
Global Trends

Wellbeing Discourses in an Environment of “Unsustainable Development”: Bridging the Past and the Future

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Abstract—Recent developments in expert discourse regarding transformations of the welfare state and its future are discussed. The research field embraces international organizations’ visions and national strategic program documents of members of the Wellbeing Economy Governments partnership (New Zealand, Scotland, Iceland, Wales, and Finland), international rankings data, expert discussion papers, and research literature. The wellbeing economy model—the key focus in this discussion—is part of the sustainable development framework, and its advocates and supporters seek to contribute to the mainstream discourse on development. These models are now facing severe systemic limitations, due to emerging challenges in the context of resource scarcity and growing international and political tensions. Promoting universal models appears to be an unsustainable challenge; in an international environment of “unsustainable development,” a reference framework for development relies on a diversity of approaches to progress in wellbeing and on principles encompassing a dialogue culture and on responsible commitment.

Keywords: discourse, social state, welfare state, welfare, wellbeing, wellbeing economy, “wellbeing budget,” political-environmental discourses, sustainable development, responsible development

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The concept of “sustainable development” has been around for more than three decades. Since the work of the Brundtland Commission,¹ which formulated the development agenda “without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs,”² new approaches have appeared in the public debate aimed at solving the multivalued task of “a future for all.” It suffices to recall the infamous “third way”—the course adopted by the British Laborites and politicians of several other Western countries towards the synthesis of neoliberal economic attitudes and elements of the welfare state, justified and popularized by

Anthony Giddens and his associates [Giddens, 1990; 1998]. The “new communitarianism,” the principles of which were developed in the widely known works of Amitai Etzioni [Etzioni, 1993; 1997], focused on promoting the ideal of communities united by common moral principles and creative social practices. The work of Elinor Ostrom [Ostrom, 1990], the first female winner of the Bank of Sweden Prize in Economics (Nobel Prize, 2009), drew attention to this dimension at the same time. Another dimension is corporate social responsibility strategies and “corporate citizenship” models for business, which have been transformed into today’s popular “environmental, social, and corporate governance” criteria (ESG). Like variations of the “green transition”—an invariable part of the modern political agenda of the West and the unprecedented scale of the “green” lobby business project—these ideas were correlated with the philosophy of sustainable development within the “new capitalism” model. According to the beliefs of its supporters, the prospects for the notorious “end of history” were opening.

Reflecting on the path taken over 30 years, one cannot but agree with the conclusion that this slogan, popular at the end of the millennium, in reality marked “the beginning of the end of the global hierar-

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¹ Named after Gro Harlem Brundtland, the head of the World Commission on Environment and Development at the UN, the then leader of the Norwegian Labor Party, and the Prime Minister of Norway.

² *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future* (Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 1987).

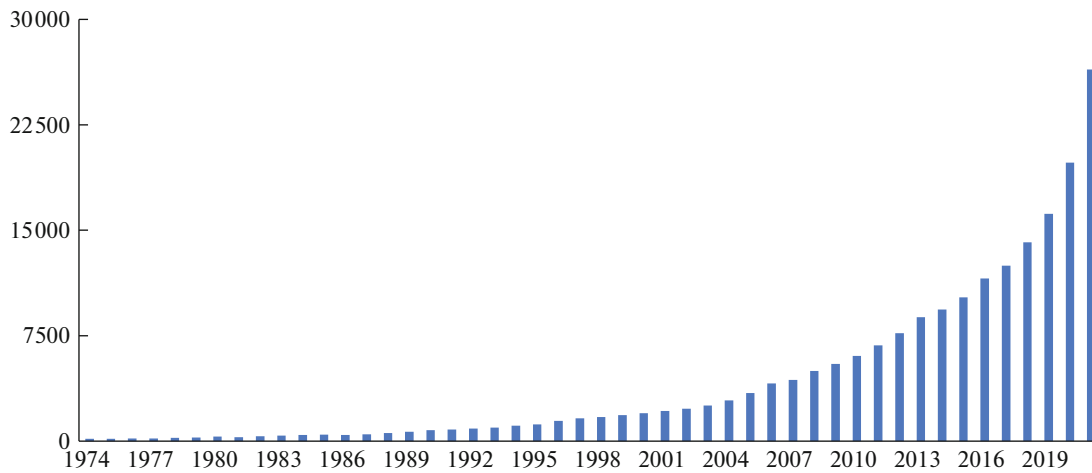


Fig. 1. Number of publications on wellbeing in Scopus Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of summary data of publications included in the bibliographic and abstract database of the Scopus scientific literature.

chy of political concepts of the West, which centered on societies that identified themselves as market liberal democracies” [Martyanov, 2021, p. 112]. The existing conceptual consensus is collapsing before our eyes, not only due to clear transformations in the structure of the world order but also under the influence of radical changes in social and cultural norms that regulate social relations in Western societies and from where this consensus originates. The landmarks of the desired future, the very possibility of finding an overall direction of political and sociocultural development for communities that differ in their political culture and resource endowment, are under question.

Western societies ideally perceived “sustainable development” as the result of political democracy and a welfare state, the correlation of the development of institutions of political participation and social support for the population with stable economic growth. Moreover the dissolution of consensus around the goals of development and the very image of the future is largely due to the crisis of the institutions of the welfare state, with the exhaustion of the possibilities of Western societies to ensure their former standard of living at the expense of the resources of the rest of the world. There was a demand for a radical revision of the models and priorities of social policy that had developed in the industrial era; however, serious differences appeared in the approaches of the political and administrative elites and various social groups in Western countries.

