



Rethinking Wellbeing Seminar Series

Thinking About the Environment Differently

Seminar Report

Wednesday 19 September 2012, The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh

Introduction

- 1** This seminar series aims to challenge perceptions of wellbeing, and show the potential of thinking differently about the environment, economy and society for Scotland and its people.
- 2** The first seminar focussed on 'Thinking about the Environment Differently', and this report has three aims:
 - To summarise the main outcomes of this first seminar;
 - To provide a building block for the eventual report for the overall series; and
 - To lay a foundation for two further seminars, 'Thinking about the economy differently', to be held on 15 November 2012; and 'Thinking about society differently', on 20 February 2013.
- 3** The seminar comprised two presentations, followed by a Panel Session with Q&A and discussion (not dissimilar to a Question Time format). The audience included MSPs and their researchers, and other invited guests from a wide range of organisations and civic society in Scotland. Afterwards the Panel and Speakers were invited to a dinner and further discussion with MSPs.

Presentations

- 4 **Dr Aileen McLeod MSP**, a Director of the Scottish Futures Forum, welcomed participants and introduced the seminar series. Rethinking our approach to wellbeing is about how Scotland can find different and better solutions to the intractable problems of environmental and social sustainability. She emphasised the inter-dependence of the economy, the environment and society. Too often these are treated in 3 distinct silos, yet the economy is part of society and society depends on the environment. These all need to be joined up.
- 5 She drew attention to the International (Rio + 20) and European dimensions, where the strategy is for an equitable society and a green economy, and emphasises the eradication of poverty and the need for resource efficiency. These will not be achieved by governments alone, and civil society and the third and private sectors will have key roles to play. In Scotland we need to develop similar frameworks and strategies, to make progress together on sustainable development. The Forum hope that the seminar series will contribute to the business of the Scottish Parliament, including in areas such as maximising the benefits of preventative spending agenda as well as improving the quality of life.
- 6 **Tom Crompton**, Change Strategist at WWF-UK, spoke about how values and decisions inform one another. He stressed the scale of the challenges we face, and the need to create political space for the public acceptance for more ambitious change. The basis of his presentation was grounded in what people value: what shapes and matters to them. He cited Canon Kenyon Wright, Chair of Scottish Constitutional Convention (1999), who reported that “there is a profound longing for a new kind of politics and society that listen to, care for, respect and share with all our people ... in which all count and none are excluded.”
- 7 Tom argued that it is our values on which society is built; they connect issues, such as public health, social mobility, and environmental protection. Yet far too often the environment has been treated as a separate subject, sanitised from the values which infuse public commitment. He described how our values can be evaluated to provide a map of what matters. Based on international research, this shows that the values which people hold overlap, but also fall into consistent clusters. Groups of these clusters can be identified, and there is an antagonistic relationship between those which he called ‘extrinsic’ (tending to instrumental objectives, associated with individualistic self-interest) and ‘intrinsic’ (such as affiliation or relationships and those associated with more altruistic aims, and more likely to support social and environmental action).
- 7 These distinctions are not personality types, but describe the values we bring to play as an important determinant of attitudes and behaviours. He gave practical examples of experimental evidence which shows how values can be engaged and can be reinforced by exercise, like muscles (citing Michael Sandel). Values can be strengthened both by how we talk and by what we do. For example, responses differ if a survey is called a consumer survey rather than a citizen survey. He argued that environmentalists can create an own goal if we try to encourage behaviours by emphasising what nature is worth (“billions of pounds to the UK economy”). This will tend to trigger self-interested responses, rather than support for collective social and environmental action.

