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EDITED BY

Wolfgang Sachs,
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REVIEWED BY

Friedrich Hinterberger,
University of Applied Arts
Vienna, Austria
David Barkin,
Metropolitan Autonomous
University, Mexico

*CORRESPONDENCE

Anders Hayden
anders.hayden@dal.ca

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The wellbeing economy: Possibilities and limits in bringing sufficiency from the margins into the mainstream

Anders Hayden^{1*} and Clay Dasilva²

¹Department of Political Science, Dalhousie University, Halifax, NS, Canada, ²The Balsillie School of International Affairs, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, ON, Canada

The idea of sufficiency faces great obstacles in contemporary political economies in which production and consumption growth has long been considered imperative. Despite evidence supporting calls for a sufficiency-oriented, post-growth approach to environmental challenges, only pro-growth environmental perspectives have found significant mainstream political support until now. However, one recent formulation that has a strong affinity with a sufficiency approach—a wellbeing economy—has found growing support among mainstream political actors including governments and international organizations. Does the growing support for a wellbeing economy represent the long-sought breakthrough for a sufficiency-oriented, post-growth environmental approach? To help answer this question, we conduct case studies of New Zealand, Scotland, and Iceland—the three founders of the Wellbeing Economy Governments (WEGo). These nations have (to varying degrees) taken steps to downplay the centrality of economic growth and instead highlight wellbeing as the ultimate goal. They have also moved “beyond GDP” by introducing new wellbeing measurements and using them in policymaking. However, movement in a post-growth direction is limited by continuing dependence on economic growth to achieve intermediate goals, such as employment creation and provision of welfare state services, that are closely associated with the goal of wellbeing. We therefore characterize the emerging practice of the wellbeing economy as a “weak post-growth” approach. To become a “strong post-growth” perspective, it needs to be linked to a much more challenging project of disentangling contemporary societies’ dependence on economic growth. The article includes a discussion of ways that WEGo nations could contribute to addressing that considerable challenge and build on the sufficiency-oriented elements evident in the wellbeing economy.

KEYWORDS

wellbeing economy, sufficiency, post-growth economy, beyond GDP, growth dependency, welfare state, sustainable growth, degrowth

Introduction

Ecological debates have long pitted defenders of economic growth against advocates of post-growth approaches. On the pro-growth side, one finds mainstream formulations of sustainable development (WCED, 1987) and related ideas such as ecological modernization/eco-modernism (e.g., Mol et al., 2009; Asafu-Adjaye et al., 2015), green growth (e.g., OECD, 2011), green economy (e.g., UNEP, 2011), and sustainable and inclusive growth (e.g., European Commission, 2010; Jacobs and Mazzucato, 2016). Such pro-growth approaches emphasize the possibility of decoupling GDP growth from negative environmental impacts through improved technologies and greater ecological efficiency, while arguing that environmental policy can create opportunities for greater economic activity, profits, and jobs, with “first mover” advantages and greater competitiveness for countries and companies that lead the way (Jänicke and Jacob, 2004).

On the other side of the debate, post-growth approaches (e.g., Jackson, 2017; Victor, 2019) include calls for degrowth (e.g., Kallis et al., 2020; Hickel, 2021), a steady-state economy (Daly, 1996), and strong sustainable consumption (Lorek and Fuchs, 2019). Related concepts such as “doughnut economics” (Raworth, 2017) and a-growth (van den Bergh, 2011) do not see economic growth as a priority objective, but are agnostic about whether adequate action to address environmental challenges could still allow for some continued GDP growth. While post-growth approaches generally accept the possibilities for some activities and sectors (e.g., renewable energy, care-related activities) to expand, along with some role for technology and efficiency, they also see a centrally important role for sufficiency, i.e., the idea that “there can be enough and there can be too much” (Princen, 2005).

Alongside efficiency and consistency (i.e., technologies and production methods consistent with natural processes), sufficiency can be considered one of three key components of a comprehensive ecological strategy (Sachs and Santarius, 2007, pp. 158–165)—one that mainstream pro-growth approaches neglect. Sufficiency can be understood as “living well within limits” or having enough for a good life, but not consuming so much that it is ecologically excessive—that is, not consuming at a level that undermines possibilities for others, today and in the future, to also lead good lives (O’Neill et al., 2018; Fuchs, 2020; Hayden, 2020).

The concept of sufficiency is discussed in more detail elsewhere in this issue we briefly highlight two points relevant to the analysis that follows. “Enough” involves two thresholds: a minimum and a maximum (Spengler, 2016). Although this article focuses mainly on sufficiency with regard to the upper threshold—i.e., the need for the globe’s affluent consumers and consumer societies to limit consumption and production volumes—for those living with very little, sufficiency may require more consumption. This article also

emphasizes sufficiency at the macro-economic level, i.e., a critical perspective on GDP growth as a dominant societal goal and the search for post-growth alternatives. However, sufficiency can also involve efforts to limit specific products, practices, or sectors considered excessive due to their social or ecological impacts (Hayden, 2014a,b), or other manifestations of the modern emphasis on “faster,” “further,” and “more” (Sachs, 2001), and be pursued through a wide range of policies and actions that enable people to reduce specific forms of consumption (Schneidewind and Zahrnt, 2014; Darby and Fawcett, 2018; Toulouse and Attali, 2018; Hayden, 2020).

There is considerable evidence to support calls for a sufficiency-oriented, post-growth approach. Although these issues remain contested (e.g., Hausfather, 2021), the pro-growth project of decoupling economic growth from environmental impacts has produced limited results to date, falling short of what is needed to address climate change and other environment challenges (Parrique et al., 2019; Haberl et al., 2020; Jänicke, 2020; PwC, 2020; Wiedmann et al., 2020). However, until now, only pro-growth environmental perspectives have found significant mainstream political support—largely because they are consistent with the perceived political imperative of economic growth (Dryzek et al., 2003; Richters and Simoneit, 2019; Wiedmann et al., 2020), including the need for economic growth to generate adequate revenues for state expenditure (ranging from military needs to social spending), keep unemployment at bay, and most generally to maintain economic and social stability. Environmental reform efforts thus confront a “glass ceiling” as states must limit themselves to measures that do not inhibit economic growth, with an additional constraint relating to the legitimation imperative and the need to avoid “impinging on the quality of the citizens’ lifeworld” (Hausknost, 2020). The result is an unsatisfying impasse between politically viable but ecologically inadequate pro-growth perspectives on one side (Jänicke, 2020), and more ecologically sound but seemingly unachievable post-growth approaches on the other.

Some observers see a possible break in the impasse as one idea with roots in post-growth thinking and a strong affinity with a sufficiency approach—the concept of a wellbeing economy (WE)—has recently found a growing number of adherents among governments, international institutions, and other mainstream political actors (Fioramonti et al., 2022). One understanding of a WE is that it shifts the central goal from economic growth to the generation of human wellbeing in ecologically sustainable ways. In line with sufficiency-oriented thinking, many proponents of a wellbeing economy are critical of the limits of the project of decoupling economic growth from environmental impacts, as well as the limits of further consumption growth in generating wellbeing in already affluent societies, while emphasizing the need for an equitable distribution of income and wealth rather than hoping for economic growth to trickle down

(Fioramonti et al., 2022; WEAll, 2022a). Does the growing support for a wellbeing economy represent the long-sought breakthrough for a sufficiency-oriented, post-growth environmental approach? If not, how can the concept of a wellbeing economy be taken further so as to advance a post-growth environmental politics?

After explaining materials and methods used, the article will examine in more detail differing post- and pro-growth formulations of a wellbeing economy and inroads the idea has made into the political mainstream, before turning to case studies of three countries that have embraced the concept. The case studies examine changes in understandings and measurement of economic success, and policy initiatives related to a WE, with an emphasis on the degree to which post-growth and sufficiency elements are evident. The discussion that follows considers some ways that the WE could become a stronger post-growth concept, notably by engaging with the challenging task of lessening the growth dependency of contemporary societies.