Attempts to bring the academic discourse on the welfare state to a new level are largely associated with the difficulties of generating novel, breakthrough ideas in this area in recent years. No coincidence that the starting point in modern discussions is the study by the Danish sociologist Gösta Esping-Andersen, which was published during a period of active search for new models of development [Esping-Andersen, 1990].

This work, seminal for social research, dealt with the prospects of “welfare capitalism” as a basis for renewal the social contract that had developed in the postwar era in Western countries.

The Keynesian origins of the models identified by Esping-Andersen have become the property of economic history; in the context of a shrinking resource base for mass social support, current searches are directed towards a redistribution of responsibility between the state that sets development priorities; business as a “generator” of income; and citizens, families, and households as beneficiaries of state policy. At the center of the discussion are issues of responsibility and trust. The distribution of the obligations of the parties and the understanding of their mutual responsibility determine the direction of the development policy, but the ethical guidelines of such a policy remain vague, and the interpretation of the social norm and forms of its political institutionalization is a subject of acute disagreement in the expert community [Semenenko, 2019; 2021].

In the 2010s reformatting proceeded by revising the priorities of state regulation and increasing the responsibility of citizens for ensuring their wellbeing. The end of the “welfare state” was announced back in 2013 in the Netherlands: in this wealthy country in terms of GDP per capita (sixth place among European countries, \$54 300 at PPP, data for 2020),³ the “welfare society” model gave way to the “participation society.” This concept was adopted (openly or behind the scenes) in countries that based their social policy on the principles of state redistribution and social protection of the mass strata and developed the ideas and logic of the notorious “third way.” Experiments such

³ GDP per capita, PPP—Country rankings, Global Economy.com, Business and economic data for 200 countries. https://theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/gdp_per_capita_ppp/Europe/.

as the introduction of an universal basic income—a mechanism for “transition to a more responsible personal strategy for each citizen” based on the “monetization” of the resources of the welfare state—have not been successful [Sadovaya, 2020, p. 70]. In the context of the emergence of new threats to human wellbeing associated with the pandemic, the degree of discussion about the limits of mutual obligations of participants in social interactions—the state, business, family, individual—and their consequences for ensuring guarantees of individual freedoms of a person and citizen has noticeably increased.

At the beginning of the 21st century, there was a radical shift in the agenda of discussions from a focus on social problems to a predominant focus on climate change and environmental degradation. At the same time, the demand to ensure an environmental and social “link” and to integrate the environmental component into the social dimension of development policy sounded ever more loudly. If we briefly outline the framework of the current discussion, then the question is about the fundamental possibility and about the ways of social development without harming the environment and ecological development without harming future generations. Such synergy is expected to be achieved by changing the direction of the dominant economic model towards postgrowth.

FROM “WELFARE STATE” TO “WELLBEING ECONOMY”

The radical transformations of the economic structure that occurred within the life cycle of one generation raised the question of reformatting the social policy agenda. The digital transformation of the state and the drift of the labor market towards an “invisible digital platform” is accompanied by changes in the regulation of employment, healthcare, education, and social security of the population that change the social policy agenda [Social State, 2020]. Do contemporary discourses reveal new outlines in the social development governance system? What influence does expert discourse have on the governance agenda? Or, on the contrary, do the impulses come from the state and from the market, from the players of the market economy and then are captured by the expert community?

The first publications on wellbeing as a development priority appeared in the early 1950s (the Scopus database, launched in 2004, registers only six such publications in 1951, and 17 ten years later). Since the late 1970s, a gradual growth begins, partly due to the reaction of the scientific and expert community to the 1972 report of the Club of Rome *The Limits to Growth*. In the 2000s the increment is already proceeding at a rapid pace, and at the turn of the third decade, it has passed the 25000 mark (26429 publications in 2021). The focus of researchers is theoretical understanding, qualitative assessments, and quantitative analysis of economic wellbeing, social wellbeing, and governance

practices for promoting and maintaining wellbeing. The focus on the achievements of the West as a model for the rest of the world in the last two decades is complemented by the promotion of positive experience and best practices of the non-Western world, but they are evaluated in the same Western-centric paradigm.⁴ At the same time, a growing critical discourse focuses on reassessing the Western experience as universal, asking questions about the applicability of models of wellbeing and proposed mechanisms for their implementation, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),⁵ about “environmental imperialism” and “climate dictate” [Mazzocchi, 2020; Nefedov, 2005; Mohammed, 1999]. Even the current experience of European countries makes us pay attention to different priorities related to the peculiarities of political culture, national self-consciousness, and identity, as well as to the structure of the national economy and the ideological positions of political leaders (for example, in such different national-state communities as Hungary or Ireland).

The term *wellbeing* itself has a long history in philosophical and economic thought, but its roots in the social sciences date back to the second half of the 20th century. Wellbeing has become a reference point in the development and implementation of governance practices that correspond to the agenda of the welfare state of the universal Western model. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term *wellbeing* as “the state of being or doing well in life; a happy, healthy, or prosperous state; moral or physical wellbeing (of a person or community)”; Ozhegov’s explanatory dictionary, as “a calm and happy state” or “life in contentment.” The meanings that are invested today in the understanding of “wellbeing” as a scientific category are largely determined by the historical and cultural context of the study or the priorities of public policy.

