



WELLBEING ECONOMY ALLIANCE

WEAll Ideas: Little Summaries of Big Issues

What is a wellbeing economy?

Different ways to understand the vision of an economy that serves people and planet

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WEAll

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Disclaimer: WEAll is a collaboration, not a representative body. With over 100 affiliated organisations around the world, its membership includes an unprecedented breadth of approaches, views and expertise. These *WEAll Ideas* papers benefit from the knowledge of our diverse members and associates, but do not necessarily represent their organisational positions or individual stances. WEAll is proud to support and amplify the ideas in this paper, but in doing so it does not present them on behalf of our entire membership.

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Introduction

The Wellbeing Economy Alliance seeks to make the economy more humane and more sustainable. With over 100 affiliated groups across the world, we are as broad as the current model is narrow – diverse in our experience, expertise, focus, strategy, and our spheres of influence.

We agree that not only do we need to collaborate to have the impact we need – ‘togetherness above agreement’ – we also share a sense of what a wellbeing economy is. Different parts of the movement will emphasise different elements and add more details as their experience, knowledge, and focus allows – but they will do so from a common sense of what a wellbeing economy is all about.

This *WEAll Ideas: Little Summaries of Big Issues* paper is an attempt to share some of that sense in different formats that are useful for different audiences.

The content in here is drawn from the wellbeing economy community in its broadest sense. Our founding members contributed to the goals/fundamentals/building blocks – themselves drawing on processes of engagement, dialogue and discussion with their networks. People from all over the world have added to the *Old Way Vs New Way* matrix. And WEAll’s communications group has helped draft the everyday explanation.

More detail on these aspects of a wellbeing economy will be provided in the *WEAll Ideas: Little Summaries of Big Issues* paper series, on WEAll resources hub, and in the expertise of our members and allies.

1. Why a wellbeing economy?

What's wrong with the current system?

We hold that the current economy is an economic system that is unsustainable, unfair, unstable, and unhappy.

The economic model that has become so dominant is called all sorts of things: 'neoliberal'; 'market fundamentalist'; 'overly financialised'; 'extractive'; and 'toxic'.

What it is *called* doesn't matter so much as how it has strangled our imaginations and our sense of possibility. The current economy is seen as the only kind of economy that we can have, and that to resist it would be to bring society to its knees.

Yet society is already on its knees – seen in widening economic inequalities (especially as the very richest race further away); in levels of insecurity, despair and loneliness; and in desperate searches for ways to cope solutions that turn people inwards or against each other as trust in each other and in institutions withers away. Many people fear the loss of their jobs, insecurity in old age, and the destruction of their dreams and cultural norms.

The planet is also on her knees – on the brink of the 6th mass extinction with the prospect of catastrophic climate break down getting closer and closer. In the last 40 years, humanity as a whole has gone from using one planet's worth of natural resources each year to using one and a half, and is on course to using three planets worth by 2050.

And the root cause of this is how the economy is currently designed – in a way that does not account for nature, in a way that is blind to distribution of resources, and in a way that puts measures of progress such as short-term profit and GDP to the fore.

These are structures that are deliberate – and hence can be dismantled and designed differently.

2. WEAll Need

The non-negotiables of a wellbeing economy

WEAll need...

1. Dignity: Everyone has enough to live in comfort, safety and happiness
2. Nature: A restored and safe natural world for all life
3. Connection: A sense of belonging and institutions that serve the common good
4. Fairness: Justice in all its dimensions at the heart of economic systems, and the gap between the richest and poorest greatly reduced
5. Participation: Citizens are actively engaged in their communities and locally rooted economies

While quite simple, we believe that these points are a sturdy set of wheels to help convey the Wellbeing Economy Alliance members' initiatives and scholarship to more people and where we wish to go together. As WEAll member Chris Riedy wrote, 'When we faithfully carry these principles through into actual policies and programs, we do end up with proposals that are very different to what we have now'.

3. What is a wellbeing economy?

The concept of holistic wellbeing is familiar the world over, even though different terms might be used to describe its key idea: quality of life and flourishing for all people and sustainability for the planet.

