

Getting wellbeing economy ideas on the policy table: theory, reality, pushback and next steps

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Executive summary

There is no shortage of empirical evidence, visions, ideas, recognition by major multinational institutions, or public alignment in favour of fundamental economic change. Yet none of this has been sufficient to bring about change at the necessary pace or scale. This paper draws on experiences in Scotland, New Zealand Aotearoa¹, Wales, Finland, Iceland, Costa Rica and Bhutan to consider reasons behind the inadequate progress in these countries in order to inform champions of new economic models and update current approaches and tactics.

Selected literature on large-scale change points to the need for a mosaic of tactics and approaches such as:

- **Work at all levels of the system**
- **The importance of pioneers and amplifying their messages**
- **Public acceptability**
- **Closing salience and power deficits**
- **Political pressure**
- **Expert knowledge**
- **Harnessing external events**
- **Feasible solutions on the table**
- **Evidence of impact**
- **Compelling communication**
- **Tolerable costs**
- **Successful social movements**
- **Enticing narratives**
- **Changed frames of reference**
- **Warm actors in the policy community.**

In the countries considered, certain aspects seem to have been important for building momentum: coalitions and a base of support; modelling on peers and support in numbers; relationships and reassurance; and champions and catalysing moments. These lessons can be distilled into the broad themes of cooperation, education and mobilisation.

Yet progress has not been easy and certainly has not been sufficient. There are considerable and varied barriers to efforts to transform the economic system, such as:

- **Government systems that pull towards the status quo (system inertia)**
- **The competition for time and attention from other, often apparently more urgent or hot, political issues (lack of bandwidth)**
- **The resistance and recalcitrance of those who do very well in or are simply content with the prevailing way of doing things (deliberate blockers)**
- **Small-scale and tentative adoption, and misuse of the agenda to carry on with business as usual (weak implementation and co-option)**
- **Lack of clarity about concepts and practical implications, and the slow emergence of benefits (confusion and impatience)**
- **Misalignment between the nature of system change and the actions politicians gravitate to (not giving politicians what they need)**
- **Insufficient groundswell beyond the active movement (inadequate support base)**
- **Intra-movement divisions over tactics (friendly fire).**

To address these challenges, both bottom-up and top-down actions are necessary across a spectrum of advocacy: from cooperation and education to persuasion and contestation.

Specifically: consistently critiquing the status quo and celebrating the vision; building a broad base; emphasising social justice credentials; championing; investing in intrapreneurs²; broaching the blockers; and partnering. Essentially, the economic system change movement needs to engage across a suite of practices, tactics and entry points.

¹ "Aotearoa" is the Māori name for New Zealand and the two are increasingly used together to describe the country.

² Those proactively acting within government to make change.



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Part 1

Introduction

The need for fundamental economic change does not lack for empirical evidence. There is no shortage of visions laid out by various communities, institutions and thought leaders, nor is there a lack of ideas for practical steps and changes in policy and practice to transform economic systems. There are signs that some of the ideas and concepts are reaching multinational institutions as seen in the [WISE Centre](#) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the European Union's [Eighth Environment Action Programme](#), the [European Commission's work on Beyond GDP Indicators](#), and the European Parliament's [Beyond Growth conference](#). Citizens are also embracing the vision of a more humane, more sustainable economy, with almost three quarters (74%) in the G20 countries backing economic priorities that “move beyond profit and increasing wealth and focuses more on human wellbeing and ecological protection” (Earth4All, Global Commons Alliance, 2021).

Yet, thus far, none of this has been sufficient to bring about change at the necessary scale, pace and extent. The movement has not converted ideas into policy, let alone policy into impact at the level required.

It therefore seems timely to consider the reasons behind the inadequate progress: what is holding back adoption of the agenda and implementation of the ideas? Are there tensions that wellbeing economy advocates have yet to grapple with? To use the words of the co-president of The Club of Rome, Sandrine Dixson-Declève: “What are the pain points and where is pushback coming from?”