Thus, in China, the official discourse states the construction of a “moderately prosperous society”; as guidelines for the future, the tasks of “achieving more noticeable and significant shifts in the comprehensive development of the individual and in the implementation of the general prosperity of the population”⁶ are set. The slogan of “common prosperity” appeared in official political discourse under Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s, at the same time the question was raised of how to “avoid polarization” between rich and poor

⁴ Costa Rica tops the Happy Planet Index, beating Western economies on sustainable wellbeing, The 2021 Happy Planet Index. <https://happyplanetindex.org/the-latest-happy-planet-index-costa-rica-tops-the-list-beating-western-economies-on-sustainable-wellbeing/>.

⁵ Sipiczki, A. (2022) A critical look at the ESG market. <https://www.sipotra.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/A-CRITICAL-LOOK-AT-THE-ESG-MARKET.pdf>.

⁶ Xi Jinping’s speech at the solemn meeting on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CCP, Xinhua News. https://russian.news.cn/2021-07/01/c_1310038413.htm.

areas of the country, “without weakening the vitality of developed areas and encouraging eating from the same big pot” [Deng Xiaoping, 1994, pp. 470–471]. Four decades later, “an ideal goal, the implementation of which was postponed until a high level of economic development was achieved,” “gained concrete shape” [Gamza and Lomanov, 2021, p. 150].

Obviously, this challenge is facing not only China. The correlation between the goals of the wellbeing economy and motivation for development actualizes the question of assessing the psychological dimension of development and of determining specific guidelines and horizons. Whether a “welfare society” is feasible in principle is debatable. This topic is discussed mainly in relation to population health and assessments of subjective wellbeing [Maccagnan et al., 2019]. A broader social vision is rather an exception; it is present in the documents of individual expert entities working in the field of social design; at the same time, the system of coordinates and the strategic vision of development are aligned in accordance with the standards and priorities of the developed countries of the West [see, for example, Hellström et al., 2015], which set the tone of the discussion. In recent years, the problems of the poorest countries have been acutely heard in the academic field in the context of postcolonial discourse.

In addition to ambiguous interpretations with an emphasis on economic indicators or subjective perception, both domestic and foreign researchers have difficulties in divorcing the concepts of “wellbeing” and “welfare.” The terms *wellbeing* and *welfare* are often used interchangeably, but in a strict sense they have different meanings. If welfare reflects the material side of the issue, wellbeing precisely characterizes the state of happiness and tranquility [Tsapenko, 2015, p. 23], that is, the feelings of a person experiencing these states, which are extrapolated to the community as the bearer of the “cumulative” feelings of its members. The category of subjective wellbeing reflects the state of social wellbeing of the individual and the community; today, as Russian researchers note, “the understanding that the subjective wellbeing of citizens is one of the most important tasks facing governments has become mainstream” [Monusova and Goffe, 2020, p. 166]; accordingly, the number of works studying not only psychological but also economic and political aspects of its influence on social development is growing. However, the methodology of “defining and measuring subjective wellbeing has not been worked out, which makes it difficult to study it and forces one to treat subjective assessments with restraint and caution” [Ibid., p. 178]. Such attempts have been made repeatedly; as a result, a common place has become a correlation with the ratings of the World Happiness Report, which has been released annually since 2012 under the auspices of the UN and is widely

promoted,⁷ despite the controversial assessment criteria and the very possibility of a comparative assessment of the social dynamics of states according to such criteria.

The possibilities of political manipulation of subjective assessments in an attempt to evoke predictable reactions and to play on negative sentiments are used both in the struggle for votes and in the imposition of governing decisions. This rejection is reinforced by the experience of global risks and the gaps between the technological capabilities to generate them and the cognitive and sociopsychological resources of risk management; under these conditions, “there is a search for new role models of success and ‘narratives of hope’ based not on economic prosperity but on prosocial behavior” [Nestik and Zhuravleva, 2020, pp. 29, 22].

For the carriers of the religious picture of the world, such behavior is correlated with the Divine plan for man and the world, with the search for higher meanings of Being. Questions of compatibility of different pictures of the world are reflected in modern discussions about social justice, correlating, including critically, with the landmark work of John Rawls [Rawls, 1971], about the very possibility of “global justice” [see Sadovaya and Sautkina, 2015, pp. 52–59] and about social imagination as a source of forming a positive image of the future but also in discussions about the meanings and conflicting interpretations of development that this category is endowed with by carriers of different worldviews.

Understanding “the fundamental diversity of forms of people’s inner experience, the diversity of both cultural traditions and innovative searches” postulates the multidimensionality of development, which is supported by human relationships and the culture of dialogue [Rashkovskii, 2022, pp. 108–109]. The variety of forms of social wellbeing, which determines the horizons of social development, is the result of this primary multidimensionality of interpersonal and intergroup interactions and their institutional forms. However, such questions are outside the field of the mainstream discourse of “sustainable development,” which postulates the wellbeing guidelines as an entity given from the outside, as a task solved for a person, which is already saturated and oversaturated with economic and social meanings and does not accommodate different interpretations of such meanings. Beyond this discourse remains the spiritual dimension of development, as well as the vital, existential importance of finding ways to overcome the profound spiritual crisis of the consumer society. By ignoring this component in public discourse deepens the value divide in modern societies.

In the expert community today, there is basically a consensus around the key priorities of the transition

⁷ *World Happiness Report*, New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network.

to “wellbeing in life.” Among them, the climate and environmental agendas and the problems of inequality and social exclusion are invariably present. Furthermore, the demystification of economic growth as a universal response to societal demands, and the orientation of economic management decisions towards improving the level of intangible wellbeing of current and future generations is also sharply raised [Laurent, 2021].