Materials and methods

To examine the question of whether a wellbeing economy represents a long-sought breakthrough for a sufficiency-oriented, post-growth environmental approach, we conducted case studies of three countries—New Zealand, Scotland, and Iceland—that have committed to becoming wellbeing economies. The countries selected are the founding members of the Wellbeing Economy Governments (WEGo).¹ The case studies are based on an analysis of documents from the WEGo nations, with an emphasis on documents that help to assess the degree to which commitment to a wellbeing economy has affected government policy priorities and particularly the orientation toward economic growth. These include: speeches and opinion pieces by government leaders related to a WE, government budgets and related background documents, official documents outlining new “beyond GDP” wellbeing measurements, governing party policy statements, agreements on coalition government policy agendas, and—in the case of Scotland—a document specifically outlining the government’s economic transformation strategy to create a WE. In addition, we draw on existing academic research, NGO reports and other gray literature, and media articles on the WE experience in these countries. We focus mainly on governments to understand whether, in practice, a WE represents a post-growth, sufficiency-oriented perspective since governments are the key institutions capable of translating the abstract WE concept into concrete policy actions. To provide additional background, we also examined documents from non-governmental organizations

¹ As WEGo founders, they offer a slightly longer experience to examine as aspiring wellbeing economies than more recent members, Wales and Finland.

and international/EU institutions related to the more general debate on a wellbeing economy.

Background: Wellbeing economy meanings and inroads

Post-growth formulations

Similar to concepts such as sustainable development and democracy, a wellbeing economy is an idea with potential to find widespread support, although adherents may have quite different understandings of the term. We begin with understandings of the idea put forward by the main non-governmental proponent of the concept: the Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEAll), which was established in 2018 (Abrar, 2021, p. 163). WEAll (2022a) describes itself as: “a global collaboration of almost 200 organizations, alliances, movements and individuals working together to transform the economic system into one that delivers on five core needs for ecological and human wellbeing: dignity, connection, nature, fairness, and participation.” Its membership list includes many ecologically minded, civil-society organizations, including the Doughnut Economics Action Lab, European Environmental Bureau, GNH Center Bhutan, New Economics Foundation, Oxfam, Post-Growth Institute, The Club of Rome, and The Next System Project, among many others (WEAll, 2022b).

WEAll (2022a) provides 16 different “20–30 second descriptions” plus eight short phrases to characterize a WE, including:

- “A Wellbeing Economy is one that serves people and planet. It doesn’t focus on growth in economic terms—but instead, growth in human wellbeing, flourishing, environmental quality, which are more important than just money.”
- “A different economic system which prioritizes the wellbeing of people and the planet. At the moment, we are chasing economic growth—that is destroying the planet without delivering what we really need as humans. A Wellbeing Economy is aimed at changing this and delivering what we need, the first time around.”
- “Building a Wellbeing Economy is about transforming our economic system so that it delivers social justice on a healthy planet, the first time around rather than addressing societal issues after they take place.”

These particular statements highlight a transformative, post-growth vision along with emphases on social justice and a preventative approach toward social and ecological problems (themes we will return to below).

Similarly, Fioramonti et al. (2022), who have connections to WE-All, describe a WE as “an economy that pursues human

and ecological wellbeing instead of material growth” (p. 1). In the WE paradigm, “the goal is no longer growth, but balanced sufficiency, equity, and sustainability as drivers of wellbeing” (p. 5). While the WE approach “reject[s] any attempt at making conventional economic growth more socially or environmentally acceptable (as is the case with ‘inclusive’ or ‘green’ growth), it calls for completely refocusing the debate away from growth” (p. 3). The authors similarly criticize the SDG agenda, which still has economic growth at its center (p. 6).

The European Environmental Bureau and Oxfam Germany put forward their own post-growth WE vision, in which “all policies are framed in terms of human and ecological wellbeing, not in terms of economic growth” (EEB and Oxfam Germany, 2021, p. 8). Their WE approach emphasizes the need to tackle the “root causes” of exploitation: “the dependency on growth and associated material acceleration of the economy, the vicious circle of economic and political concentration of wealth and power and the perpetuation of exploitative structures, which allow costs to be shifted onto others” (p. 18). A WE thus involves: “a process of global dismantling of neocolonial structures and [countering] structural discrimination and racism,” “[d]emocratising the economy, dispersing economic and political power into the hands of the many rather than the few,” and “making the economic system independent of growth and thus allowing a reduction in material use” (p. 42). The goal of “reducing the fixation and dependence on growth” entails shifting “the political mindset away from simply growing GDP and global trade to aiming directly for the growth of wellbeing within planetary limits,” while related policy tasks include action to “[d]ecouple employment/work and social security systems from economic growth” (p. 47).

WWF’s European Policy Office has also called for Europe to embrace a post-growth vision of a “wellbeing economy beyond GDP” to guide recovery efforts after COVID-19 (Humphries et al., 2020). WWF highlights both the “limitations of GDP as the headline measure of progress” and the “fallacies behind ‘green and sustainable’ growth” (p. 9), calling for “an alternative model that goes beyond green growth” (p. 15). While some observers, as mentioned, have criticized the continued focus on economic growth in the UN Sustainable Development Goals, WWF calls on the EU to adopt a WE strategy “with the SDGs acting as a guiding tool” (p. 6). Among its recommendations are for the EU to use the European Semester to track progress using a new wellbeing measurement framework, while replacing the goal of “sustainable growth” (pp. 26–27).

Inroads in the political mainstream

Finding support in ecologically-minded NGO circles for a post-growth WE vision is one thing, but some leading WE advocates have argued that the wellbeing economy concept is also the most effective way to bring post-growth ideas and

policies into the political mainstream (Fioramonti et al., 2022). They identify numerous similarities between a WE and other sufficiency-oriented and post-growth approaches, including degrowth, but argue that there are important differences in terms of political appeal: “Both the WE and degrowth agree that material production and consumption cannot grow forever on a finite planet and that wellbeing can improve while reducing GDP. Yet, ... the degrowth approach has not yet had much success in influencing policy making” (pp. 3–4).

The WE concept has key political advantages over other post-growth approaches, Fioramonti et al. (2022) argue, including a more “positive and forward-looking” language: “unlike other critiques of the growth economy that project an image of contraction, parsimony and deprivation, the WE uses 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” (pp. 2, 5). Furthermore, they argue that the WE’s language and concepts are “more adaptable to different social and economic contexts” than those of other post-growth approaches (p. 1), having relevance not only in high-income nations but also in the global South: “Unlike degrowth, the concept of wellbeing, in its multidimensionality and simplicity, has no boundaries and requires no disclaimers: it resonates the world over” (p. 4). The potentially broad political appeal of a WE is also linked, according to the authors, to the general perception of wellbeing as a “post-ideological” concept (p. 3).

Fioramonti et al. (2022, p. 4) note that the “most striking example of the WE’s policy impact is the establishment of the Wellbeing Economy Governments (WEGo)...” which was launched in 2018 by New Zealand, Scotland, and Iceland, with Wales and Finland later joining. The partnership’s aims “are to deepen their understanding and advance their shared ambition of building wellbeing economies” (WEAll, 2021). WEGo, which grew out of the idea of creating an alternative to the G7—a “WE7”—promotes sharing of expertise, best practice and policy ideas to advance their “common ambition of building a Wellbeing Economy” (Abrar, 2021, p. 168).

As a further indication of the WE’s inroads into the political mainstream, Fioramonti et al. (2022, p. 5) point to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s work in this area. An OECD (2019, p. 4) working paper on “The Economy of Wellbeing” notes that: “As wellbeing has matured as a statistical and measurement agenda, it has become increasingly relevant as a ‘compass’ for policy, with a growing number of countries using wellbeing metrics to guide decision-making and inform budgetary processes.” At a WEGo symposium, the OECD’s Secretary-General, Gurría (2019) stated that the OECD is taking action “to help countries build ‘economies of wellbeing,’” adding that the “pursuit of greater wellbeing for all must become second nature in policymaking.”