Reflection and introspection in this report may help examine strategic questions about approach and tactics. Acknowledging the reality of the challenges presents an opportunity to refine focus and recognise areas that may require more effort, new partners and shifts in strategy.

Scope and limitations

This paper is part of a series by Earth for All and The Club of Rome about economic transformation and is the product of a short project. It is not comprehensive and has limitations in its scope and assumptions. These include: the term “wellbeing economy” used as a proxy for the economic system change agenda, the extent of actual implementation, the focus on the political rather than the technical or economic nature of the challenges, the countries considered, and the research approach.

First, the term wellbeing economy is used to refer to various ideas around economic system change that pertain to the purpose and design of the economy in line with what people and the planet need.



Second, the extent of implementation and adoption of such an agenda is worth reflecting on. Do government declarations of support for the wellbeing economy agenda denote adoption? Can we deem the agenda implemented when governments use certain indicators to determine policy goals and design and budgets? Or must a critical mass of policies be enacted before we may consider the agenda implemented?

The gulf between policy enactment and actual implementation is infamously wide, so should we instead measure tangible impacts on people's lives? For example, the Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEAll) set the following tests to determine if progress in building a wellbeing economy has gone far enough (Wellbeing Economy Alliance, 2022):

- Does the economy provide everyone with what is needed to live a life of dignity and purpose?
- Does the economy restore, protect and cherish the natural environment and is the economy guided by the principles of interconnection and indivisibility of human, animal, plant and environmental health?
- Does the economy value activities and behaviours by their contribution to social and ecological wellbeing?
- Is the economy designed to ensure a just distribution of income, wealth, power and time?
- Is the shape and form of the economy locally rooted and determined by people's active voices?

Since the wellbeing economy agenda is about transformation, perhaps we need to be looking for signs of progress in practice. Systems change scholars suggest that a wholesale transformation must be multidimensional and address laws, culture, technology, businesses and approaches to the ecosystem (Mersmann et al., 2014).

On the other hand, given that any wholesale change seems far off, and certainly there is no country that could meet the WEAll tests, perhaps looking for the opening of opportunity is sufficient for the purpose of discussing the challenges? For example, policymakers agreeing on flagship policies, a consistent shift in language from political leaders, and government use of broader measures of progress. The countries in this study illustrate some shifts along these lines (see Part 3 below). Political leaders there have shown some receptiveness to the agenda, and others have been inspired by their ostensible leadership (putting to one side whether that reputation is merited).

Given these dilemmas, this paper prioritises lessons that can be gleaned from the countries considered, rather than undertaking a rigorous audit of their adoption of wellbeing-centred economic policymaking and governance or any impact of its implementation. Even the most tentative signs of progress have been hard fought for and remain fragile, so they offer ample lessons about the nature of potential pain points and pushback, which is the focus of this paper.

Third, this paper considers the challenges that might be termed “small p politics” and does not focus on the technical or the economic challenges to implementing the agenda. These are of course important topics and fortunately others are turning their attention to those complex implementation matters (see, for example, [ZOE Institute for Future-Fit Economies](#), [WEAll](#), [Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona](#) and [Tim Jackson](#)). There would also be merit in a



subsequent paper exploring the interaction between the technical, economic and political challenges and the circumstances in which one overwhelms or counteracts the other(s). For example, in the current scenario, with its market logic and assumption that price signals are adequate, activities in line with the collective wellbeing of people and the planet might seem falsely expensive and harmful activities might seem falsely cheap because they do not take into account environmental and social harms. We could also gain a lot of insight by examining the implementation journey of a few individual policies and the pain points they encountered or the circumstances that enabled their passage.

Fourth, the paper draws on selected literature and the author's experience from several years of advocating for the wellbeing economy in Scotland, Europe and Australia. However, this vantage point is limited, so it is augmented by considering lessons from New Zealand Aotearoa, Wales, Finland, Iceland, Costa Rica and Bhutan: countries where there has been some adoption of the agenda, but where there is also a degree of resistance. This suite of countries is inevitably a subset of those that could have been investigated if capacity allowed. There are many other countries where policies and practices compatible with the wellbeing economy agenda are present, such as Canada, Italy, South Korea, Ecuador, Rwanda, France, Japan, Australia, Germany and many more. Those selected are either official members of the Wellbeing Economy Governments partnership (Scotland, New Zealand Aotearoa, Wales, Finland and Iceland) or, in the case of Costa Rica and Bhutan, well known for their sustainability or social justice initiatives.