LEARNING FROM EXPERT PLATFORMS: ALLIANCE FOR THE WELLBEING ECONOMY

The responsibility for promoting attractive models of the “wellbeing economy” as the basis of a new social consensus, undermined by the erosion of the foundations of the welfare state, is now shared by the expert communities and political elites of the countries promoting these priorities. Without exception, all interactions of this kind, aimed at attracting broad public attention, are carried out on open network platforms; the effectiveness of such interactions largely depends on expert support. Thus, corporate business has been popularizing its social responsibility within the framework of the “corporate citizenship” and “stakeholder capitalism” models for more than a decade, and its counterparties operate on numerous platforms of civil initiatives of the “global civil society” [see Peregudov and Semenenko, 2009]. However, these concepts themselves are losing their former attractiveness in the conditions of the crisis of the Western-centric model of globalization. Various expert ratings that assess the state and even the “degree” of public relations have become popular tools for organizing discussion and information [Sadovaya et al., 2016].

Efforts can be undertaken to harmonise the priorities and interests of different stakeholders around the socioeconomic regulatory agenda. For example, the Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEAll)⁸ is a network of more than 200 civil-society and business organizations focused on advancing this agenda and citizens in their personal capacity. On this platform, a Wellbeing Economy Governments partnership (WEGo) has been created, where wellbeing is not only included in the political and governance agenda and in national development strategies, but where targets to measure the wellbeing of national and local communities (Wellbeing Economy Governments partnership (WEGo)) are being implemented. New Zealand, Scotland, Wales, Iceland, and Finland currently participate in this association. In fact, this initiative is designed to help deepen cooperation, search for innovative governance approaches and solutions, promote “good practices,” and exchange experience and information between members.

The organizers are aimed at expanding the partnership through states and regional governments with dif-

⁸ Wellbeing Economy Alliance. <https://weall.org/>.

ferent economic indicators and different social structures, while this is a relatively homogeneous association of small northern and Anglo-Saxon countries. Each of the member countries positions itself as a leader in one of the key areas for promoting an alternative socioeconomic agenda.

New Zealand

Criticism of the paradigm of economic growth and GDP dynamics as an indicator that does not reflect the real level of wellbeing of the national community was voiced in academic discourse at the turn of the 1990s, when the New Zealand economist Marilyn Waring published a book that laid the foundation for “feminist economics.” This work drew attention to the contribution to the wellbeing of women in the household, which is not taken into account in the GDP, as well as the environmental damage from human economic activity [Waring, 1988].

In the three decades that have passed since then, the debate over adequate estimates of the level of wellbeing has only gained momentum. The result was the promotion of the international system for calculating the Human Development Index, then the Human Development Index under the UN auspices. Today, under the auspices of the World Economic Forum, broadcast projects for the integration of the “care economy” are being promoted, included as a way to solve problems of gender equality, especially by the example of the experience of non-Western countries, promoted in this context.⁹ However, traditional GDP indicators remain superior.

Back in the early 1990s, the country’s minister of social security introduced the From Welfare to Wellbeing initiative, the goal of which was to mobilize society around a long-term social agenda [Player, 1994]. The initiative then focused only on social security and did not affect other areas. Today, New Zealand is one of the few leading countries in promoting the wellbeing economy model. For the fourth year in a row, it has approved a “wellbeing budget” that prioritizes people and the environment. Investment decisions are made considering the social and environmental performance of the projects. However, these decisions do not yet significantly affect the real situation in the social sphere and in the environment: biodiversity is deteriorating, and the impact of the pandemic is also felt. According to critics, the “wellbeing budget” does not change the logic of the functioning of the economic system but patches up the holes that this system

⁹ Care economy: An opportunity to create jobs and close the gender gap, World Economic Forum 2022. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/05/care-economy-gender-gapdavos22/#:~:text=The%20care%20economy%20comprehends%20those,even%20less%20are%20considered%20productive.>

leaves.¹⁰ However, the critics themselves do not have a program for implementation of the intended targets.

New Zealand has a record of advancing the climate agenda to achieve carbon neutrality, also controversial in terms of achievable results but with strong political and public support. There is also the experience of integrating the priorities of the indigenous population into national development strategies: the policy of biculturalism ensured the promotion of Maori culture as a bearer of a unique image of the country, the “New Zealand project” was actively promoted as an advanced social model [Semenenko, 2021, pp. 35–37]. “Cultural identity” is included among the key dimensions of the wellbeing of New Zealand society, along with citizen involvement and trust in government institutions, the state of the environment, public health and housing, income and consumption, work and earnings, knowledge and skills, security, social connections, subjective wellbeing, and the distribution of time between work and leisure.¹¹ However, social inequality remains a serious problem, and the compatibility of economic, social, and environmental agendas is a systemic challenge both for the current “government of change” and for promoting the priorities of the “wellbeing economy.”

Scotland

It was Scotland that in 2018 took the initiative to create the WEGo partnership on the foundation of the WEAll network platform. Like New Zealand, Scotland seeks to lead the way in promoting new development models and seeks to position itself in this debate and in promoting model “good practices.” Even before the official ratification of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon stated that Scotland would adopt the SDGs and provide international leadership in the implementation of this agenda [Pautz and Collins, 2019, p. 6].

