs. (Enabling profitable investment opportunities for business is, of course, also a motivation for growth-oriented policies.)

Concern over the welfare state's financial sustainability stands out particularly strongly in the Nordic WEGo nations, Finland and Iceland. Alarms have been raised about aging populations and projections of slower labour-productivity and GDP growth, leading the [Ministry of Finance \(2022, p. 23\)](#) in Finland to conclude that "in the longer term general government finances are not on a sustainable base." Similar worries exist in Iceland ([Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs, 2021](#)). Such concerns prompted Prime Minister [Marin \(2022\)](#) to tell Finland's Parliament that "now is the time to strengthen the conditions for sustainable economic growth" as it "plays an important role in strengthening public finances," while the [Government of Iceland \(2021, p. 26\)](#) promised that the "growth potential of the economy will be boosted..." Dependence on growth to maintain existing institutions that have delivered relatively high wellbeing helps to explain the gap between Prime Minister [Jakobsdóttir's](#) critical remarks on the growth economy and her government's prioritization of growth.¹³

Overall, the WEGo experience shows limited post-growth elements within a broader context of continued pursuit of growth. As such, it could be characterized as, at most, a weak post-growth approach ([Hayden and Dasilva, 2022](#)). [Mason and Büchs \(2023\)](#) similarly find disparities between WEAll's radical narratives – on moving beyond GDP as a wellbeing indicator, pursuit of economic growth, and transforming capitalism – and WEGos' more limited reformism. This is not to say that the WE is only an empty buzzword in WEGo nations at this point. It has been accompanied by some strengthening of social and environmental policies (although not necessarily enough to satisfy critics) within a project of sustainable and inclusive growth. Its limited post-growth elements in practice could conceivably become more extensive over time –

⁹ These documents include the Programme for Government, annual statements and press releases announcing the government's legislative program, and the government's Annual Reports outlining progress toward wellbeing objectives and program commitments ([Hayden, 2024](#)).

¹⁰ One could also interpret policies such as curbing road building and expanding active and public transit as a matter of changing the satisfiers of core needs (see, e.g. [Gough, 2017](#), pp. 48–56, 159). Growth of satisfiers that meet needs and generate wellbeing in less ecologically harmful ways, while reducing reliance on ecologically damaging satisfiers, is quite consistent with, and arguably central to, a WE. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this idea.

¹¹ New Zealand's Living Standards Framework does not include GDP, but "income, consumption, and wealth" is one domain, with indicators for household expenditure and disposable income. The country's first Wellbeing Report states that wellbeing "encompasses aspects of material prosperity such as income and GDP" ([Treasury, 2022](#), p. 6, see also 96, 97–99). Similarly in Wales, GDP is not a "national indicator," but Gross Disposable Household Income (GDHI) per head is. Annual *Wellbeing of Wales* reports put considerable emphasis on economic growth, output as measured by gross value added (GVA), and GDHI in the section on a "prosperous Wales" (e.g. [Welsh Government, 2023b](#), p. 22).

¹² Scotland partially addresses this issue with a carbon footprint indicator.

¹³ Other factors include Iceland's ideologically-diverse governing coalition with two more conservative parties outweighing the prime minister's Left-Green Movement (2024), but even the latter party expresses a commitment to "sustainable growth."

in which case, one could interpret the evolution as a process of gradually relinquishing growth-oriented discourse and practice¹⁴ – but the WE is for now far from the post-growth breakthrough that many have sought.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The wellbeing economy – and wellbeing, more generally – are potentially the quintessential buzzwords: feel-good ideas that almost all can agree with, which users can fill with their own disparate meanings, and which can shelter very different political agendas.

Although one cannot blame a concept for all the ways that it is used by political actors with their own agendas, which may be quite different from what some supporters originally intended and may include deliberate attempts to blunt a concept's radical edge, the WE does have a particular vulnerability to cooptation given the broad appeal and amorphous nature of wellbeing.¹⁵ Unlike other post-growth concepts such as degrowth, a WE can be embraced both by radical critics of a growth economy and by those who remain unquestionably committed to growth. Relatedly, adoption of the WE concept by governments and international organizations can allow some observers to believe that a commitment has been made to a transformative post-growth agenda, even as leaders of those entities reassure others that economic growth remains a priority. (On this point, it seems to be less a matter of deception by mainstream leaders than some post-growth economy advocates hearing what they hope to hear.)