This project began with desk research to provide background for a small number of interviews with protagonists inside and outside government who could speak to the context and processes in each country. In total, 17 people were interviewed, of whom 8 were part of the government in their respective countries.³ The author also reviewed recent scholarly publications that consider the extent to which several countries are matching their wellbeing economy rhetoric with reality. While the author's experience has been augmented with that of others and some relevant literature, readers should bear in mind the limitations. Other researchers may point to different dynamics and suggest that alternative pressures matter more than those discussed here.

³ These individuals were interviewed on the basis of anonymity. When wording such as "is said to", "it was observed" or "it was noted" is used in this paper without a source being given, that statement or observation has come from one of the interviewees



Part 2

Some insights from theory

The following are very brief summaries of ideas in the literature regarding how change happens. They cover systems change, policy windows and funnels, policy streams, social movements and activating audiences.

The literature discussed here is a selection that offers insights for the subsequent discussion of what worked in practice. A wider lens would have included other relevant themes such as frames and values; use of metaphors, language and other communication; how biases inform people's thinking and behaviour; theories of the state, interest groups and governance; and power.

Systems change: layers and pioneers

Many people working on economic system change find the multilevel system perspective useful (Geels et al., 2017; Göpel, 2016). This highlights three layers of a system: macro or landscape; meso or policy regime; and micro or niche level. Crucially, they influence each other: niche actions show what is possible and demonstrate in a practical way the sort of change required, for instance. For its part, the policy regime is shaped by mindsets prevalent at the landscape level, while changes in policies that happen at the regime level will enable new possibilities and compel different activities at the niche level.

The actions that agents of change might want to deploy at each level include:

- At the landscape level: creating spaces to ask big questions, challenging what people see as normal, bringing new ideas into play and showcasing alternatives.
- At the policy regime level: empowering campaigners and advocates, creating coalitions with people working on a new system and working with them in advocating to government, and working with actors inside the current system to support their efforts.
- At the niche level: incubating innovators, supporting their strategies and leadership so they can scale and replicate, and creating communities around niche innovations to sustain them (Finance Innovation Lab, 2015).

The role of pioneers is important. These are actors breaking with business as usual and building an illustration of the new in the here and now, often described as prefiguring a new system while the old one remains. Pioneers operate not just in business enterprise and in community protects, but also in government where they devise policy instruments to help encourage and incentivise activities aligned with a wellbeing economy. Pioneers demonstrate the possibility of a different way of doing things and enable learning and experience from change. The work of pioneers, whether intentional or not, often serves to create magnets that inspire and attract others to the ideas embodied in the project or policy. If other early adopters replicate the activities of pioneers, they may eventually reach a critical mass and a tipping point where new norms emerge.



However, a recurring theme in systems literature is that single projects tend to remain isolated. Concerted energy is necessary to amplify the message their work offers, such as taking the lessons and implications to policymakers so that they change policy structures to become conducive to the sort of behaviours the pioneers embody. This summation from Hahnel captures these dynamics:

Without the example of successful experiments ... people will never move beyond reform, which never fully solves problems and is always vulnerable to “roll back.” On the other hand, without much larger reform movements, experiments in equitable cooperation will remain isolated and never reach enough people. Broadly speaking, the answer is more powerful reform movements and campaigns, combined with more and larger experiments in equitable cooperation. Neither alone will prove successful, but fortunately each helps mitigate predictable pitfalls in the other. (Hahnel, 2016)

This points to a *plurality* of approaches and interventions, none of which will be sufficient on its own, but which have potential to add up to major shifts. Various analysts have documented and clustered these roles. For example, a recent study (Leadbeater & Winhall, 2020) lays out four critical roles:

- Entrepreneurs, whose initiatives challenge the existing system and enable new ways of doing things
- Inside-outsiders, working within the system to open it up to change
- Convenors, who bring the other actors to co-create a vision and agenda
- Commissioners, who commission the new ways of doing things.