Even while this understanding exists in many places and cultures, the economic system that dominates the world has lost the capacity to effectively organise and distribute resources and to care for the natural world. To re-state the consequences of what the current system reinforces, a focus on growing GDP has aligned economic policy with the interests of the wealthy few and lost sight of the larger goal of sustainable wellbeing for everyone. This results in destruction of the earth's ecosystem, widespread poverty, inequality, growing political unrest and lack of a vision for a better future.

Economics and business practices need to be reoriented to **what an economy should actually deliver: an equitable distribution of wealth, health and wellbeing, while protecting the planet's resources for future generation and other species.** By reorienting goals and expectations for business, politics and society, we can build a wellbeing economy that serves people and planet. A wellbeing economy would deliver good lives for people first time around, rather than requiring so much effort to patch things up. It will not harm people and the environment, and so will avoid having to deliver expensive down-stream intervention to fix the damage caused by the growth-ist economic model.

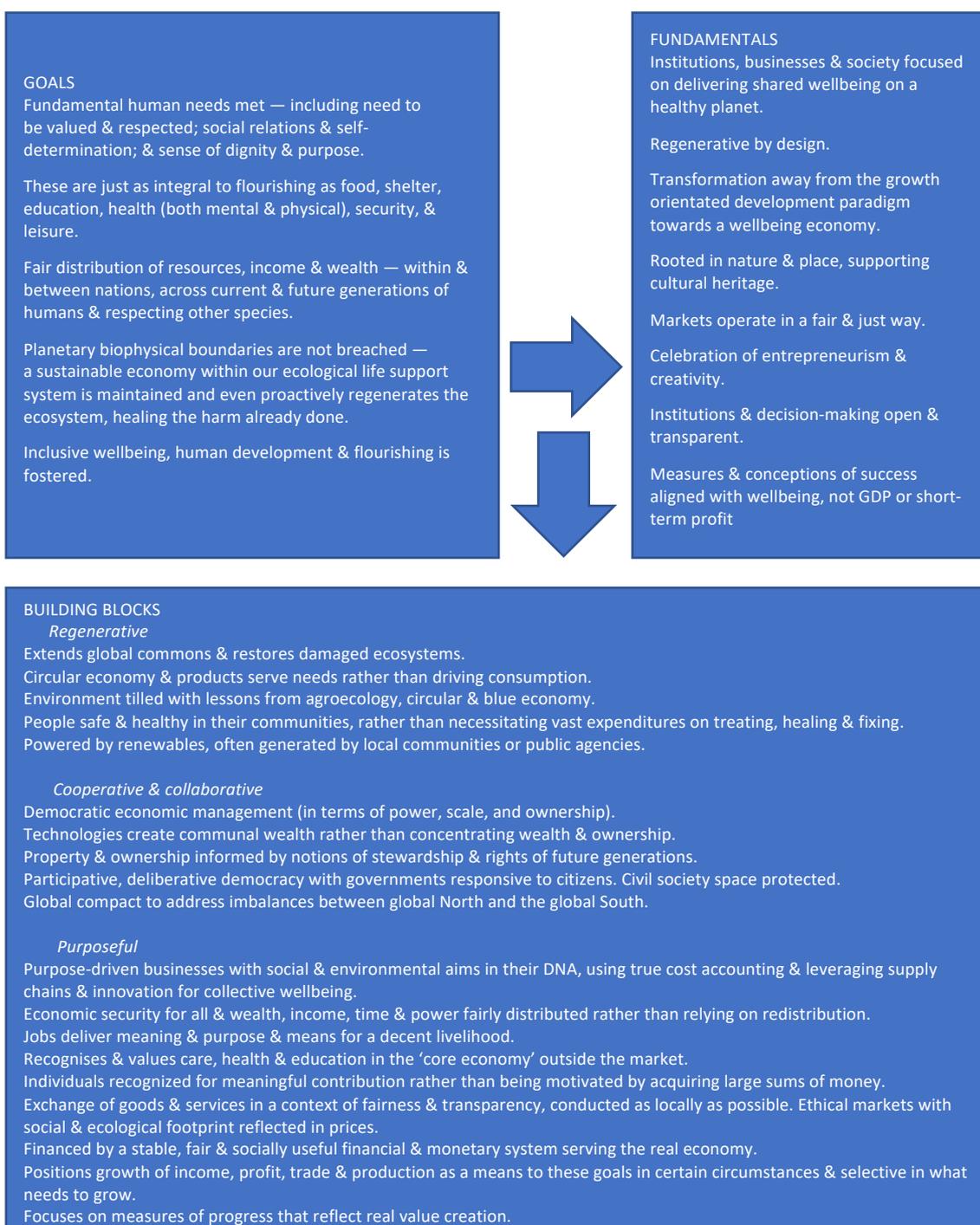
When it all boils down to it, a wellbeing economy is designed with a different purpose: it starts with the idea that the economy should serve people and communities, first and foremost.