- 9 These tensions do not necessarily correlate with left and right in politics. The political traditions of both left and right have these tensions within them, and some surprising politicians recognise the importance of economics not as an end in itself but as a means to change the heart and soul (Margaret Thatcher, 1981). We have seen education treated as a factor in international competitiveness, and threats to activities, such as planning law, which express a sense of collective responsibility.
- 10 Tom drew attention to the primacy accorded to GDP as an indicator of national progress, which percolates through many areas of public policy. What we need are National Progress Indicators which give weight to the intrinsic values, the ones that underpin stronger public concern about social and environmental issues and, to the extent they are held to be important, correlate with high levels of subjective wellbeing and happiness. It is reinforcing those values that provides the route to realising the vision which Kenyon Wright encapsulated.
- 11 **Professor Chris Spray MBE**, Chair of Water Science and Policy at the University of Dundee, spoke about Local Governance for Ecosystem Services. He founded his presentation on the inscription from Gerald Manley Hopkins, carved into the Scottish Parliament Building, which speaks to values:
- ‘What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.’*
- 12 Ecosystem services describe all the benefits which people obtain from habitats – goods, services and livelihoods. Chris outlined the evidence for the decline and deterioration of ecosystems, globally and locally, and in both developing and developed countries, with adverse impact on economic and social wellbeing. Things continue to be lost, notwithstanding legal protection: regulatory systems are not working sufficiently.
- 13 While these concerns have been long established, what is new is greater understanding of how habitats work to benefit people. He emphasised the role of planning and values (linking to themes Tom had raised); the potential to realise multiple benefits; and the importance of engaging with local communities, because it is their values that will determine what is going to happen. He grouped ecosystem services into categories:
- Provisioning, ones which provide food, fibre and fresh water (which typically have a market value, and have been the main focus in the past)
 - Regulating services, such as regulating the climate, flooding, water quality
 - Supporting services, such as nutrient cycling or soil formation; and
 - Cultural services, such as spiritual benefits, e.g. Ayres Rock (which have a value inherent in all of us, but impossible to measure in economics).

Taken together, these all contribute to wellbeing.

- 14 He described the UK National Ecosystem Assessment, which aims to ascribe both economic and non-economic value to ecosystem services. Based on his specialist expertise and interest in wetlands, which are very important in Scotland, he outlined the potential for multiple benefits, and understanding the extent of interconnections in the landscape. Currently these are often poorly identified and valued, with an under-appreciation and under-valuing of the services which these ecosystems provide, ranging from jobs to flood prevention. Wetlands are being lost and degraded in part because we are getting remote from the environment and we have lost appropriate local governance. Chris illustrated how we fail to value water.
- 15 Appropriate responses include the need to take stock of ecosystem assets, and this requires a holistic approach. Evidence should be based on measurement, and this can often be built on existing initiatives (through techniques such as opportunity maps). Key wetland and ecosystem initiatives in Scotland include the Rural Land Use Study, and the potential for a series of pilot catchments, in particular drawing on work in the Scottish Borders. By involving local communities, it is their values that should determine the re-balancing of the ecosystem benefits, potentially giving less weight to provisioning, and more to regulating, supporting and cultural services. The aim should be to secure multiple benefits. This needs a partnership approach, with the aim of preserving the economic vitality of communities and their environment.

Discussion

- 16 The discussion Panel comprised the speakers together with Professor Jan Webb, University of Edinburgh and Susan Davies, SNH.
- 17 A key question was whether the two speakers' perspectives were consistent or contradictory. On the face of it, Tom had cautioned about the risk of using monetary values to champion environmental (or social) objectives, whereas Chris had argued the importance of knowing the value of ecosystem services. Discussion moved towards a consensus. This acknowledged the importance of understanding and measuring the full range of benefits we derive from the environment, but recognised it could be counter-productive to argue for environmental or community benefits by appealing to self interest or monetary values alone. The risk was seen as commodifying nature, and ending up "knowing the price of everything, but the value of nothing".
- 18 Following directly from this, a persistent theme was the need to secure the multiple benefits which are potentially offered by a holistic approach to public policy. Here, the breadth of the National Performance Framework was seen as offering potential, though too often this is reduced to the single objective of "sustainable economic growth" rather than the breadth of "opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish". Performance management frameworks, using a spectrum of criteria (and techniques such as Balanced Score Card) can support a more comprehensive approach, whereas narrowly conceived budgets and targets can drive activity perversely.