Policy windows and funnels

The political scientist Joseph P. Overton wrote that crucial in attaining change is the range of ideas that the public deems acceptable. This window of acceptability (the “Overton Window”, as it became known) tends to determine its political viability (Srnicek & Williams, 2015). Public acceptability will shape what issues politicians can champion and enact without worrying about losing office in the face of hostile public opinion. As Crompton, Kasser, Maio et al. (2014) observe, “Neither government nor business can respond adequately to today’s profound social and environmental challenges without experiencing far wider public acceptance of the need for ambitious change, and far more vocal public demand for such change.” Wellbeing economy proponents therefore need to shift public opinion, building appetite for change.

The Overton Window concept chimes with the idea of the policy funnel. The policy funnel is a way of understanding the process by which policies are formed: from a generalised public concern that then generates a debate that stimulates proposals for policy changes that lead to specific texts or agreed actions. Outside players such as The Club of Rome can influence any stage of this process, but the way in which they act will alter according to where in the funnel an issue is. At the beginning of the funnel, actors could deploy activities that promote certain narratives and support deliberative democracy activities. Citizens’ assemblies, for example, have been found to be a potentially transformative ingredient in climate action (Willis et al.,



2022) with participants calling for ambitious policies – considerably bolder than those devised by politicians (Mellier & Wilson, 2020). At the policy details end of the funnel, activities might include briefings to civil servants about what other jurisdictions have done and support for policy intrapreneurs to convince their colleagues.

Policy streams

The multiple streams approach of Kingdon (1984) is an influential work in political science. It lays out the importance of streams that can converge to create a window of opportunity for change, the implication being that change is highly contingent on particular circumstances. As set out by Kingdon (2011) and cited in Bache (2020), the streams are:

- Problems: creating a pressing political agenda
- Policies: pulling together expert knowledge and proposals and ensuring they conform to policymakers' values
- Politics: shifts in the public mood (see Overton Window above), effective efforts by a pressure group, or a change in government, for instance.

Kingdon's approach aligns with practitioner [Gus Speth](#)'s observation that change happens:

- When enough people are fed up and see the system as the problem
- Via crises
- When different progressive communities come out of their silos and fuse into one force
- When this is supported by a powerful positive vision of the future.

Kingdon's and Speth's conclusions illustrate that policy change requires a range of factors. No single element is adequate on its own. Change is likelier when there is a confluence of external events, policy learnings, notable failure of current policies, and the formation and action

of coalitions. For example, external events create an obvious opportunity for change, such as a financial crisis, an election that brings a new political party to power, or the signing of a new international agreement. While such moments might show the impossibility of business as usual, they might not result in change in themselves. They need to be followed by policy solutions that are presented as not only feasible, but put forward ways that fit with policymaker and public values.

For example, Bache's analysis of wellbeing into public policy highlights the need for evidence that politicians can use to sell a proposed change and good suggestions for action, but he notes that these need to be accompanied by concrete examples of the difference a change will make, compelling communication, public acquiescence and tolerable costs (Bache, 2020).

Change is likelier when there is a confluence of external events, policy learnings, notable failure of current policies, and the formation and action of coalitions.

These dynamics are apparent in the various cases discussed below.



Social movements

There seems to be growing public discussion of how the work of social movements and protest actually brings about change. Recent debate about the tactics of Extinction Rebellion [illustrate this](#). Context matters. For example, the [oft-cited factoid](#) that it takes 3.5% of a population to be engaged on an issue to change the system may not be true (Chenoweth, 2020; Matthews, 2020).