Just as use of the language of “empowerment” by major development agencies did not mean commitment to progressive social transformation, today's embrace of the “wellbeing economy” by governments and international organizations does not imply a post-growth conversion. Moreover, a WE risks becoming a watered-down buzzword that offers, like the terms coopted by global development organizations, little more than a “thin veneer over ... business as usual” (Cornwall, 2007, p. 475). Concern over this prospect appears to be growing among WE advocates, with criticism of “wellbeing washing” – i.e., use of wellbeing language “without genuinely transforming policy” (Abdallah et al., 2024, p. 199; see also Black, 2023) – along with criteria to distinguish a “genuine” WE from “window dressing” (McCartney et al., 2023).

Worse scenarios than watering down are possible from a post-growth perspective. A WE could further legitimize pursuit of economic growth, based on the argument that growth is needed to generate employment

and revenues for social spending, which are essential for wellbeing. Rather than growth for growth's sake – which is increasingly critiqued today – it would be growth with a higher purpose, i.e., an indispensable means to achieve the ultimate end of wellbeing. Indeed, the idea that growth and wellbeing are mutually reinforcing is already prominently voiced by the OECD (2019, p. 4), Finland (Box 1), and others.

I do not see the previous points as sufficient grounds for post-growth advocates to abandon the WE concept, which, in WEGo nations, has shown some promise in enabling *limited* steps toward a post-growth economy. These include displacing GDP growth from its undisputed status as the overriding societal objective in some WEGo nations (although GDP growth remains at least a high-priority means to wellbeing, if not still an end goal), moving beyond GDP alone toward more comprehensive measures of economic and social performance, and action to integrate those indicators into policymaking. WEGo nations have also introduced sufficiency-oriented policies of various kinds that could be expanded, with Wales standing out for initiatives such as a sufficiency-oriented transport policy that curtails most roadbuilding. Indeed, Wales, with its groundbreaking Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, shows more hints of post-growth possibilities than other WEGos (Hayden, 2024). A need nevertheless exists for strategies to contest the WE's dilution and uphold a transformative post-growth WE vision. The ideas that follow are not full answers, but hopefully can contribute to debate over how to respond.

In a previous article (Hayden and Dasilva, 2022), we argued that to take the WE further – from a “weak” to “strong post-growth” perspective that no longer pursues economic growth – it is necessary to link it to the difficult project of overcoming contemporary societies' growth dependency. WEGo nations and other WE supporters could start by acknowledging growth dependency as a problem and support research into better understanding and overcoming it (Jackson, 2020). Particularly important is the further exploration of policies to decouple employment – and economic security more generally – from growth. Also important is the challenging question of reducing the welfare state's growth dependency (Corlet Walker et al., 2021). This requires action both to enhance the supply of revenues through redistributive taxation (and potentially more public ownership of enterprises, among other forms of more equitably distributed ownership) and limit demand for public spending through a preventative approach to social and environmental problems – an idea that can build on some existing practice in WEGo nations (for details, see Hayden and Dasilva, 2022, pp. 13–14). Tackling growth dependency also requires confronting related obstacles to a radical, post-growth WE that can reinforce this dependency, such as the neoclassical economics training of policymakers, short-termist and siloed policymaking, and opposition from vested interests (Mason and Büchs, 2023). In addition, experience shows that critics will attack those perceived as being “anti-growth” – even, as noted above, in Wales where the government has remained committed to growth (Hayden, 2024). Proponents of a post-growth vision will need a persuasive response and a compelling counter-narrative to defend themselves from such attacks.