A wellbeing economy has also found support within European institutions. Before joining WEGo, Finland made the “economy of wellbeing” a major theme during its presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2019 (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2020), leading to an endorsement of the concept by the Council in October 2019 (Council of the European Union, 2019). In January 2020, the European Economic and Social Committee declared that the “EU urgently needs to develop the foundations for a sustainable and inclusive wellbeing economy that works for everyone” (EESC, 2020). The EESC added that “building the wellbeing economy must start by adopting a precautionary approach in which macroeconomic stability does not depend on GDP growth.”

Pro-growth and other formulations

While the above-mentioned examples illustrate significant advances into the political mainstream for a concept that first emerged out of a critical perspective on economic growth, one should be cautious before accepting the conclusion that states and international organizations are embracing post-growth ideas through the WE concept. In some hands, the wellbeing economy has taken a pro-growth turn. For example, the OECD Secretary General stated that the “Economy of WellBeing” highlights the need for “a growth model that is equitable and sustainable from the outset” (Gurría, 2019). Similarly, the OECD working paper cited above—whose full title is “The Economy of Wellbeing: Creating opportunities for people’s wellbeing and economic growth”—“defines an economy of wellbeing around the idea of a ‘virtuous circle’ in which individual wellbeing and long-term economic growth are mutually reinforcing” (OECD, 2019, p. 4).

Variations on the theme of the WE as a form of inclusive and sustainable growth are indeed common among governments and mainstream political-economic institutions. In the case of the Council of the European Union (2019), for example, their endorsement of the idea came with this understanding: “Taking wellbeing into account in all policies is vitally important to the Union’s economic growth, productivity, long-term fiscal sustainability, and societal stability.” Further examples of such pro-growth WE thinking appear in the case studies that follow.

Meanwhile, some understandings of a WE focus on matters other than growth. For Birkjær et al. (2021), a WE “is about actively using wellbeing metrics and tools to inform government priorities and policymaking . . .” (p. 5). From this perspective, it is not enough to introduce new wellbeing indicators that go “beyond GDP”; to be a WE, “governments must ‘go beyond measurement’ and give wellbeing metrics an active role in government” (p. 14). As will become evident, all three cases that we examine meet this criterion, although there are questions about the degree to which they involve a shift toward post-growth politics.

Case studies

New Zealand

Aotearoa New Zealand has long been a pioneer of progressive reform, including women gaining the right to vote in parliamentary elections in 1893, early introduction of welfare state programs, and declaration of a nuclear-free-zone in 1987. It has also been home to influential work critiquing GDP’s limits as a prosperity indicator, including that of Waring (1988) that helped set the stage for later “beyond GDP” initiatives. At the same time, the country’s colonial history has left a legacy of socio-economic marginalization for indigenous Māori and Pasifika peoples. New Zealand also faced a macroeconomic and political crisis in the mid-1980s and went onto adopt neoliberal reforms and austerity—an experience that still marks the country. This brief background provides some context for New Zealand’s emergence as a leader in the wellbeing economy movement.

A “beyond GDP” living standards framework

New Zealand’s Treasury began developing the Living Standards Framework (LSF) in 2011, drawing together several different initiatives on measuring social wellbeing in ways that go beyond GDP (Patterson, 2019; Ng, 2022). The LSF, which was formally released in 2018, draws heavily on the OECD’s wellbeing approach. It includes a multidimensional dashboard of economic, social, and environmental indicators to assess “intergenerational wellbeing.” The LSF dashboard includes indicators grouped into 12 current wellbeing domains², 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, i.e., “our people,” while data on the four capitals help to assess the ability to sustain wellbeing in “our future” (Treasury, 2018b). The LSF can play an important role in highlighting wellbeing differentials within the population. A notable, although unsurprising, finding is that Māori and Pasifika populations have lower wellbeing on many indicators, while less expected is the degree to which older people do better than younger people in most domains, including measures of material wellbeing (Grimes, 2021, p. 280). A revised LSF was introduced in 2021 (Treasury, 2022); we have focused on the previous version that was used to shape wellbeing budgets up to and including 2022.

² 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 wellbeing, and time use.

Wellbeing budgets

While many countries have introduced beyond-GDP measurement initiatives, what makes New Zealand a pioneer is the degree to which they have used those new measurements in policymaking, notably in “wellbeing budgets” starting in 2019 under a Labour-led government. Information from the LSF was used—along with evidence from sectoral experts and input from government agencies—to determine the budget’s five priorities: mental health, child wellbeing, 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 (Treasury, 2018a; Ng, 2022). In their budget bids, public agencies had to show how proposed expenditures aligned with the five priorities and refer to their initiatives’ wellbeing impacts. As Prime Minister Ardern (2019) explained: “If you are a minister and you want to spend money, you have to prove that you are going to improve intergenerational wellbeing.” Agencies also had to describe how they collaborated with others in developing their initiatives—with the aim of breaking down agency “silos.” The LSF was then used as part of the process to assess and rank spending proposals for decisions about budget allocations (Treasury, 2018a; NZ Government, 2019; Ng, 2022). The 2019 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.

Subsequent wellbeing budgets have each had different emphases. The response to the COVID-19 crisis took center stage in 2020. The 2021 budget was notable for its substantial increase in social assistance benefits with the aim of “tackling inequality and child poverty” and helping “low-income New Zealanders to meet their basic material needs”—underlining a break with past orthodoxy on the thirtieth anniversary of the neoliberal, program-slashing “Mother of All Budgets” (NZ Government, 2021, pp. 14, iv). Other noteworthy elements included a NZ\$3.8 billion Housing Acceleration Fund to expand housing supply—a response to New Zealand having some of the OECD’s most unaffordable housing—in addition to investments to address the disadvantages of the Māori population in areas such as housing, health, and education (NZ Government, 2021, pp. 14, 18; see also Bartos, 2021).

Three high-priority elements stand out in the most recent 2022 wellbeing budget: new funding of NZ\$11.1 billion for the health sector to improve access to and reform the delivery of health services, NZ\$2.9 billion in spending from a Climate Emergency Response Fund, and NZ\$1 billion in short-term measures to help low- and medium-income earners cope with rising living costs (NZ Government, 2022; see also Ardern, 2022; Robertson, 2022; Shaw et al., 2022). The climate spending, which the prime minister called the country’s “biggest investment in climate action ever” (Ardern, 2022), supports the country’s new

Emissions Reduction Plan. Also noteworthy is the use of a Māori wellbeing framework, He Ara Waiora, in addition to the LSF to develop the 2022 budget.³

How much of difference do these wellbeing budgets make? The answer will become clearer over time, but commentators on New Zealand’s initial experience have frequently pointed to positive, incremental improvements that fall short of being transformational or sufficient to address core social and environmental challenges (e.g., Bradford, 2022; Hughes, 2022a; Shaw et al., 2022; Spence, 2022). As the Country Lead for the Wellbeing Economy Alliance Aotearoa put it, the 2022 budget “contained many good measures... However it continued the incremental, slow approach to change that won’t substantially alter persistent poverty, wealth inequality or the biodiversity and climate crises.” While some have called for greater increases in social spending, the government has remained committed to budget responsibility rules that limit spending, prompting one critic to write: “If you’re not willing to spend on social problems, a wellbeing ethos alone won’t help you” (McClure, 2021). With regard to environmental sustainability, critics have welcomed additional spending and related actions in the country’s first-ever Emissions Reduction Plan, while calling for much greater ambition (Bradford, 2022; Hall et al., 2022; Hughes, 2022b; WWF-NZ, 2022).

Although impacts have not been as substantial to date as some had hoped, a WE approach does strengthen the case for more social spending, particularly that which benefits the most disadvantaged, for whom every dollar of spending will generally create a greater boost in wellbeing compared to spending on the already well-off (Bartos, 2021). Wellbeing budgets have also advanced the idea of treating public spending as investment (e.g., early intervention to address mental health) that generates positive social returns and helps prevent future costs (Mintrom, 2019).⁴ Another indication that a genuinely new approach is at play is the inclusion of a “wellbeing outlook” for the nation—in addition to a conventional economic outlook—at the beginning of the wellbeing budget documents. The outlook highlights

³ The NZ Government (2022, p. 11) states that, in developing the budget, it considered the “alignment of initiatives with the principles of tikanga (decisions made in accordance with the right processes) and manaakitanga (maintaining a focus on improved wellbeing and enhanced mana for all New Zealanders),” while in future budgets it will include other principles: “kotahitanga (working in an aligned, coordinated way), whanaungatanga (fostering strong relationships through kinship and/or shared experience that provide a shared sense of belonging), and tiakitanga (guardianship and stewardship of the environment, particularly taonga and other important processes and systems)”.