The Social Change Lab [conducted analysis](#) of research on social movements and protests and found they tend to be successful when:

- They are non-violent
- They involve a large number of people (because “big numbers at a protest give [policymakers] a clear signal of public opinion”)
- They comprise diverse actors (especially not just the so-called typical protesters)
- Pre-existing public sentiment is supportive
- The media, celebrities or high-profile politicians support the cause
- Elites respond positively (with one scholar cited as “claiming that this factor alone explained 80% of the variance in outcomes”)
- They involve visible actions that starkly expose a problem in the eyes of a wider audience.

These findings are complemented by those from the British think tank, the Institute for Public Policy Research, which concluded that successful movements address salience gaps and power deficits. The authors explain:

successful movements seek to close what we call the ‘salience deficit’, where the public or power-holders do not think the issue is important or see it through a different frame, and the ‘power deficit’, where the people wanting change are not in positions of power or have limited influence on those who are. (IPPR, 2021)

Activating audiences

The studies noted above show that a critical factor behind policy change is engagement of key audiences. For some issues, widespread public concern about the status quo and excitement about change is necessary. Consequently, more and more actors are investing in work around “narratives”. Done well, this sophisticated storytelling effort helps reveal the root causes of problems and the possibility of change: “system consciousness” is the term sometimes used. When people’s frames of references transform and they come to ask different questions and interpret outcomes differently, they develop new perspectives on what is possible (Gopel & Wehnert, 2014).



What is important, however, is not to be unilateral in these efforts. The public is not a uniform group. There will invariably be a [spectrum of allies](#): from active and passive allies, to the neutral, to passive opposition and finally active opposition. Many systems thinkers such as Donella Meadows and others advise not wasting time on people who are actively opposed to a change. For example, Anat Shenker-Osorio advises not to deploy efforts to *convince* any opposition, but instead use messages that alienate the opposition and cast them as outliers (as cited in Ogunlesi, 2022). Other narratives experts concur. The civil society organisation [Community Change](#) based in Washington, D.C., for example, explains that:

By using messages that engage our base, persuade the middle and alienate the opposition, we achieve multiple things. First, we empower our choir to want to convince the congregation. Second, we argue on our terms ... And, finally, we can make our opponents appear like the outliers they are: out of touch with what the vast majority believe and desire. (Shenker-Osorio, 2017)

This also supports the message from those studying social movements and protests: use knowledge about actors within current power systems to identify those most likely to be ready to acknowledge the need for change and support new ways of doing things. This is explained as delineating between various pillars of the current regime and focusing especially on the least-loyal pillars, as this is likely to be more effective than putting efforts solely into rapid mobilisation and building numerical advantage (Chenoweth et al., 2022).

Part 3

In practice: Scotland and beyond

What emerges from the selected literature is a mosaic of tactics and approaches such as:

- Work at all levels of the system
- The importance of pioneers and amplifying their messages
- Public acceptability
- Closing salience and power deficits
- Political pressure
- Expert knowledge
- Harnessing external events
- Feasible solutions on the table
- Evidence of impact
- Compelling communication
- Tolerable costs
- Successful social movements
- Enticing narratives
- Changed frames of reference
- Warm actors in the policy community.

With that in mind, this section draws out reflections on the process of change and efforts to shift economic agendas in a handful of pertinent countries. These countries are implementing a suite of policies aligned with the wellbeing economy agenda. Apart from Costa Rica and Bhutan, these countries are, at the time of writing, members of the Wellbeing Economy Governments partnership (WEGo). WEGo members have all adopted wellbeing measurement frameworks and are – to different degrees and in different ways – using them to shape policy. WEGo members and Costa Rica and Bhutan are articulating recognition that gross domestic product (GDP) as a primary measure of progress is inadequate and needs to be complemented, at least, with other metrics (Mason & Büchs, 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic, WEGo policy labs helped respective governments to prioritise health goals over short-term economic objectives. Aside from Bhutan, none of the countries officially questions the goal of growth, but they do show readiness to note its flaws, such as inequality.