In addition to addressing such obstacles, analysis in this article suggests a need for discursive strategies to help prevent erasure of the WE's post-growth elements. The development buzzwords literature offers some suggestions relevant to supporters of a post-growth WE. Cornwall (2007) notes that meanings of words depend on the context and other words surrounding them; anchoring words to particular political projects thus requires help from other words. Drawing on Laclau's concept of “chains of equivalence,” she notes that “the more words in the chain, the more the meaning of any of those words comes to depend on the other words in the chain” (Cornwall, 2007, p. 482). Possibilities thus exist to maintain or recover the radical meaning of terms by using them in constellations with other words that link them to a transformative project. For example, Cornwall points out that empowerment means one thing in a constellation with terms such as good governance, accountability, and results-based management, and something quite different

¹⁴ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting that the move beyond growth-oriented discourse and practice could be seen as a process. One example of a step in that process comes from a non-WEGo nation, the Netherlands, where the research offices of the two main left-leaning parties, Labour (PvdA) and the GreenLeft (GroenLinks), produced a joint discussion paper on political cooperation and a shared agenda (S Jongers and Thijssen, 2023). The document identifies a “green wellbeing economy” (p.2) as a cornerstone of a shared vision: “an economy in which not economic growth and the highest possible corporate profits, but broadly shared human well-being and a balanced relationship with nature are paramount” (p.4). The document proposes saying “goodbye to economic growth as an end in itself” (p.9). While still allowing room for economic growth as a means to achieve wellbeing, such a formulation is a step beyond a conventional prioritization of GDP growth. See Moraal (2023) for an English-language overview.

¹⁵ Besides the primary concept of wellbeing, critics might argue that some secondary concepts underlying a WE are too easily coopted by the mainstream status quo as they do not go far enough in breaking the grip of conventional economic reasoning, as suggested by an anonymous reviewer. Examples could include human and natural capital, or the use of monetary valuations to calculate the full range of external costs and benefits (e.g. Fioramonti et al., 2022). However, other key statements of a post-growth WE vision do not rely on such concepts (e.g. EU Wellbeing Economy Coalition, 2023), so it would be inappropriate to see them as key elements of a WE vision. Such differences in the secondary concepts used by WE supporters further illustrate a WE's potential to take on a multiplicity of meanings and be linked to very different political or intellectual projects.

alongside solidarity, rights, and social justice. The latter three terms could also be useful elements of a constellation of words highlighting the wellbeing economy's progressive social agenda, while the WE's post-growth character could be emphasized by consistently defining it and speaking of it in a constellation with terms such as post-growth or beyond growth, and related concepts such as sufficiency, living well within limits, and planetary boundaries. Any WE discussion that is silent on such issues risks remaining on conventional, growth-oriented terrain, which is the default setting for politics and policy.¹⁶ Criteria to identify a "genuine" WE could also potentially help in this process.¹⁷

Might other terms be more effective in broadening support for a post-growth vision without sacrificing the challenging ideas at its core? Full assessment of that debate is beyond this article's scope. Suffice it to say that, alongside key disadvantages, the controversial deployment of a "missile word" like degrowth (Demaria et al., 2013, p. 191) – which critics maintain is a missile that "backfires" (Drews and Antal, 2016) – has the benefit of being much harder to assimilate into a political project offering minimal change to the growth paradigm. That is not to rule out the possibility that, in some contexts, soft-peddalling the message and terminology might be tactically expedient (e.g. to expand support for interim steps such as adoption of beyond-GDP measurement frameworks or win policy battles against the forces of climate denial and delay). However, the risk that soft-peddalling will evolve into silencing of a post-growth message needs to be taken seriously and countered; indeed, there is plenty of evidence that such silencing is already happening in the understandings of a wellbeing economy that have gained most ground in the political mainstream.

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Anders Hayden: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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¹⁶ While there is an argument for simply not talking about growth and focusing on addressing social and ecological challenges, it is hard to see how we can begin to solve the difficult challenges of growth dependency without speaking about the goal of moving beyond growth.

¹⁷ The criteria proposed by McCartney et al. (2023) do not explicitly emphasize a "genuine" WE's post-growth character, but include elements that would contribute to a post-growth transition.

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