Scotland is actively implementing targeted measures to promote the concept of the wellbeing economy and related governance approaches. Mechanisms have been launched that can contribute to the successful implementation of the outlined agenda, such as the payment of wages that ensure a decent quality of life (Living Wage Scotland); encouragement of socially oriented enterprises through the National Agency for Economic Development (Scottish Enterprise) through the provision of targeted grants; the adoption of advanced legislation on climate change that aims to achieve zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2045. A Just

Transition Commission has been set up to advise the government on how to support communities in the face of phasing out industries that are incompatible with a low-carbon economy. Achieving zero emissions is one of the priorities of the national entity of the same name (Zero Waste Scotland);¹² it promotes circular economy projects combined with responsible consumption education.

In December 2021, the Scottish Government presented a budget developed in collaboration with the Scottish Green Party, which prioritizes improving the welfare of citizens and the development of the social sphere, as well as achieving environmental sustainability; a separate section is devoted to the impact of planned spending on carbon emissions.¹³ Among the tools that could help advance the wellbeing economy are the Community Empowerment Act and efforts to improve their welfare. In Scotland, the discourse of wellbeing is actively promoted at the local level.

However, the debate over the sources and priorities for the implementation of these ambitious plans only intensifies in the current conditions, and supporters of the welfare economy concept criticize current cabinet advisers who promote the principles of “green growth” within the traditional market economy paradigm.¹⁴ The postpandemic recovery, the budget deficit, the situation around Ukraine, and the consequences of the EU sanctions policy make the implementation of the “wellbeing budget” in the planned volume an unrealistic prospect. An acutely negative reaction from the heads of the financial departments of Scotland and Wales was caused by the decision of the Cabinet of Boris Johnson to allocate another tranche of funds for military supplies to Ukraine in June 2022, partly at the expense of their social budgets;¹⁵ in accordance with the principles of devolution, the management of these funds is the responsibility of the countries of the United Kingdom, while military items of expenditure are financed from the national budget.

Wales

Wales joined the Alliance in 2020, but the wellbeing economy has been at the center of public discussion here for years. The idea was reflected in strategic documents, including urban development strategies [Zeidler et al., 2021]. In 2015, Wales passed the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (later incorporated into the Welsh Constitution) to achieve seven goals:

¹⁰Budgets must do more than patch failures, Newsroom, May 21 (2022). <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/budgets-must-do-more-than-patch-up-failures>.

¹¹Our People. Our Country. Our Future. *Living Standards Framework: Background and Future Work*. Wellington, New Zealand: New Zealand Government, The Treasury, 2018. <https://www.treasury.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2018-12/lisf-background-future-work.pdf>.

¹²Zero Waste Scotland. <https://www.zerowastescotland.org.uk/>

¹³Scottish Budget 2022 to 2023, The Scottish Government, 2021. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-budget-2022-23/>.

¹⁴The Myth of Green Growth, Wellbeing Economy Alliance, 2020. <https://weall.org/the-myth-of-green-growth>.

¹⁵Westminster raids Welsh Government funds to pay for military aid for Ukraine, Wales Online, June 30 (2022). <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/politics/westminster-raids-welsh-government-funds-24361829>.

prosperity, sustainability, equality, health, community cohesion, cultural preservation and flourishing, and global responsibility. The priorities were formulated in the process of discussion between the state and stakeholders on the platform The Wales We Want National Conversation¹⁶ [Parker, 2022, p. 212]. In addition to the three pillars—the economy, social sphere, and environment—the preservation of centuries of Welsh history and culture has been incorporated into the policy documents as a key pillar of this course. A set of 46 national indicators was proposed to measure progress towards the goals set. Expert entities, such as the Wales Center for Public Policy, are working on the development of evaluation criteria.

Despite the ambitious claims, experts admit that actions at the local level without reorganization of the governance system and strategic planning are of limited effectiveness [Ibid., p. 216]. Wales needs to modernize its port infrastructure and energy network, but the compatibility of such “traditional” priorities and a new vision of development is not obvious, especially since it is impossible to assess the long-term effects of the proposed measures within the existing development budgeting logic.¹⁷

Iceland

The starting point for shaping the wellbeing policy agenda in Iceland was the financial crisis of 2008, which stimulated a revision of the priorities and model of economic management [Abrar, 2021, pp. 170, 171]. Among the priorities of this country, gender discourse and environmental sustainability are highlighted. In terms of gender equality, Iceland is a leader in world rankings. Correlation with the natural environment is a key landmark of the national identity of the Icelanders; any threat to the country’s ecosystems is painfully perceived by the inhabitants as a threat to themselves. The current head of the Cabinet of Ministers, Katrin Jakobsdóttir, notes that the social, economic, and environmental components of politics are inseparable, and the economy must be directed towards combating climate change and inequality.¹⁸ Recent years have witnessed an increase in public trust in the authorities, which ensures the promotion of welfare priorities.

Based on consultations with stakeholders and taking into account public opinion polls, areas such as health, safe housing, work–life balance, achieving

¹⁶The Wales We Want National Conversation. <https://cynnal-cymru.com/the-wales-we-want-national-conversation/?cn-reloaded=1>.

¹⁷The impact of infrastructure on wellbeing in Wales, Wales Center for Public Policy, May 23 (2022). <https://www.wcpp.org.uk/commentary/the-impact-of-infrastructure-on-well-being-in-wales/>.

¹⁸Iceland and the Wellbeing Economy, Chatham House, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_yY_iW0iYw&ab_channel=ChathamHouse.

carbon neutrality, innovative growth, and development of social connections were identified as priorities for the five-year financial plan [Abrar, 2021, p. 172]. A system of 39 indicators has been developed to evaluate the effectiveness.¹⁹ Eight think tanks are responsible for expert assessments [Óskarsdóttir, 2020], primarily the National Statistical Center, the responsibilities of which include collecting, monitoring, analyzing, and data distribution on indicators of the wellbeing of the population on an ongoing basis, as well as tracking and developing these indicators in cooperation with key actors. The projects being implemented today are mainly represented by investments in social infrastructure, healthcare, and education and are included in an ambitious plan to achieve carbon neutrality no later than 2040.