For example, among the WEGo members:

- In February 2023, the Finnish Government published its [National Action Plan for the Economy of Wellbeing](#) (see also [Demos Helsinki](#)). When it held the EU council presidency, Finland's main theme was the "economy of wellbeing" (Demos Helsinki). Finland is well known for actions that align with the wellbeing economy agenda, such as cooperatives, basic income trials and the circular economy.
- Iceland has a good track record of gender equality and progress on renewable energy. It introduced a framework of 39 wellbeing indicators in 2019 (accepted into policy in 2020) and 6 wellbeing priorities (mental health, secure housing, better work-life balance, zero carbon emissions, innovation growth and better communication with the public). These



constitute a set of financial, social and environmental metrics equally significant to Iceland's success ([WEAll](#)).

- Wales is well known for being the first country to create an office of the Commissioner for the Wellbeing of Future Generations, giving impetus to its Wellbeing of Future Generations Act.
- New Zealand Aotearoa has introduced a wellbeing budget, based on its Living Standards Framework, supported by key reforms to change the hard-wiring of government. It has also seen innovative policymaking, such as giving the [Whanganui river legal rights on a par with human rights](#).
- Scotland's government has stated its objective to build a wellbeing economy, has a measurement dashboard called the National Performance Framework and has examples of institutions and policies that show promise, such as the Sustainable Procurement Duty and Zero Waste Scotland. It also holds the secretariat for WEGo.

Both Bhutan and Costa Rica demonstrate how lower levels of income can still come with progress in the conditions for flourishing:

- Bhutan is known for its Gross National Happiness index (inspired by its Buddhist heritage) and elevating the goals of sustainable and equitable economic development; environmental conservation; preservation and promotion of culture and heritage; and good governance (Brooks, 2013); early adoption of renewable energy; its climate negative status; and recent progress in various aspects of social development (see [World Bank](#) and [Bhutan Country Report 2022](#)).
- Costa Rica regularly tops or out-performs in indices such the Happy Planet Index and the Social Progress Index (and uses the latter to track progress). It is renowned for its reforestation, biodiversity and conservation work, and for its strong democratic mechanisms and robust provision of basic services, such as health, education, potable water, electricity and telecommunications ([Costa Rica Country Report 2022](#)).

Several aspects seem to have been important in building momentum in these various contexts. These are: coalitions and bases; modelling on peers and support in numbers; relationships and reassurance; and champions and moments.⁴ These will be explained briefly, before turning to the pushback and pain points as they were experienced and evident in Scotland and other countries.

Coalitions and bases

As noted in the literature cited above, when civil society is united and transmitting consistent messages, this can counter the power of those with vested interests who would otherwise maintain business as usual.

In Scotland, this seems to have been the case as the wellbeing economy agenda built momentum in recent years. A diverse range of civil society actors have collaborated to promote

⁴ A note on terminology: "advocate" is used to refer to someone outside government pushing the agenda; "intrapreneur" for those proactively acting within government to make change; and "champion" to refer to a senior person within or outside government who gives profile and endorsement to the agenda.



changing the economic system, having come to appreciate the relevance of the economy to the issues they each work on. Deliberate and proactive advocacy advanced discussions about the economy within civil society.

Civil society groups used various communications platforms to critique business as usual and to propose, socialise and normalise alternatives among a range of audiences. With more resources they could have done more, but routes included:

- Consistent and accessible input to a range of gatherings organised by third parties such as large events and seminars, and to a range of audiences in the current system and those already exploring alternatives
- Media appearances and op-eds
- Articles and blog posts, including in third-party outlets and in academic journals
- Proactive and reactive social media
- 1:1 meetings with allies (including those inside government), potential allies, those building the evidence base, policymakers, politicians and their staff, and those who might be compelling to decision-makers and to potential blockers.

What emerged was an informal coalition that seems to have bolstered appetite within policy circles for listening to, heeding and then implementing some relevant policies and adopting wellbeing economy language:

The wellbeing economy narratives that WEAll and WEGo are promoting, even though to different extents, have potential to contribute to a shift of perceptions among mainstream policymakers of GDP as a measure of progress, economic growth as a policy goal, and capitalism as the economic system that underpins current economies. (Mason & Büchs, 2023)

As more people accepted the conversation about economic change and the purpose of the economy and as people engaged with the agenda, civil society organisations then reinforced shared messages via:

- Briefings to members of the Scottish Parliament ahead of relevant debates
- Participating in each other's dialogues, conferences and fringe events at party conferences
- Cross-referencing each other's work
- High-profile interventions such as open letters with a range of signatories to show the breadth of support for the agenda.