⁴ On this point as well, critics argue that the approach has not been taken far enough; Hughes (2022a) maintains that the government has focused largely on paying costs of damage created by the economic system rather than addressing the factors driving those costs.

successes (e.g., high levels of social trust) as well as problems requiring policy attention (e.g., a 7.5 year gap between Māori and non-Māori life expectancy) (NZ Government, 2021, pp. 4, 6). One limit, however, is that the Outlook's environmental information does not provide a full picture of unsustainability of New Zealand society, a point we return to below.

Post-growth and sufficiency elements in New Zealand

One fundamental change in New Zealand that has an affinity with post-growth thinking is the explicit shift away from GDP as the primary indicator of prosperity toward a multidimensional understanding of wellbeing. As Fioramonti et al. (2022, p. 4) write, New Zealand's "Wellbeing Budget stems upon the understanding that GDP growth does not guarantee improvements in living standards..." Meanwhile Laurent (2019, p. 86) suggests that New Zealand's 2019 wellbeing budget involved a decision to "exit growth" ("*sortir de la croissance*").

It is important, however, not to overstate the degree to which New Zealand is moving in a post-growth direction. What Prime Minister Ardern actually said in the first Wellbeing Budget document was: "while economic growth is important—and something we will continue to pursue—it alone does not guarantee improvements to our living standards" (NZ Government, 2019, p. 2). The Budget document goes on to say: "Sustainable economic growth is an important contributor, but many factors determine people's wellbeing" (NZ Government, 2019, p. 5), while Treasury official Ng (2022, p. 183) explained the approach to growth as follows: "While higher market incomes are a very powerful means to the end of higher wellbeing, they are nevertheless only a means." In her statements on the 2022 Wellbeing Budget, Ardern defended her government's record by stating that it had "delivered one of the strongest economies in the world, with GDP up 5.6% in the past year..." (NZ Government, 2022, p. 2) while also celebrating small and medium businesses for their "potential to accelerate our economic growth" (Ardern, 2022).

Although its actions have raised the hopes of some post-growth theorists, New Zealand clearly has not moved beyond the pursuit of economic growth; however, it has downplayed the centrality of growth to some degree by reframing it as one means among others to achieve the ultimate objective of wellbeing. Also evident are some examples of sufficiency-oriented policies targeted at specific sectors, such as a NZ\$375 million allocation in the 2022 budget to reduce reliance on cars by investing in cycleways and public transit.⁵ That said, there is as yet no sign of

⁵ The NZ\$375 million for that purpose should be kept in perspective, as it compares to the NZ\$569 million spent on a more conventional technological shift: encouraging people to scrap fossil-fuel-powered vehicles and replace them with low-emissions vehicles (NZ Government, 2022, pp. 35, 36).

a sufficiency approach to the country's biggest GHG source—its cows—despite the limited scope for technological and efficiency solutions to limit their methane emissions and calls for action to reduce livestock numbers (Hughes, 2022b; see also Levitt, 2021).

While this article is mainly concerned with sufficiency at the "upper threshold"—avoiding ecologically excessive consumption and production—it is worth noting that New Zealand's WE approach puts greater emphasis on providing enough at the "lower threshold" through various (albeit insufficient, according to critics) initiatives to meet basic needs and reduce poverty.

Scotland

Scotland has been led since 2007 by the Scottish National Party, a center-left pro-independence party. Pursuit of a societal project that distinguishes Scotland from the rest of the UK (especially from Conservative-dominated, neo-liberal England) has been central to arguments for independence, and one factor behind the country's commitment to a wellbeing economy (Roy and Lorimer, 2022). The context for Scotland's WE efforts include poor health outcomes (Ball, 2021) and significant concentrations of poverty and deprivation (Oxfam Scotland, 2013), i.e., wellbeing outcomes and inequalities calling out for policy attention. At the same time, Scotland has sought to stand out as a climate leader (SNP, 2021), with some of the world's deepest GHG reductions to date and relatively ambitious future targets: 75% GHG reduction below 1990 levels by 2030 and net zero by 2045.

From performance management to wellbeing

A key step in Scotland's journey toward a wellbeing economy was the introduction in 2007 of a National Performance Framework (NPF), which began as an indicator set used internally by government for performance management of public services (Wallace, 2019). With the NPF's revision in 2018, it had evolved into a wellbeing framework and had become a leading example of national "beyond GDP" measurement (Wallace, 2019; Bache, 2022). As Scottish First Minister Sturgeon (2020) described the 2018 NPF changes, "we made wellbeing at that time an explicit part of our national purpose as a country" (Sturgeon, 2020). The NPF expressed that purpose as follows: "To focus on creating a more successful country with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish through increased wellbeing, and sustainable and inclusive economic growth" (Scottish Government, n.d.). Some NGOs argued that this reframing of national purpose did not go far enough, as it "justified an unwarranted focus on sustainable economic growth and GDP to measure it," while failing to make clear that economic growth is subservient to—and only one means to achieve—wellbeing (Oxfam Scotland, 2017; Wallace, 2019, p.

58). The Framework identifies 11 priority national outcomes—related to children and young people, communities, culture, economy, education, environment, fair work and business, health, human rights, international contributions, and poverty—behind which is a dashboard of 81 indicators, many of which are linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Scottish Government, n.d.).

Those who highlight the wellbeing economy's ability to bring post-growth ideas into the mainstream have pointed to Sturgeon's July 2019 TED Talk, in which she stated: "Growth in GDP should not be pursued at any and all cost The goal of economic policy should be collective wellbeing: how happy and healthy a population is, not just how wealthy a population is" (Sturgeon, 2019; Fioramonti et al., 2022, p. 4). She added that the "limitations of GDP as a measurement of a country's success are all too obvious" and highlighted the importance of promoting "a vision of society that has wellbeing, not just wealth, at its very heart." While such statements differ significantly from conventional growth-centered political rhetoric, Sturgeon (2019) also made clear that "economic growth matters—it is important—but it is not all that is important."

Similarly, in a speech to a Wellbeing Economy Alliance conference, Sturgeon (2020) proclaimed that Scotland is "redefining" what it means to be a "successful country" and "putting wellbeing at the heart of what we are doing." Sturgeon stated that GDP "cannot be . . . the only measure of national progress" and that it "makes no sense to focus purely on growth." In other words, GDP remains one measure of national progress—indeed, an economic growth indicator is part of Scotland's NPF—and growth is one thing, among others, that the government continues to focus on.

Scotland's strategy for economic transformation

An important document to understand the government's future objectives is *Delivering Economic Prosperity: Scotland's National Strategy for Economic Transformation* (Scottish Government, 2022a). "A wellbeing economy, based on the principles of prosperity, equality, sustainability, and resilience, is at the heart of our vision for the economy in 2032," according to the Strategy (p. 13). Elaborating on the meaning of a WE, the document refers to "a society that is thriving across economic, social and environmental dimensions, and that delivers prosperity for all Scotland's people and places," adding that "We aim to achieve this while respecting environmental limits, embodied by our climate and nature targets (p. 5).

Although a WE is the goal, many elements of the Strategy are indistinguishable from a conventional growth agenda. A core part of the vision is to make Scotland "wealthier," that is, "[d]riving an increase in productivity by building an internationally competitive economy founded on entrepreneurship and innovation" (p. 8). Objectives include

international and domestic recognition of Scotland as a "nation of entrepreneurs and innovators," the "best place to start and grow a business," a "magnet for inward investment and global private capital," and a nation "where employers have the supply of skills they need, and fully utilize these to grow and take advantage of opportunities" (p. 7).