At the turn of the 2010s, the University of Iceland in Reykjavik made an interesting attempt to compare the level of wellbeing of 29 countries in terms of social and economic indicators (in addition to the EU countries, the United States and Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, and Turkey were included in the pool) in correlation with their level of wellbeing (i.e., in a combination of objective and subjective indicators). Iceland was sixth on this list.²⁰

As the developer of this tool noted, the bureaucracy is very small in this country, and government structures often turn to independent experts. Although a significant part of the expertise is transferred to law firms and foreign agencies, some tasks are solved by the national scientific community, due to the small scale of the field, scholars can contribute to the solution of practical problems, which, in turn, directs the country’s scientific community to empirical research of a pragmatic nature [Ólafsson, 2011, p. 17]. As a result of the combined efforts of state and expert structures, a small country with a population of about 350000 people has developed ambitious social and environmental programs. Bearing in mind the scale and insular geographic location, their feasibility is largely determined by natural factors (in particular, climate shifts), while demographic problems and trends in rapid population aging and declining birth rates also act as serious objective constraints.

Finland

The experience of Finland is of particular interest, since the Nordic countries are examples of “successful implementation of the welfare state model” [Zhuravleva, 2019, p. 115] in its classical sense. Over the past three years, this country has been consistently ranked first in the well-known “rating of happiness” (Iceland

¹⁹Indicators for measuring wellbeing (2019) Government of Iceland, Prime Minister’s Office. <https://www.government.is/lisalib/getfile.aspx?itemid=fc981010-da09-11e9-944d-005056bc4d74>.

²⁰Comparing wellbeing of nations: An international database, Þjóðmálstofnun, Social Research Center, University of Iceland, 2011. <http://wellbeing.hi.is/29nations.php>.

is in third position),²¹ although the significance and reliability of such assessments, as was noted above, is beyond dispute.

Finland was the last to join the Wellbeing Economies Partnership. The main challenge for the country's social policy is the aging of the population [Lång, 2022]. Experts predict serious increases in the burden on healthcare under the influence of climate change.²² To address these challenges, Finland has also adopted a welfare economy model. Significant efforts to promote the concept itself were made during the Finnish Presidency of the EU Council in 2019. At the same time, emphasis was placed on the social component—the importance of education, social security, healthcare, achieving gender equality, and safe and healthy working conditions. The willingness to promote such a model was enshrined in the program “Inclusive and Competent Finland: A Socially, Economically, and Environmentally Sustainable Society.”²³ These initiatives were institutionally reinforced by the establishment of a working group on welfare economics within the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to develop a national strategy based on Finnish realities; under the auspices of the Finnish Parliament, the think tank SITRA operates as an intellectual leader in the development of such a strategy and initiator of pilot projects at the local level [Hellström et al., 2015].

Drivers of development in the conditions of the highest level of regulation of the social sphere and forced equalization of incomes need innovative forms of support. A feature of Finland is the attention to delegating decisions to the local level and the development of interaction between local authorities and communities. The introduction of new governance practices is also carried out at the level of Finnish municipalities.²⁴ Unlike other countries of the WEGo Partnership, Finland does not have a system of indicators for measuring wellbeing, and benchmarks, such as reducing inequality and income gaps, as well as achieving carbon neutrality by 2035, are included in related public policy areas.

The platform of the Alliance for the Wellbeing Economy supports network communications, popularizes “good practices,” and offers practical solutions to promote the wellbeing economy model. Many

²¹ *World Happiness Report*, New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network, p. 17.

²² Healthcare and social welfare must systematically prepare for climate change, Finnish government, 2021. <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/1271139/healthcare-and-social-welfare-must-systematically-prepare-for-climate-change>.

²³ Inclusive and Competent Finland: A Socially, Economically, and Environmentally Sustainable Society, Program of Prime Minister Sanna Marin's Government, Helsinki: Publications of the Finnish Government, 2019. https://www.ncsl.org/Portals/1/Documents/educ/International_Ed_Study_Group_2020/Finland/10.Finland2019GovernmentPriorities%20.pdf.

²⁴ Doughnut economics toolbox launch for Finnish municipalities, Doughnut Economics Action Lab, 2022. <https://doughnuteconomics.org/events/179>.

OECD countries rely on similar approaches to one degree or another; in several states (for example, in the Netherlands), the discourse of the wellbeing economy is integrated into the broader social context of the “participatory society.” At the same time, it is unlikely that in the foreseeable future this discourse will become mainstream even in the context of the notorious sustainable development, despite attempts to spread it beyond the group of rich countries that initiated the development of goal-oriented national strategies. This does not exclude the possibility of using “good practices,” but it also requires adequate responses to new challenges facing the social development governance system in a radically changed international political and information technology environment. The question is to what extent it is fundamentally possible to give such answers within the framework of the promoted paradigm of the “wellbeing economy” and the transition to a “wellbeing society.” Moreover, the motivation for development is not limited to these guidelines.