- 19 Our institutions too often remain locked into a 'silo' mentality. This is problematic when so many public policy issues – from climate change and loss of biodiversity to multiple deprivation and the integration of health and social care – are cross-cutting, and need solutions fitted to the character of the problem rather than constrained to institutional boundaries. Public service reform (the Christie Commission) and preventative spend are seen as offering opportunities to rethink the way we deliver public services, and re-configuring resources to solve (and not just manage) problems in ways which are more radical and effective.
- 20 Also recurrent throughout the seminar was an emphasis on the local dimension. This came through in several ways, building on the knowledge and capacity which local government and communities have in managing their own affairs. Local politicians are connected with issues in their area, and communities do not see or value environmental policy in cash terms, but have a more rounded view: there is a need to listen to local communities and their perceptions.
- 21 Linking these themes together was recognition of the need for partnership, as an antidote to silos, and joining national and local agendas. It is important to clarify the appropriate roles for all participants in the economy: the different levels of government, local communities, social enterprises and the private sector – what is done best at what level, and by whom. Place making and promoting health and wellbeing requires governance, and investing in assets, integrated at a local level.
- 22 This integrated approach should also extend to resolving the relationship between the market and the state, competitiveness and collaboration. For both to play to their strengths is especially vital when there is huge pressure on the public purse. Markets may drive efficiency in resource use, but are less good at capturing common good, especially when dominated by large corporations. These tensions are expressed in choices of language – citizen or consumer, passenger or patient as opposed to customer or client – and competition may sometimes inhibit effective service delivery, as when transport deregulation prohibits joined-up services. We need a more holistic view, which pushes at the boundaries of remit and the short time horizons which often dominate both business and political decision-making.
- 23 Two groups were prioritised in discussion – the young and the disadvantaged. It is vital to include the young in these discussions, at a stage when their values are evolving, and taking account of the influence of home, school and the media. Particular concern was expressed that tackling disadvantage and the most vulnerable should be an inherent priority. This includes working with groups in socially deprived areas to help them create and own assets for their own wellbeing.
- 24 Reference was made back to the high water mark of the Earth Summit at Rio in 1992, and the aspirations of Local Agenda 21, asking if the seminar was re-inventing sustainable development, albeit it in different language? The advice was that while commitment has ebbed and flowed, the challenges remain. What is needed is to build on past experience, but also learning lessons and new insights, including being more tolerant of failure (and the potential to learn from it). We have to be smarter in order to secure more radical change, extending from re-balancing the tax system to a better understanding of how values drive behaviour.

Reflections and Key Messages

- 25** The seminar attracted a capacity audience, with significant attendance and engagement by MSPs. The combination of having thought provoking speakers and inputs from the panel, with a high level of well-informed participation in discussion, meant the event was challenging, productive and able to broach a very broad agenda in only two hours.
- 26** While it is far from easy to distil key messages from such wide-ranging debate, some of the main points included:
- Values are key determinants of attitudes and behaviours. There is a need to recognise the tensions between values which stress self-interest rather than community and environmental action, and that the latter can be strengthened and reinforced by our language and actions.
 - Being aware of the breadth of services which ecosystems provide, together with local engagement, can enhance the wellbeing of communities and raise awareness of the need to enhance and protect, rather than exploit, their environments.
 - Taken together, these ideas can help us move towards smarter ways to secure more sustainable development. The seminar expressed a clear sense of the inter-connected nature of environment, economy and communities. In particular, understanding our dependence on the environment, and the concepts of wellbeing and wealth, should not be represented in monetary terms alone. The seminar questioned whether economic growth and more consumption would necessarily lead to increased wellbeing or reduced poverty.
 - Rethinking Wellbeing also requires Rethinking Governance. In particular, this means devising ways to break down silos and design effective partnerships between all agencies spanning from central government, the third sector, to local and community levels; and between state and market sectors. The seminar stressed the importance of local capacities in decision making and problem solving. These relationships need to be reinforced by performance frameworks that support securing multiple benefits, and prioritise tackling disadvantage and taking a long-term view.
 - In turn, this implies rethinking economics, re-cast so that it becomes not an end in itself, but one means – and not the sole driver – of securing wellbeing and achieving the aim of a Scotland in which all flourish.

Implications for 'Thinking about the economy differently'

27 The holistic approach of the seminar meant that although the explicit focus was on the environment, frequent reference was made to economic and social aspects. Building on this, some of the potential avenues to explore at the next seminar to be held on 15 November 2012 on rethinking economics might include:

- What kind of economics is needed to guide us towards securing wellbeing, quality of life, multiple benefits, and tackling disadvantage? How do we harness the more altruistic values which can be more supportive of the social and environmental dimensions?
- Is wellbeing dependent on economic growth, green growth, or can we have prosperity without growth? Should growth be no more than one measure of the state of the economy, rather than an overriding goal?
- How should our economics adequately reflect the value of the environment (ecosystems services) and social justice? Are these externalities which deserve adequate accounting, or different qualities requiring separate treatment?
- To what extent should we restructure and rebalance our taxes and incentives (bribes?) to encourage people to secure health at personal, community and environmental levels, and for the longer term?
- More generally, how can economics be restructured to take into account a more comprehensive range of concerns, and a longer time frame? Overall, how would this affect standards of living, quality of life and wellbeing?
- Can economics provide guidance on what activities are best done by central governments, local governments, communities and social enterprises, individuals and the market? How can these different actors work together in common cause?

