



Rethinking Wellbeing Seminar Series

Thinking About Society Differently

Seminar Report

Wednesday 20 February 2013, 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** This report summarises the main outcomes of this third seminar, which focussed on 'Thinking about Society Differently'. It 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

- 3 **Dr Aileen McLeod MSP** and Director of Scotland's Futures Forum welcomed participants, and introduced the speakers. The key aim of the seminar series has been to challenge our perceptions and preconceptions of the environment and wellbeing, and the way these relate to economic and social interests. She said we need different and better solutions to solving intractable and challenging problems of economic, environmental and social sustainability. Complex problems, such as multiple deprivation, population health, climate change and loss of biodiversity, require us to consider the economy, environment and society holistically rather than as three distinct silos. The economy is part of society, and society depends on the environment, and all of these need to be joined up.
- 4 The previous seminar focussed on thinking about the economy differently, with the key message that we are living beyond our means in both an economic and ecological sense. We continue to pile up debt, damage ecosystems and biodiversity, and fail to tackle destabilising the climate; in all in these we are saddling future generations with massive liabilities. There is a clear need to reduce consumption, and save and invest more. Yet the Brundtland report of the World Commission on Environment and Development "Our Common Future" highlighted the dilemma of how do we meet current needs without prejudicing future generations? How can we reduce consumption, yet at the same time protect those less well off, and not exacerbate social injustice, poverty and health inequalities?
- 5 **Professor George Morris**, Consultant in Ecological Public Health, set out the case for building public health and wellbeing on ecological principles. He started with a number of what he described as reasonable assertions:
 - Any modern definition of public health has to extend to wellbeing
 - Both health and wellbeing invariably flow from societies to individuals, which shows where the responsibility for creating the conditions for wellbeing lies
 - The environment and how it changes are intimately connected with health and wellbeing; changes in our environment are already undermining both, in the UK and globally
 - For too long we have looked at these issues in our disciplines and silos: the way forward has to be an ecological approach.
- 5 The ecological approach can be characterised by a number of transitions – dynamic changes in the determinants of health, which alter the ground on which we create public health and wellbeing, but also set the context, the style of intervention and chances of success. This links to inequalities, which are not simply about the position of poor people with environmental hazards, but the transition from an exposure, hazard or environmental good to a risk or benefit for the individual. The transitions include nutrition, urbanisation, demography, energy, economy, disease, culture and the environment. For example, in Scotland and elsewhere in Europe, we are seeing change from a large number of young supporting a smaller number of old: this has been inverted, which has huge implications for the environmental dimension of public health. How do we stop people becoming ill through muscular, cardiovascular or respiratory disease, and how do we keep them in their own homes (if that is where they want to be) once they have these problems?

- 7 On the environment, policy and action could be more effective if we develop the capacity to navigate complexity. This includes recognising that the environment has the capacity to generate good health and wellbeing: being outside, green space, blue space, and forests are all good for you; so too is how people feel about their environment. “Good Places Better Health” was a policy introduced in 2008 which looked at the health of children. It produced much learning about evidence, the science-policy interface and stakeholder engagement. It also showed that having an environmental conceptualisation of public health is as legitimate as medical and behavioural conceptualisations, and showed the value of conceptual models as tools to think with.
- 8 The core idea of Ecological Public Health is that human and ecosystem health are inextricably and dynamically bound together, which has not been very obvious in either public health or environmental science. It does not place the environment ‘out there’ as something to which we react, but something we are part of. It is a concept that is unifying, but there are no ‘pump handles’ – i.e. simple solutions – in this story (George referred to John Snow removing the Broad Street pump handle to treat cholera in London in the 1850s). To handle the complexity we will need to integrate impact assessments of environment and health. The benefits humans get from the environment, ecosystem services, have not been on the public health agenda, but 4 categories of services have been mapped by the WHO: supporting (e.g. photosynthesis), provisioning (food, fuel, materials), regulating (water and air quality) and cultural (the non-material qualities). All these affect our wellbeing, our feelings of security, freedom of choice and our health.
- 9 ‘Good Places Better Health’ showed how useful it is to develop the tools to think about the relationships between health and the proximal environment (air quality, litter, etc) and our influence on ecosystems. This helps to engage stakeholders to map policy.
- 10 There are 5 main pillars of ecological public health. They support an overall goal of a society in which health and wellbeing are pursued in a way which respects planetary boundaries, and creates and protects a safe operating space for humanity and the other species which inhabit the planet. The pillars are:
 - Framing issues holistically – if we don’t include all the factors that bear on a problem, we won’t end up with the right solution
 - Synthesising a mixed economy of evidence, being prepared to act when we have removed sufficient uncertainty
 - Having an ethical framework (environmental and social justice, and sustainability)
 - Considering physical, institutional and educational infrastructure carefully
 - Optimising governance, including engagement and accountability.
- 11 Thinking in terms of these pillars won’t turn things round overnight, but will start to nudge towards doing the right kind of things. *Good Places Better Health* has provided good learning to build on.