Goals include "dramatically increas[ing] the total number of new businesses created" in Scotland" and "a step change in the percentage of Scottish start-ups and existing mid-sized businesses that grow to scale" (p. 17). Not only is economic growth still an objective, but the goal is faster growth than in recent years: "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" (p. 4).⁶

The Strategy does make clear that its ambition "is not just to grow our economy," but also to transform Scotland's economic model and "build an economy that celebrates success in terms of economic growth, environmental sustainability, quality of life and equality of opportunity, and reward" (p. 6). In other words, the ambition is not only to be "wealthier," but "fairer" and "greener" as well (p. 8). The WE vision "builds on our previous inclusive growth approach" (p. 13), and includes commitments to "significantly reducing poverty" through "better wages and fair work" (pp. 8, 15), with a particular emphasis on reducing child poverty and improving "health, cultural, and social outcomes for disadvantaged families and communities" (pp. 14, 44).

The Strategy also emphasizes a "just transition" that contributes to "sustainable growth"—in other words, the goal is to "create new jobs, businesses and open up markets in new sectors as well as supporting the transition of existing sectors" (p. 12). Familiar growth-oriented ecological modernization language, which has been standard fare in state environmental strategies since the 1990s, is evident in statements such as "The transition to net zero is not just an environmental imperative but an economic opportunity—one where Scotland will become world-leading and secure first-mover advantage" (p. 15) and in the celebration of Scotland's ranking on a Lloyds Banking Group's UK Green Growth index as "the number one region in the UK for green growth potential and opportunity" (p. 26).

It is not surprising that governments highlight the job-creation and commercial opportunities from, for example, expanding offshore wind dependent (p. 26). Nor is it surprising that they struggle to move beyond the growth imperative and break through the "glass ceiling" of ecological transition

6 To achieve this objective, the Strategy identifies "five key transformational programmes of action that can drive improvements in Scotland's economy: stimulating entrepreneurship; opening new markets; increasing productivity; developing the skills we need for the decade ahead; and ensuring fairer and more equal economic opportunities" (Scottish Government, 2022a, p. 4).

(Hausknot, 2020). What is more concerning for anyone with post-growth hopes for the WE concept is the Scottish government's conclusion that: "As a consequence of the actions set out in this strategy, we will have achieved our vision of building a wellbeing economy" (p. 7, see also p. 54). For the government, achieving a WE appears to require little more than a by-now conventional "sustainable and inclusive growth" strategy other than having a more comprehensive set of indicators to guide it.

While welcoming the economic transformation strategy's commitment to create a wellbeing economy within environmental limits, WEAll Scotland (2022; see also Hardt, 2022) criticizes its insufficient plan of action. It pointed to positive elements, notably the plan for a "Wellbeing Economy Monitor" that expands the reporting of beyond-GDP wellbeing measurements⁷ and a review of "how to increase the number of social enterprises, employee-owned businesses and cooperatives in Scotland." However, on the whole, it saw "a continuation of the same flawed logic that has delivered decades of inequality and environmental degradation" i.e., a prioritization of GDP growth and productivity in the hope that wealth will "trickle down"—an economic paradigm that "has driven a cycle of paying to fix what we continue to break" (Hardt, 2022).⁸

Post-growth and sufficiency elements in Scotland

Scotland's adoption of wellbeing as a core objective involves some downplaying of the centrality of economic growth, although to a lesser degree than in some formulations of a WE, in which sustainable wellbeing is the ultimate objective and economic growth is, at best, only a means among others to that end. Meanwhile, Scotland's use of a "beyond GDP" wellbeing measurement framework could be considered a step in a post-growth direction, although there is no indication that Scotland's government sees it as such. Scotland's NPF continues to measure changes in GDP, not merely as an accounting measure useful for limited practical tasks,⁹ but in a form that illustrates a belief

7 The Monitor "will include measures such as healthy life expectancy, fair work indicators, mental wellbeing, child poverty, greenhouse gas emissions and biodiversity" (Scottish Government, 2022a, p. 13).

8 WEAll Scotland's criticisms also included: the lack of public participation in developing the strategy, lack of action to ensure that power is shared more equitably with workers and communities, lack of strategy to ensure businesses contribute to thriving communities, and very limited signs that the government is living up to its responsibility to ensure "that we all have the basics, like safe warm homes, that we expand the economic activities we need more of, such as decarbonisation, not just those that offer the biggest profits" (Hardt, 2022).

9 Even a society that deprioritizes economic growth could track whatever annual variations in economic output occur to facilitate tasks such as government budgeting.

that the higher GDP growth, the better. The economic growth indicator compares GDP growth in the most recent year with average growth in the three previous years; GDP growth above the three-year average is considered an "improving" situation (Scottish Government, 2022b).

As in New Zealand, some of the most prominent sufficiency elements in Scotland's WE approach are in the emphasis on ensuring enough in terms of minimal consumption levels, i.e., commitments to reducing poverty and creating a fairer society. Whether the Scottish government has an adequate strategy to act on these poverty-reduction commitments is a separate question, beyond the scope of this article; suffice it to say that some critics argue that the prominent rhetorical emphasis on such issues is not matched by sufficient concrete action (Hardt, 2022). Although not the main focus of our analysis, one can also find sufficiency oriented policies targeting specific forms of consumption, such as a policy goal of a 20% reduction of car-kilometers traveled by 2030 (SNP, 2021).

There are also elements in Scotland's WE vision that do not necessarily reflect a sufficiency approach but could contribute to it. One is the acknowledgment of the importance of alternative business models such as social enterprises, employee-owned businesses and cooperatives (Scottish Government, 2022a, p. 37), which can enable a more equitable distribution of the rewards of ownership—an issue that becomes all the more important in a post-growth society that can no longer rely on increasing the overall size of the economic pie. Such enterprises may also be less constrained by pressures to grow than conventional capitalist firms, as discussed below.

Also relevant is a preventative approach to social and environmental problems. Driven by factors including cost pressures in providing public services, poor health outcomes, costly lifelong effects of child poverty and youth unemployment, and high levels of criminal offending and reoffending, the Scottish government has had an interest in preventative approaches for over a decade (Wallace, 2019, pp. 47, 65–66). The value of spending on preventative measures to protect people and the environment remains an important theme in recent Scottish wellbeing economy debates (e.g., Walker, 2021), although critics would like to see more emphasis on prevention than on fixing problems afterwards (Hardt, 2022).

Iceland

Iceland's commitment to a wellbeing economy builds on a recent history of pushing the boundaries of what is possible economically. Its response to the 2008 financial crisis, which hit the country particularly hard, illustrated different priorities and different decisions about the distribution of the costs compared to other nations (Tan, 2018; Abrar, 2021, pp. 170–171). Iceland decided that its oversized banks were "too big to save" (Tan, 2018). While there were some spending cuts, social benefits

were protected, and Iceland was the only country to criminally prosecute bankers for their role in causing the crisis (Robinson and Valdimarsson, 2016). Iceland also ranks number one in the world in gender equality, according to the Global Gender Gap Report (WEF, 2021). Since 2017, Iceland has been led by an ecological feminist prime minister, Katrín Jakobsdóttir, who heads the Left-Green Movement (Nichols, 2018), which describes itself as a “radical left wing party, with emphasis on equality and sustainability” (Left-Green Movement, 2022). It has governed in an unusual coalition with the center/center-right Progressive Party and right-of-center Independence Party (Önnudóttir and Hardarson, 2017).

Wellbeing measurement and prioritization

An important step toward an Icelandic WE was the commitment in the 2017 coalition government agreement to create a cross-party task force on “the development of indicators to measure economic prosperity and the quality of life” (Government of Iceland, 2017, p. 4; see also Birkjær et al., 2021, p. 34). In 2018, the Prime Minister’s Committee on Indicators for Measuring Wellbeing commissioned a survey about the determinants of quality of life most important to Icelanders; the top factors were health (good health and access to healthcare), relationships (with friends, families, neighbors, and colleagues), housing (access to secure and affordable housing), and making a living (income and assets) (Government of Iceland, 2019a, p. 5). The survey contributed to the development of a framework of 39 indicators covering social, economic, and environmental dimensions of quality of life that was introduced in 2019. These indicators, which are linked to many of the UN SDGs, are “intended to complement traditional economic measures, such as GDP” (Government of Iceland, 2019b)—indeed, GDP and economic growth are among the 39 indicators (Government of Iceland, 2019a, p. 2).