The shared vision for a better way of doing things can be found across a surprising range of texts and backgrounds: it is embedded in the scripts of many religions. It is contained in worldviews of First Nations communities. It can be read in the scholarship of development experts and in research findings about what makes people content. This vision echoes in evidence from psychology about human needs and from neuroscience about what makes our brains react, and, perhaps most importantly, can be heard loud and clear in deliberative policy conversations with people all over the world about what really matters to them in their lives.

A wellbeing economy means allowing humanity to determine economics, rather than the other way around.

4. What are the fundamentals and building blocks?¹

Some details of what a wellbeing economy entails



¹ The areas in this table are drawn from a suite of projects and consultations that engaged with experts on wellbeing economics and grass roots communities about what an economy that serves people and planet entails. We see this conceptualisation as ever-evolving as we work together to refine our ideas, knowledge, and policies.

5. Explaining a wellbeing economy in everyday language

The economy belongs to all of us, not just the bankers and the politicians. Taxes and other rules shape how the economy is designed, but really the economy is jobs, schools, housing, the stuff we buy and the money in our pockets.

Everyone participates in the economy, but the economy isn't working for everyone. Today's economic system is centred on growth — the same way many businesses are set up to extract profit.

Growth can be good, but if we only value growth we fail to focus on what really matters. For example, in a growth economy, war can be good as it drives up arms sales just as ill health boosts the bottom line of pharma companies.

But more sales and bigger bottom lines might be bad news for our future. Scientists are telling us that the planet can't handle more and more. We can't keep growing the pie when the oven is only so big - we need to share the pie more equally.

Right now, we spend a lot of time and money trying to fix the harm caused by an economy which puts growth as the top priority. This harm can be seen in pollution, carbon emissions into the atmosphere, jobs that stress people out and jobs that don't pay enough to live on. In the face of this damage, it often seems like the best we can hope for are small steps that might make things a little better in the short term and help people cope with things for another day.

But this vastly underestimates our ability to enact big-picture change. A wellbeing economy would deliver good lives for people the first time around, rather than requiring so much effort to patch things up. It would be an economy that values what matters: health, education, communities, nature.

We're not starting from scratch. Many of the ideas and examples needed to build a wellbeing economy are already out there, they just need more support, and to be more joined-up with one another.

Costa Rica delivers longer life expectancy and higher wellbeing than the US with just a third of the ecological footprint per person. New Zealand is showing how to design government budgets for a wellbeing economy, focusing on quality of life and kindness over GDP. Alternative business models like cooperatives show us how success beyond profit can be embraced.

When it all boils down to it, a wellbeing economy is designed with a different purpose - it starts with the idea that the economy should serve people and communities, first and foremost.

We designed the current economy, so we can design a new one: the only limits are our imagination. We all have a role to play in building a system that works for us - you can be part of it today.

6. How will a wellbeing economy differ from the current economy?

Getting a sense of the contrast across a range of areas and issues

The current economic system (the ‘old way’) responds to the common needs of humanity and the planet in ways that do not address the heart of problems and do not make life better for all. In fact, often problems are made worse or at best responses act as ‘sticking plasters’.