ECOPOLITICAL DISCOURSES AND SOCIAL PRIORITIES: PROBLEMS OF COMPATIBILITY

Environmental degradation and the forecasts of environmental disasters that have not yet occurred, presented in the report of the Club of Rome, mass movements of the 1960s–1970s, and fierce competition between the strategies of corporate players around the “green transition” agenda stimulated a discussion about the need to include environmental policy in the economic development strategies of countries and integration associations. In 2019, the EU Green Deal, commonly known as the European Green Deal, was adopted. The very posing of the question of a “deal” reflects the ambiguity of the priorities of this initiative, its most powerful business component, but also the search for new parameters of a social contract for development around the “green agenda” [Khaynatskaya, 2021]. On the relationship between ecology and development, which was previously considered only in the economic and social key, today the political programs of parties and governments and the targets of international organizations working in various areas of public activity are built—from education and health, culture and tourism to the fight against hunger and aid to refugees.

The discourse on the relationship between environment and wellbeing was reflected in the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment series of reports prepared under the auspices of the UN in 2001–2005. The initiative aimed to assess “the consequences of ecosystem change for human wellbeing and to establish the scientific basis for actions needed to enhance the conservation and sustainable use of ecosystems and their con-

tributions to human wellbeing.”²⁵ Both issues have been included in the SDGs and ESG assessments, and their combination is seen as a new evolutionary step in updating the environmental and social policy toolkit [Wallimann, 2013]. Today, organizations such as the OECD see wellbeing as a systemic basis for addressing climate challenges.²⁶

The inclusion of environmental and climate issues into the global policy agenda has entailed the integration of the environmental dimension into the wellbeing economy model. However, beyond the framework of general declarations of intent, there are compatibility issues, the social price that will have to be paid for the implementation of environmental priorities, and the reverse damage to the environment from social obligations. The risks for the welfare state have been talked about for a long time [Eichner and Wagener, 2004]. Its functioning depends on economic growth, which is considered one of the main factors affecting climate change and environmental degradation [Büchs and Koch, 2017]. Since environmental policy is built around measures, regulations, and a system of regulators that require large-scale investments, the poorer segments of the population suffer due to dependence on state support and lower adaptive capacity [Gough and Meadowcroft, 2012]. Social policies themselves can be carbon intensive as a result of stimulating potentially unsustainable consumption driven by rising disposable income and satisfying needs for subjective wellbeing [Gough, 2017]. The political class of the developed world promotes on international expert platforms an ideal picture of combining social and environmental policies as part of a single strategy for the transition to sustainable development and wellbeing, while its limitations and contradictions are practically not discussed in public political discourse [Koch and Fritz, 2014]. Given the limited capacity of the state budget, social and environmental initiatives initially “compete” for funding and resources [Dryzek, 2008]. The new challenges are the pandemic and growing international tensions, behind which the threat of famine looms in the poorest countries. Migration flows due to environmental changes can become a burden on social financing, the volume of which is difficult to predict.

Possible ways of synergy of the social and environmental agenda, as its supporters argue, are the transformation of the welfare state into an ecological one (ecostate) or into a symbiotic eco-welfare state [García-García et al., 2022]. In societies with a low

level of social inequality and a high level of decommodification (social security outside the market), the presence of social benefits and “airbags,” which in one way or another protect against market shocks, can lay the foundations of an ecostate. Its condition is environmental modernization [Koch and Fritz, 2014], which includes the transition to a more efficient use of resource potential and energy and to “clean” technologies, which reduces the burden on the environment. The application of the Kuznets curve to the analysis of the possibilities of environmental development shows that, as the incomes of states increase, the state of the environment improves, because more expensive and cleaner technologies with less damage to nature can be introduced [Panayotou, 1997], but the cost of such technologies is not correlated with the economic return and social effects of their use. Public support in a strategic perspective can be provided by a transition to postmaterial values influenced by shifts in the cultural norm, but the assimilation of such attitudes does not necessarily imply a commitment to an eco-lifestyle and income redistribution. Ronald Inglehart wrote about the challenges of postmaterialism in conditions of economic instability in the early 1980s, reflecting on the impact of the energy crisis and recession of the previous decade [Inglehart, 1981]. Environmental priorities and the pursuit of social justice may have different motives [Jakobsson et al., 2018]: for example, modern environmental policy is criticized as an attempt by the welfare state to “preserve a lifestyle with high consumption” at the expense of the rest of the world [Bailey, 2015]. Climate policy is perceived ambiguously by socially vulnerable groups of the population and becomes the basis for the emergence of econationalism [Margulies, 2021].

Great expectations in the context of the concept of postgrowth are pinned on the figurative idea of the doughnut economy. It is also based on the sustainable development goals and, in fact, is a concept of transition to a welfare society balancing between social and environmental indicators. Proponents of this approach are looking for opportunities to correlate human needs and the damage from their satisfaction to the environment: on the one hand, no one should live without meeting the minimum social and material needs (“in a doughnut hole”); on the other hand, the condition for their satisfaction is life in ecological boundaries to conserve the natural environment (without breaking the doughnut ring) [Raworth, 2017].

The metaphor is widely discussed in the expert community, which does not share the ideas of globalism, but it has obvious utopian messages²⁷ and serious ideological contradictions that have become the object

²⁵Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005) *Ecosystems and Human Well-being: Synthesis*, Washington, DC: Island Press. <https://www.millenniumassessment.org/documents/document.356.aspx.pdf>.

²⁶Climate Change Mitigation through a Well-being Lens “Putting people at the center of climate action,” OECD (2019). <https://www.oecd.org/environment/cc/flyer-climate-change-mitigation-through-a-well-being-lens.pdf>.