In 2019, the government identified six wellbeing priorities—mental health, secure housing, better work-life balance, zero carbon emissions, innovation growth, and better communication with the public—to guide monetary allocations in the annual budget and the country’s five-year fiscal strategy (Abrar, 2021, p. 172; Birkjær et al., 2021, p. 35). These priorities were established, in part, based on the 2018 quality of life survey, while also taking into account other government goals such as gender equality and the degree to which government policy could make a difference over a five-year period (Birkjær et al., 2021, p. 35).

Taking the welfare state one level up

Recent policy actions reflect the above-mentioned priorities, illustrating a commitment to a strong Nordic welfare state and relatively ambitious climate action (Jakobsdóttir, 2019a; Government of Iceland, 2021), while also aiming to

manage public finances responsibly (Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs, 2021). The country’s WE approach has been characterized as an effort to “to take the traditional Icelandic welfare state one level up,” with the goal of creating “a virtuous circle in which citizens’ wellbeing drives economic prosperity, stability and resilience, and *vice-versa*, that those good macroeconomic outcomes allow to sustain wellbeing investments over time” (Birkjær et al., 2021, p. 34). In 2019, the prime minister stated that “Our main project has been to invest significantly in social infrastructure, healthcare, welfare, education” (Jakobsdóttir, 2019a). Recent initiatives have included a social housing plan to address affordable housing scarcity, a significant increase in child benefits, and an extension of parental leave (shared between partners) from 9 to 12 months (Jakobsdóttir, 2019b). The 2021 coalition agreement similarly promises to maintain a “strong welfare system” as “the basis of equality” and “promote a healthy society,” which includes not only investments in healthcare services, but also “more emphasis ... on public health, prevention and mental health” (Government of Iceland, 2021, pp. 17, 21).¹⁰ The latest coalition agreement also proclaims that “We are going to prioritize climate issues.” Iceland has an interim goal of reducing GHGs 55% below 2005 levels by 2030 on the way toward “carbon neutrality and full energy conversion no later than 2040,” which would “make Iceland the first state to be independent of fossil fuels” (Government of Iceland, 2021, p. 9; see also Nichols, 2018).

The goal of “a strong society of wellbeing and equal opportunity” is balanced with ensuring “that expenditure growth remains modest” in Iceland’s fiscal budget proposal for 2022. Moderate spending is related to “the guiding principle underlying the fiscal strategy [which] is to halt the rise in the debt-to-GDP ratio no later than 2026.” Limiting the debt-to-GDP ratio and halting debt accumulation is seen as necessary “to ensure the financial resilience of the public sector,” i.e., safeguarding the government’s ability to respond to future economic shocks and finance public services and transfers even as costs grow due to an aging population (Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs, 2021). This formulation highlights the constraints on fiscal capacity for public spending to address wellbeing goals that are related both to the level of debt and GDP: action to limit debt expands future public spending capacity, as does an increase in GDP. These issues are related to the growth dependency of contemporary states, which we return to below.

¹⁰ The 2022 budget proposal also gives a high priority to healthcare in terms of resource allocation, while continuing personal income tax changes that emphasize reducing the tax burden on lower-income households (Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs, 2021).

Post-growth and sufficiency elements in Iceland

At first glance, the possibilities for a sufficiency-oriented WE approach appear more promising in Iceland. Compared to other WEGo leaders, Prime Minister Jakobsdóttir's statements illustrate a more critical analysis of the contemporary growth economy and the need to put saving the planet ahead of saving capitalism as we know it (Jakobsdóttir, 2019a), and point toward a more radical post-growth WE vision with a strong sufficiency component. In an address to a WEGo workshop in Edinburgh, Jakobsdóttir (2019b) stated:

We have built an economic model under which constant growth is not only essential, but also considered positive no matter how it is achieved and at what costs. This has led to increased social and economic inequality and an ever-escalating climate crisis. It has left us in 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.

She went on to say that the “Wellbeing Economy Governments project differs from this thinking.” Jakobsdóttir (2020) later wrote that a WE is an “attempt to develop a new economic model, which is centered on wellbeing rather than on production and consumption.” She added: “Our generation has no option but to change the way we live.” Echoing sufficiency-oriented ideas of critics of consumerism, Jakobsdóttir (2019b) has argued that: “Carbon neutrality can actually bring us opportunities for increased wellbeing. Less consumption and a slower pace of life will help halt climate change while also increasing general wellbeing.”

Such ideas may not be so unusual within left-green political circles, but they are much less common in prime ministers' offices. To what degree has this critical perspective on a growth- and consumption-oriented economic model made its way beyond speeches and into government policy?

Very little, if it all, if one judges by the 2021 agreement that outlined the governing agenda for the re-elected coalition of the Independence Party, Progressive Party, and Left-Green Movement (Government of Iceland, 2021). While the document refers to Iceland as a wellbeing economy and commits to strengthening cooperation with other WEGo nations (pp. 7, 58), the first specific commitment after a general introduction is: “We are going to grow to greater prosperity ... Growth and prosperity are the government's guiding lights in economic affairs” (p. 5).

The coalition agreement includes the following commitment: “The growth potential of the economy will be boosted with strong support for innovation, research and development ...” (p. 26). This point responds to concern

expressed in the country's five-year fiscal policy statement for 2022–2026 about the effects of declining productivity growth and an aging population (Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs, 2021), which are two factors that have been highlighted as drivers of “secular stagnation” of contemporary economies (Gordon, 2016). Due to these factors, the Icelandic economy's annual potential growth rate has fallen from 2.7 to 2.3%—a rate still well above zero, but which means that annual GDP will be 300 billion Icelandic krona (~US\$2.33 billion or US\$6,700 per capita), lower in 25 years than otherwise (Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs, 2021).

In a sufficiency economy, such a trend would be no cause for alarm—and could be welcomed as a sign of the maturation of the economy that will bring environmental benefits. However, Iceland's fiscal policy statement highlights the challenges that lower growth will create and seeks to counter it. It notes that an aging population will increase demand for public spending, while slower economic growth will—unless the tax system is changed—reduce tax revenues and public spending capacity. Rather than accepting slower growth, the statement emphasizes a policy role “in counteracting this trend and promoting increased long-term potential output throughout the economy” through increased investment and by fostering a climate of economic stability (Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs, 2021).

The fact that the Left-Green Movement governs in coalition with two right-of-center parties—and is the junior party based on parliamentary seats¹¹—undoubtedly constrains how far it can move in a post-growth direction. That said, the Left-Green Movement (2022) itself still refers to “sustainable growth” as an economic priority, and justifies its commitment to equality in part by referring to research showing that “increased inequality reduces economic growth. An economic policy that reduces inequality will not only lead to a fairer society, but also to a richer society.” (However, the party does highlight a number of sufficiency-oriented ideas targeting particular products or sectors rather than the economy as a whole).¹² Meanwhile

11 The Left-Green Movement was the second largest party after the 2017 election, behind the Independence Party, and fell to third behind the Progressive Party in 2021, although it held onto the prime minister's office.

12 This includes commitments to: reduce consumption of unsustainably produced meat, reduce transportation of imported food by promoting domestic vegetable production, reduce food waste, improve public transit to enable less private vehicle usage, and plan urban areas “so that public transport, cycling and walking become viable options” (Left-Green Movement, 2022).

Prime Minister [Jakobsdóttir \(2019a,b\)](#), despite other growth-critical statements, also speaks of the need for “inclusive growth.”¹³

While Iceland clearly has not moved fully into a post-growth era, its embrace of the WE concept does involve a more limited—and still incomplete—shift toward seeing wellbeing as the end goal and GDP growth one means among others to achieve it.