In a wellbeing economy (the ‘new way’), responses would be person-centred, geared towards environmental protection and regeneration, positive and long-term. The exciting thing is – the new way is already emerging, with inspiring examples around the world showing us the way.

This table sets out indicative wellbeing economy responses to some of the major issue areas that decision makers deal with. It’s a work in progress and is co-created with suggestions added on a regular basis. Thus the version below is a snap-shot in time. For the most recent version please visit <https://wellbeingeconomy.org/oldwaynewway>.

Issue area (alphabetical)	OLD WAY: Current system response(s)	NEW WAY: Indicative Wellbeing Economy response(s)
Climate crisis and communities	<p>Carbon capture and storage and emergency responses to ‘natural’ weather-related disasters</p> <p>Low income communities most affected by climate crisis and bear most of the costs</p> <p>Communities expected to increase their resilience</p>	<p>Circular economy principles in manufacturing and resource use</p> <p>Community-based renewable energy generation</p> <p>Climate crisis mitigated</p> <p>Climate justice to ensure the burden of adaptation and mitigation is shouldered by those most responsible</p>
Economics education	<p>Curricula confined to neo-classical approaches and narrow focus on theory and models</p>	<p>Pluralistic and heterodox curricula on offer</p> <p>Dynamic macro modelling and systems perspective</p> <p>Real world context to the fore</p>
Food System	<p>Prices ignore environmental costs of production (including transport costs) and do not pay living wages to suppliers</p> <p>Unhealthy addictive food cheaper than healthy food</p> <p>Small-hold producers are price takers at the beck and call of large agricultural complexes</p>	<p>In-season</p> <p>Locally grown, regenerative and cruelty free</p> <p>Fair value share throughout supply chain</p> <p>Plant-based diets more common place</p>

Fossil Fuels	<p>Exhaustion of remaining fossil fuel reserves seen as viable</p> <p>No planning for livelihoods of workers in brown fields beyond fossil fuels, leaving communities economically stranded</p>	<p>Tangible pathways of training, enterprise creation, income support for brown field workers</p> <p>Relevant skills directed to circular economy and renewable energy</p>
Materials cycle	<p>Linear: take, make, use, waste</p> <p>Planned obsolescence</p> <p>Prices unrelated to environmental cost</p>	<p>Circular</p> <p>Extended producer responsibility</p> <p>Prices of inputs and production reflect true and full cost</p> <p>Local artisans delivering repair and remanufacture</p>
Mindsets	<p>The dominant mindset is that there is no alternative to neoliberal capitalism and business as usual</p>	<p>The dominant mindset is that thousands of alternatives for designing economies exist – it is in our power to design economies differently. Economies should have human and environmental wellbeing as their focus</p> <p>Innovation is the norm</p>
Pollution	<p>Costs passed onto third parties</p> <p>Clean up rather than prevention</p>	<p>Polluting the commons charged at true prices – producer pays</p> <p>Caps on emissions set according to science</p>
Purpose of the Economy	<p>Boils down to increasing per capita GDP</p>	<p>Holistic measures of progress that encompass human and ecological wellbeing, including of future generations</p> <p>Co-creation of these measures through wide public consultation</p>
Work	<p>Acute specialization and atomization</p> <p>Workers treated as 'just in time inventory' and a cost to be reduced</p>	<p>Tasks shared, autonomy devolved, scope to follow through</p> <p>Workers treated as human beings. Work shared to allow more economic equality and working time reduced to allow other activities in employee's lives</p> <p>Remuneration reflects social value (not just what 'Compensation Committees' decide). Employees receive a decent share of the value they create</p>

7. Acknowledgements

All the material above has emerged from conversations and discussions with people in the WEAll family and beyond. Much of it is synthesised from their reports, papers and vision documents. There are too many minds and ideas to acknowledge them all individually, but their work is vital in informing understanding of a wellbeing economy.