- 12 Judith Robertson**, Head of Oxfam Scotland, spoke about the Oxfam Humankind Index – an alternative measure of prosperity. Oxfam is an international NGO whose mandate is to work with others to overcome (rather than alleviate) poverty and suffering wherever it happens in the world. They work in humanitarian emergencies; have a big development programme; and their campaigning and advocacy work seeks structural change.
- 13** There are systemic issues causing poverty globally and in the UK. We are exceeding environmental planetary boundaries, and there are major winners and losers already. If we are going to generate a safe operating space for humanity, drastic action is required. Wealth and prosperity are relative, about what somebody next to us has does or doesn't have, and the resultant inequalities are a key driver of change. At present Britain is failing, not closing the inequality gap: yet ironically “the economy has never been healthier and the drugs needed to cope with it have never been more affordable”. We spend money “on things we don't need, ... to impress people we don't know”.
- 14** Oxfam work in communities and, like George, bring models into that experience. They use DFID's Livelihoods Pentagon, a holistic asset based analysis based on human, social, manufactured, financial and natural assets to address deficits people are dealing with in their communities. ‘Whose Economy’ seminars held in Scotland have looked at deindustrialisation and the changing nature of the economy. In Clydeside, private sector propositions and consumption actually seem to degrade our communities, taking resources out and eroding them. Decades of regeneration, economic growth and anti-poverty policies have failed: they have not reduced poverty in Scotland, and health inequalities are worse. “Unexplained premature mortality, the Scottish/Glasgow effect” is a blight on our country. The pernicious paradox is that in vulnerable communities the only asset available may be their family relationships and social networks, yet these have been undermined by the demands of the market for poorly paid, flexible, and insecure labour, and people's capacity to respond to that.
- 15** To summarise, the economy is not addressing poverty. We rely on a process of economic growth with its GDP measure that is not only failing to deliver for 20 – 30% of our population, but also exacerbating inequalities and excluding people from decisions made about the direction of development and their local environment. Worse, we seem prepared to accept an analysis in the Welfare Reform process which blames people for a situation which has failed to deliver for them and they have no power to deal with.
- 16** Instead if you use the Livelihoods Pentagon to ask people in a participatory analysis what their assets and priorities are – “what do you need to live well in your community” – you have the basis to build on people's engagement. This was the background to the Humankind Index, and the development team included the New Economics Foundation and the Fraser of Allander Institute. The work focused on communities that nobody generally talks to, with a range of workshops, focus groups and surveys all over Scotland. The consultation process identified 18 sub-domains or aspects that people reported as being the most important asset in their lives.

- 17** What people cared about most were having an affordable, decent and safe home, and their physical and mental health. Next came living in a neighbourhood where you can enjoy going outside and having a clean and healthy environment. It was not until number 4 that having satisfying work came in, and the emphasis was on satisfaction, not money. Having good relationships with family and friends; and access to green and wild spaces, community spaces and play areas followed this. It was not until after these that secure and suitable work, and having enough money came in (at 8 and 9). People are not seeing money as the end: they are seeing a decent home and good health as the outcome they seek. It is not rocket science: without good health you cannot work and can't help family and community.
- 18** People need to feel valued, and Judith said that Welfare Reform has gone so far away from making people feel valued. In terms of the Index, poor communities are 10% behind the national figures. The key question is what do we do with the Index, and what does it tell us? In part it is about communities owning it, but it also has to deliver policy change, and challenge our current modes of operating. The methodology was resource intensive for an NGO but, with the help of Carnegie, Oxfam is developing a policy assessment tool (to be capable of being used on a mobile phone) able to determine what a policy is going to do the Index: is it going to improve people's sense of prosperity? Economic growth remains fundamental, but it isn't the end that people really care about – it is a means not an end. That is one of our challenges, to tell that political story and say “this is what people really care about, how are you responding to that?”

Discussion

- 19** A sustainable society is about the now as much as about the future, i.e. we need to address current inequalities as well as the intergenerational ones. A sustainable society is about living within our means, and we have to address the legacy of debt, in terms of ecology, society and economy. The topic is in common parlance, but we still don't have the means to address it. Scotland could be different, as we have our own Parliament.
- 20** The members of the discussion Panel, comprising the speakers together with Professor Jan Webb, University of Edinburgh, were asked about how to secure effective engagement on this agenda. The panel advocated not starting with the unconverted, but with the many people who are open to these ideas. Talk to people face to face in their communities: civil servants and local government especially need to do this. Bureaucracies can hide behind the mechanistic way in which public bodies are run and services delivered. For example, community planning involves neither planning nor communities.
- 21** The recommendations of the Christie Commission were good, but delivery remains a challenge. There is a need to deal with complexity – *Good Places Better Health* shows that it can be done. Politicians and professionals must be brave. Budgets should be made to follow the priorities that matter to people; this should mean spending less on infrastructure such as road building and more on regenerating communities.