One other policy area is worth mentioning in connection with a politics of sufficiency: work-time reduction. Iceland has seen some of the most significant recent experimentation with a shorter workweek. Other WEGo nations have also seen prominent work-time reduction initiatives of their own ([BBC, 2021](#); [Taunton, 2021](#)). In 2015 and 2017, Reykjavik City Council and the national government initiated two major trials, involving more than 1% of the country’s workforce, with many employees moving from a 40- to 36- or 35-h workweek without loss of income. Success in meeting the trials’ goals—improving worker wellbeing, while maintaining (or increasing) productivity and service provision—subsequently led to the negotiation of more permanent, although more modest workweek reductions for tens of thousands of employees ([Haraldsson and Kellam, 2021](#); see also [Kobie, 2021](#); [Lau and Sigurdardottir, 2021](#)). Although these work-time initiatives have not been framed mainly as a post-growth alternative to increased consumption and production, building on such experiences could be important in taking the WE concept further in a post-growth direction, as discussed below. Indeed, the [Left-Green Movement \(2022\)](#) wants to continue shortening the work week; one MP has said “the next step is to reduce working hours to 30 hours per week” (Bjarkey Olsen Gunnarsdóttir, quoted in [Haraldsson and Kellam, 2021](#), p. 55).

Discussion

Wellbeing economy as a weak post-growth perspective

WEGo countries are now exploring what it means to create a wellbeing economy, a development that has promise as well as limitations for advancing a sufficiency-oriented post-growth politics.

Advocates of a post-growth transformation have argued that GDP growth must be deprioritized in high-income nations if planetary boundaries are to be taken seriously (e.g., [Koch, 2020](#), p. 123; [Corlet Walker et al., 2021](#), p. 2). The commitment to

a wellbeing economy is a step in that direction as wellbeing becomes the overarching goal, with growth relegated to a means to achieve it (a step that is most clearly evident in New Zealand). However, this step is a small one as GDP growth remains important to all three countries. Similarly, a post-growth vision often starts with the idea of moving beyond GDP and measuring progress in new ways (e.g., [Alexander, 2016](#); [Jackson, 2020](#)). WEGo nations are indeed measuring wellbeing in more comprehensive and meaningful ways. That said, these new measurements do not mean that governments are ignoring GDP to the extent that many post-growth theorists would like to see (e.g., [van den Bergh, 2011](#), p. 888).

In addition to “measuring what matters,” [Jackson \(2020, p. 5\)](#) identifies a second of three key steps for wellbeing economies: “to align government policy as fully as possible with the goal of achieving societal wellbeing rather than with the narrow pursuit of GDP growth.” Although work remains on this front, WEGo nations have taken important steps in this direction, e.g., through New Zealand’s wellbeing budgets and Iceland’s establishment of wellbeing priorities to guide budget allocations and the country’s five-year fiscal strategy. Also noteworthy in all three countries are preventative investments to help improve or maintain wellbeing from the outset, discussed in more detail below.

In all three WEGo cases examined, a commitment to sufficiency is more evident with regard to ensuring people have the minimum requirements to live good lives than it is with limiting excessive production and consumption. Indeed, the WE concept shows a clear affinity with strengthening the welfare state. Also evident is a growing emphasis on investments in programs to improve mental health, which are a “new frontier for the welfare state” ([Layard, 2012](#)), and have the potential to bring substantial wellbeing benefits.

The emphasis on social spending to improve wellbeing can be seen as a move away from neoliberalism, even if WEGo countries try to remain within fiscally responsible spending limits and critics argue that WEGo policies to reduce poverty and inequality ought to go further. Scotland and Iceland also stand out for relatively ambitious climate targets and policies, while New Zealand, long a climate laggard, has recently introduced stronger climate policies. The net effect could be characterized as somewhat more social democracy and climate action, broadly consistent with ideas of “inclusive and sustainable” growth.

While critics of neoliberalism and climate inaction could hail that as a step forward, post-growth WE proponents have been clear that the goal is not merely an improved growth model. Indeed, [Fioramonti et al. \(2022, p. 2\)](#) maintain that, with the rise of the wellbeing economy, it “is the first time that a variety of national governments,” with the support of the OECD, “openly unite on the basis of a post-growth agenda.” However, the cases examined here suggest that it is an error to assume that governments that adopt a wellbeing economy language are also embracing the full range of post-growth ambitions that

¹³ A similar phenomenon of political leaders putting forward a critical perspective on the economic growth paradigm, while reverting to a post-growth framing in other contexts, is evident in other countries as well ([Hayden, 2014b](#), pp. 125–127, 311–318), reflecting the difficulties of trying to pursue a post-growth politics in a political-economic system still dependent on growth.

motivated those who first developed the concept. While the WEGo case studies illustrate some elements consistent with a post-growth agenda, as noted above, what has made it through the process of political mainstreaming to date is a largely pro-growth WE vision, amounting at most to a “weak post-growth” approach. Meanwhile, institutions such as the [Council of the European Union \(2019\)](#) and [OECD \(2019\)](#) have been explicit all along in depicting a wellbeing approach as a contributor to an economic growth agenda.

Even if governments and political leaders were to have stronger post-growth aspirations, they would still struggle to achieve them in a context of growth dependency. Indeed, some statements by Iceland’s Left-Green prime minister, Katrin Jakobsdottir, suggest that she does have a critical perspective on an economy focused on production and consumption growth. However, the Icelandic case shows the strong pressures on anyone managing the state to ensure sufficient revenue to fund wellbeing-enhancing social spending and other state activities. Combined with the challenges of keeping together an ideologically diverse governing coalition and maintaining support among voters, the result is a government policy agenda that emphasizes economic growth as a high-priority means to the end of wellbeing. Another way to state the problem is that simply declaring that economic growth has been replaced by wellbeing as the end goal does not in itself reduce dependence on growth. The “glass ceiling” of environmental transformation ([Hausknost, 2020](#)) cannot be so easily broken.

Taking the wellbeing economy in a strong post-growth direction

Tackling growth dependency

In addition to measuring success in new ways and aligning policy with the goal of achieving societal wellbeing, [Jackson \(2020\)](#) identifies a third step in moving beyond growth: tackling growth dependency ([EESC, 2020](#); [Petschow et al., 2020](#); see also [EEB and Oxfam Germany, 2021](#), pp. 28, 29). This is the most challenging of the three steps and the one that WEGo nations have done least to address. We do not claim to have full answers to how to address this complex but vitally important problem, a full analysis of which is beyond the scope of this article. In this section, we point to some ways that WEGo nations, and others, might contribute to finding solutions and thereby help a stronger post-growth WE vision to emerge.

A good start would be to openly acknowledge growth dependency as a problem and support research into better understanding and overcoming it. WEGo nations could make an important contribution by carrying out inquiries into growth dependency of their economies and possible responses, as advocated by [Jackson \(2020, 2022\)](#) for the UK and the European Economic and Social Committee ([EESC, 2020](#)) for EU member

states, building on existing analysis of such issues ([Petschow et al., 2020](#)).

Two of the most fundamental challenges are disentangling employment and the welfare state from their growth dependency. With regard to the former, profit-seeking businesses in competitive markets face strong pressures to increase efficiencies and reduce labor inputs and costs, and the resulting increases in labor productivity threaten to increase unemployment—unless economic output expands at a rate sufficient to absorb those displaced by more productive methods as well as new entrants to labor markets. In the post-growth literature, a widely discussed response to this issue is to use labor productivity gains to reduce work hours, thereby helping maintain employment and economic balance even in a non-growing economy ([Hayden, 1999](#); [Schor, 2001](#); [Kallis, 2018](#); [Lange, 2018](#); [Victor, 2019](#))—while also creating time affluence as an alternative to more material affluence by freeing up time for a less stressful, more convivial life. As noted above, WEGo nations have recently introduced work-time reduction initiatives of various kinds, which provide experiences they could build on. That said, to make a stronger post-growth contribution, the vision for work-time reduction initiatives would have to shift from the recent emphasis on reducing work hours without any sacrifice of output (by ratcheting up hourly productivity) toward seeing work-time reduction as an alternative to continued economic expansion and consumption growth.