²⁷Milanovic, B. (2018) Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist by Kate Raworth, Brave New Europe. <https://braveneweuropa.com/doughnut-economics-seven-ways-to-think-like-a-21st-century-economist-by-kate-raworth>.

of massive criticism. Personal sacrifice for the sake of the common good and a voluntary refusal to increase needs, motivated by a high level of environmental awareness, are far from always acceptable economically or psychologically achievable. In the broader context of the wellbeing economy, attempts to account for diverse indicators based on universal criteria are fraught with the danger of reformatting responsibilities, shifting it from the state to the citizen, as in the case of an universal basic income, and implicit support for neoliberal principles of regulation. The desire to develop universal approaches to achieving a balance between development goals within the framework of the modern world order leads to a systemic contradiction: in less developed countries, it is necessary to ensure economic growth to fight poverty, but growth contributes to environmental degradation, while the alarmist “green” discourse persistently and even aggressively promotes the idea that humanity does not have the time or resources to maintain viability within the growth paradigm.

CONCLUSIONS: TOWARDS A NEW SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT GOVERNANCE SYSTEM

The study of discourses that promote the model of the wellbeing economy and the society built on the foundation of such a model testifies to the search for new development opportunities beyond the traditional welfare state but also to systemic contradictions in attempts to develop universal development benchmarks. The possibilities of linking the environmental and social agendas are not obvious, especially considering the shifts in public consciousness and public policy priorities that have taken place under the influence of the pandemic, when the issue of the social and economic determinants of people’s health as a key dimension of wellbeing has become acute [Dalziel and Cameron, 2021].

Among the stakeholders involved in the discussions—scholars, experts, politicians, civic activists, representatives of urban and rural communities or interest groups speaking on behalf of “green” business sectors—there are many sincere supporters of post-growth ideas, who are convinced that it is possible to change the targets of economic development through changes in the cultural norm and the corresponding political and administrative agenda under the influence of the active position of citizens and responsible expert work [see Laurent, 2021]. They are optimistic about the possibilities of implementing alternative approaches to the economic growth paradigm, which, in their opinion, bring the prospects of a “wellbeing society” closer. However, the budgets adopted in post-growth-oriented countries reveal a continuing high dependence on progressive economic dynamics and GDP growth. Shift in political priorities towards “green” targets in the future could lead to the redirection of resources from social spending in favor of envi-

ronmental protection or adaptation to these changes. The taxation of nonenvironmental consumption can impose an additional financial burden on citizens. Changes are driven by a divergence between social priorities and ecological benchmarks, creating new cleavages (!) in societies where widespread political appeals to reduce inequality are not matched by measurable results for citizens. Thus, the forced recourse to traditional energy sources confronts the supporters of solving acute social problems and radical adherents of the “green” agenda.

The academic community, which is represented mainly by scholars from developed and relatively prosperous countries by the standards of social wellbeing, actively promotes “universal” benchmarks for social and environmental governance and related approaches that can minimize damage to their economies. However, the proposed priorities limit the ability of the rest of the world to achieve a comparable level and quality of life, thereby helping to maintain the existing division between the notorious “golden billion” and the rest of the population. It is obvious that the current increase in international tension and the unfolding struggle for development resources objectively make even more uncertain the prospects for, albeit selectively, partial implementation of these models even within the framework of national economies that are small in the world. Slowdown of “wellbeing budgets” after the pandemic are the first signs of difficulties; it is obvious that in the context of growing energy and resource poverty, they will also increase. For more complex political and administrative structures that have developed in large economies, it is even more impossible to implement such approaches.

The collapse of the existing world order and the reframing of economic ties, as well as the confrontation of the collective West with Russia and the rigid sanctions pressure on Russia, cause further intensification of systemic problems in the development of previously wealthy Western societies. Thus, energy starvation contributes to inflation, which gobbles “excessive” budgets—potential sources of reorientation of spending. Consequently, supporters of the wellbeing economy face a dilemma: to overcome the crisis by traditional methods, focusing on familiar sources of growth, or to reconstruct the governance system under a new “green” framework and struggle with the obvious economic costs of this choice and unpredictable societal consequences.

The narratives of the wellbeing economy will not go into oblivion, but the semantic content of the concept itself and the criteria for its evaluation will change. The absolutization of GDP indicators works against development, as does the desire to rely solely or primarily on measurements of subjective wellbeing. The ambitious plans of “model” national strategies will have to be adjusted at the very least. Finding a balance between the needs of economic growth and post-

growth priorities that can mitigate the negative effects of growth on the human environment, apparently, remains to be experienced.

The ongoing changes in the structure of the world order, the crisis of the Western-centric model of globalization, and the strengthening of regional centers of power are eroding the universalist socioeconomic agenda for sustainable development. International platforms of various formats that have developed in recent years have ceased to be generators of common benchmarks; the representativeness of various kinds of ratings and other tools for comparing development vectors of countries and regions is questionable. Under these conditions, a scientifically based assessment of the social development agenda based on a combination of measurable and nonmeasurable indicators of human wellbeing becomes a key research priority. The role of the expert community is growing not only and even not so much in the elaboration of development policy priorities but in revising the logic of building the corresponding discourse. Success here largely depends on the level of trust and the culture of dialogue in society, which allow negotiating the social price of the strategies proposed for implementation at the national level but also at the level of cities and territories, using both tangible and intangible resources, based on the promotion of principles of *responsible development*. We would like to hope for the emergence of new narratives that can reflect not only the vital needs of a person of the 21st century but also the meaningful life aspirations of a person living in this rapidly changing social reality.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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