- 22 It is important to challenge the daily cynicism in the media. On Welfare Reform, the media characterises people on benefits as cheats and with untold wealth. The real lived experience of living on benefits is that it is hard, and the processes people have to go through make them feel very undervalued. It was argued that this is a deliberate political narrative from Westminster to create the space to reduce benefits, to take money from the poorest households. The narrative is different in Scotland and much more open. A minimum citizen income could transform the way people see themselves, but would cost money.
- 23 If empowering people results in them demanding the components of wellbeing, that would be good! The case for starting at the social end is that society can do a lot to create the conditions for well being, which is not being done at present and is much more difficult for the individual. What is disturbing is that with the economic downturn many of us were optimistic it might make the difference, but it does seem to be business as usual, hence the advocacy of an incremental approach: stealth rather than revolution. The role of models is as tools to enable people to think and act. They won't change anything in themselves: that depends on actions and challenging notions such as the poor being responsible for their own misfortune, and asking where is the wealth accumulating, and what happened to the 'trickle down' effect. Having a national balance sheet of the type Dieter Helm advocated would be a good start but challenging, as it would expose the parlous state of the economy.
- 24 Financial capital is still dominant. The current narrative does not suggest radical change with Scottish independence to the kind of higher tax rates of Scandinavia, where it can be argued a more equal distribution of assets has led to greater social solidarity. Not does it suggest a restoration of the mood at the end of WW2 that there should be a collective responsibility for common welfare for the common good. Globalisation is a complicating factor as finance is so mobile. The composition of the Welfare Commission, with economic interests, does not inspire confidence that they will come up with strong recommendations on social justice.
- 25 In terms of handling complexity and what the Government can do, the National Performance Framework is regarded as a good starting point, but concern was expressed about how it works in practice and the economic banner at the top of it (sustainable or otherwise). We are not going to challenge the economic hegemony overnight: the task is a marathon not a sprint. The major parties, apart from the Green party, do not challenge the fundamentals of the economy; there has to be engagement with decision-makers at all levels to bring about change.
- 26 Two examples of the dominance of finance and materialism were raised:
- > Wyndford in Maryhill has a pioneering community district heating retrofit into multi-storey social housing. After a visit, Peter Lilley MP from the Energy and Climate Change Select Committee questioned the cost-effectiveness of the project when the return could be matched by a 2.8% Halifax Tracker. He seemed to neglect that people (75% of whom live on less than £10k) would then still be cold!! The assessment appears to be based on a model that assumes investing in the fabric of the estate (to improve energy performance) has no value to society, and neglects that the investment is creating rather than extracting value. Also, the costs are artificially high because of the centralised structure of housing and energy finance¹. We ought to be able to make such assets work better for the public good.

1 For example, the costs of new electricity or gas networks are distributed across the whole customer base regardless of the location, whereas the costs of installing this type of heat network are borne entirely by the local customers, even though local generation of heat and power still contributes to overall energy supplies.

- With the love of the car and personal travel, mobility seems more important than social contact, with the aim of Scottish Government to get us all in motion. Only 1.5% (£10m) of the transport budget of £684m is for active travel, even though active travel can help deliver reduced obesity and health care costs, less pollution and emissions, and increased potential for local travel solutions.
- 27 All of this has implications for the way that Parliament works. What kind of society do we want? What are the means for politicians to make the changes and how can others help? If we are rethinking materialism, how do we do that? Do we need to think about re-framing how we engage? What kind of language do we need: if we use the language of assets, does that play into current paradigms? Terms such as sustainability and resilience are challenging, as they mean different things to different people; we do not have a shared understanding of what they mean. There is a need to find a common language, but it is important to start by having a public conversation and questioning the use of terms such as sustainable economic growth; and also making the issue personal, making it relevant to people's needs and interests in a decent home, good health, satisfying work and meaningful relationships.
- 28 At the end of the question and answer session, the Chairman thanked the panel, seminar organisers and everyone for their participation, and closed with a quotation from Robert Kennedy given at the University of Kansas on March 18 1968. Though delivered nearly half a century ago it still seems apt:

“Too much and too long, we seem to have surrendered personal excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things. Our gross national product ... counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for those who break them. It counts the destruction of the redwood and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl. ... It counts the television programmes which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children.

“Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages; the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage; neither our wisdom nor our learning; neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country; it measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.”

Seminar Series Project Management

Steering Group:

Clive Mitchell (SNH), Ishani Erasmus (SEPA), Daniel Hinze (Scottish Government)
and **Donald Jarvie (Scotland's Futures Forum)**

Project Manager: **Eilidh MacDonald**

Seminar Series Chair: **Tim Birley**

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