WEGo nations could also make contributions by exploring other options to decouple employment—and economic security more generally—from growth, including establishment of a job guarantee ([Alcott, 2013](#)), universal basic services ([Coote and Percy, 2020](#)), or variations on a basic income ([Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017](#)). Of course, such policies require funding, which points to a tension—evident in the WEGo case studies—between those aspects of a WE agenda that require greater public spending and a post-growth vision that, all else being equal, would limit state revenues. This leads to the challenging question of reducing the growth dependency of the welfare state. Work on envisioning a post-growth welfare state is a growing topic of its own (e.g., [Gough, 2017](#), pp. 178–184; [Büchs, 2021](#); [Corlet Walker et al., 2021](#); [Koch, 2021](#)). We highlight two main issues here: ensuring adequate supply of resources for wellbeing-enhancing programs while also reducing demand for welfare-state services.

On the supply side, in a post-growth environment, there is a need to develop additional revenue sources—ideally ones that contribute to more equitable distribution and curb consumption among the wealthiest in line with a sufficiency approach. Among the options are the introduction, or increase, of taxes on wealth ([Marriott, 2022](#)), inheritance, and property, which are less affected by economic fluctuations ([Büchs, 2021](#)). Also relevant are taxes on luxury consumption, high-environmental-impact consumption (e.g., meat, air travel), and potentially much higher taxes on high incomes ([Koch, 2021](#))—at the limit, calls in post-growth circles for a maximum income

would in effect establish a 100% tax above the maximum. Expanded efforts to tackle tax evasion would complement such efforts. Measures of this kind will undoubtedly face substantial opposition from vested interests although they may also find popular support—research in Sweden shows substantial support for a wealth tax, for example (Koch, 2021). Such issues suggest that the move to a stronger post-growth WE will be politically contentious and require a politically mobilized base of support to overcome opposition—points downplayed by those who highlight wellbeing's broad “post-ideological” appeal.

Even more contentious than taxation is more equitable ownership, a longer-term challenge that is also relevant to moving beyond growth dependency. In a non-growing economy, if states are to have adequate revenues to provide services and transfers, and individuals are to have adequate income and economic security, then an equitable distribution of ownership becomes increasingly important (Gough, 2017, pp. 179–181). The exact mix of possibilities is open for debate: public ownership of enterprises at national, state/provincial, or municipal levels, sovereign wealth funds, labor- or community-owned enterprises, co-operatives, or other options. Whatever options chosen, as Gough (2017, p. 180) argues, in a post-growth economy, there is a need “to spread the ownership of wealth” and to “give everyone a stake in capital and a non-labor source of income.” Beyond the issue of equitable distribution of the rewards of ownership, enterprises with alternative ownership forms may also be less constrained by pressures to grow than conventional shareholder-owned capitalist firms that face strong pressures to deliver returns to investors (Petschow et al., 2020, pp. 49–50, 54, 57). The Scottish Government's (2022a) pledge to review ways to expand the number of social enterprises, employee-owned businesses and cooperatives is a small but potentially useful step toward more equitable ownership; WEGo nations could contribute to a post-growth agenda by going further in this direction.

Regarding demand for public spending, wellbeing economy advocates emphasize a preventative approach to social and environmental problems—aiming to get things right the first time rather than paying to fix problems after they have been created (Chrysopoulou, 2020; Trebeck, 2020). In healthcare, for example, emphasis shifts from (over)-reliance on medical therapies and pharmaceuticals toward the social, political, and environmental determinants of health (Corlet Walker et al., 2021, p. 8). A healthier work-life balance, lower inequality, and less environmental pollution are among the factors that could help reduce needs for costly service provision (Koch, 2020, p. 129; see also Büchs, 2021, p. 326). As noted above, WEGo nations have introduced some preventative initiatives. Going further in this direction, as WE proponents have advocated (Hardt, 2022), stands out as one important way to reduce growth dependency by limiting state revenue needs.

A related issue important to curbing growth dependency is action to eliminate rent-seeking in the provision of wellbeing-enhancing services so that they can be provided at lower economic cost. Analysis of growth dependency in the UK, for example, has also shown that welfare state resources have been diverted from providing services to enriching private investors through the financialization of Britain's social care sector (Corlet Walker and Jackson, 2021; HOCEAC, 2022, p. 20)—a phenomenon that a different policy regime and ownership model could avoid.

This section has provided a brief overview of some of the issues and options related to the difficult challenge of reducing growth dependency. Much more academic and political work on these issues is needed. Research and policy initiatives that grapple with these challenges would be a valuable way for WEGo nations and other WE supporters to make a stronger contribution to a post-growth agenda.

Expanding on other sufficiency-related elements

An additional positive element of the WE concept from a sufficiency perspective is that it draws attention to factors that contribute most to wellbeing—many of which are not about material consumption. The growing evidence base on the determinants of wellbeing and life satisfaction has shown, for example, that factors such as enhancing a sense of social belonging, freedom, fairness, mutual support, and trust have greater potential to improve wellbeing and are more environmentally sustainable than increased material consumption (Barrington-Leigh and Galbraith, 2019; Helliwell, 2019). A wellbeing economy framing thus has potential to open space for debate about how individuals and societies can achieve better lives in less material intensive ways.

A range of sufficiency-oriented policies could benefit from expanded understanding of the sources of wellbeing. Already mentioned is work-time reduction, which can give people give people their “pay increase” in the form of more time rather than higher incomes and consumption. A wellbeing approach also gives a new justification for restrictions on advertising, which might start with limits on ads for GHG-intensive goods and services. Advertising aims to generate dissatisfaction with what people already have; indeed research shows that increased advertising expenditure in nations is followed by significant declines in life satisfaction (Michel et al., 2019), a result that is clearly counterproductive if the end goal is not GDP growth but wellbeing. Urban planning that emphasizes active and public transportation, and enables people to meet daily needs within their neighborhoods—in line with concepts such as the “15-minute city” (O'Sullivan and Bliss, 2020) and “city of short distances” (Marletto et al., 2016; Hamiduddin, 2018)—has considerable promise in enabling people to live well with far less automobile use and, more generally, in improving the

quality of urban life. Some steps in this direction are evident in WEGo nations, as noted above. Undoubtedly one could add many other examples to the list. Action by WEGo nations on issues of this kind, building on synergies between enhanced wellbeing and sufficiency, would be another way to take the WE concept further in a post-growth direction.

One final point relates to the content of the “beyond GDP” indicators that WEGo nations and others have developed. Although a step forward in de-centering GDP, the indicator sets used in the three WEGo cases examined provide only limited information on environmental (un)sustainability, emphasizing domestic environmental quality and territorial GHG emissions, but lacking indicators that illustrate the wider global impacts of domestic consumption (with the partial exception of Scotland’s NPF)¹⁴. Including measures such as consumption-based material, ecological, and carbon footprints or other indicators related to key planetary boundaries would help complement data on current levels of wellbeing and support a post-growth narrative.

Conclusion

As one of the main ways that sufficiency-oriented thinking has made inroads into mainstream politics, the wellbeing economy is worthy of serious consideration, both for its potential and limits to date. Present trends suggest that the wellbeing economy is emerging as a “weak post-growth” perspective—one that moves beyond economic growth as the central goal, and beyond GDP to a more comprehensive set of wellbeing indicators, but in practice remains dependent on economic growth. To become a “strong post-growth” perspective, it needs to be linked to a much more challenging project of disentangling contemporary societies’ dependence on economic growth to meet intermediate goals such as employment creation and provision of social welfare, which are closely associated with the ultimate goal of wellbeing. The

14 Scotland does include a carbon footprint indicator in its NPF.

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steps taken so far—important as they are—are only the tip of the iceberg in creating a post-growth wellbeing economy that emphasizes sufficiency.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

Author contributions

AH and CD contributed to the conception of the study, identification of documents for analysis, and interpretation of results. AH coded the documents and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors contributed to manuscript revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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