Recent examples of this coalition work include a convening of civil society groups and academics led by Friends of the Earth Scotland and WEAll Scotland. They agreed a 10-point test of wellbeing economy implementation in response to the Scottish Government's National Strategy for Economic Transformation ([WEAll](#)). In July 2023 an open letter to the Scottish Government, coordinated by WEAll Scotland and signed by over 200 organisations and academics, called on the Government to move from wellbeing economy rhetoric to action.



A similar story is apparent in Wales where one of the key champions of the future generations approach – Jane Davidson, then Welsh Environment Minister – built on and utilised the advocacy of NGOs to push the agenda within the Welsh Parliament and Government.

In Finland, civil society similarly played a critical role. Two organisations in particular – the Finnish Federation for Social Affairs and Health (SOSTE) and more recently Demos Helsinki – have driven the agenda among policymakers. Finnish proponents have also noted that

From the point of view of civil society and actors, at least the global Wellbeing Economy Alliance network (WEAll) has played a major role in supporting the idea of a welfare economy [sic]... [WEAll's role] strengthened the spread of the idea of a welfare economy [sic] and given it weight in policy discussions. (Ahokas, 2021)

While Finland's government has not yet gone so far as to take up alternative economic agendas in a substantial way, the extent of coalition work is evident in a "small but somewhat influential group of non-party-affiliated but politically active individuals with the aim of translating new economic arguments into public discussions via traditional and new media channels" (Demos Helsinki). One analyst described the process as "a concept initiated at the national level by an umbrella NGO [that] was brought to the governmental agenda later ... [showing] that these initiatives from non-governmental actors can impact the long-term agenda setting" (Demos Helsinki). That SOSTE encompasses a range of entities and perspectives is said to bode well for the ongoing momentum for the agenda, despite a recent change of government. The agenda is also described as not being particularly party-political (unlike in other countries, such as Scotland). For example, many in the Finnish business community are said to want the newly elected government to retain climate change targets and investments in green technology. Moreover, there was a right-wing government when Finland held the EU presidency and was pushing the economy of wellbeing agenda, suggesting that there might be a sufficient base across political divides for it to endure beyond the most recent change of government.

Similarly, in Iceland the coalition government's support for the agenda shows that it can be shared across left and right political groupings. Iceland's story also features public mobilisation. The Prime Minister, Katrín Jakobsdóttir, who led a coalition including a conservative Independence Party and centre-right Progressive Party, has said that it was a public campaign that encouraged her government to position gender equality as a key economic objective, with subsequent efforts in mainstreaming and gender budgeting, work that gave the country the credentials to be one of the inaugural members of WEGo. The ideas inherent in a wellbeing economy are described as not being controversial, but when it came to putting them at the heart of government, the work of actors such as the Pirate Party in keeping related ideas in the spotlight, and the activism of a prominent academic in briefing and encouraging government officials, seems to have encouraged adoption.

In addition to coalitions of organised policy actors, a wider base is important in building political ambition. In recent years, opinion polling regarding the wellbeing economy shows support among the Scottish public for individual ideas associated with the agenda and for the agenda writ large (Scotianomics, 2020). Being able to note this public support enables those supporting the agenda to go further and reference it more often. Wales and Bhutan are arguably places where respective support bases are the broadest. The Welsh Wellbeing of



Future Generations Act was preceded by a major consultation on [The Wales We Want](#) (see also Llywodraeth Cymru, 2015). Bhutan's use of gross national happiness (GNH) came from the previous king, and is now supported by his son, and reflects Bhutan's Buddhist culture.

It is apparent that both an organised civil society championing an approach and a broader base of support help build the confidence of political actors (such as intrapreneurs working to advance the wellbeing economy within the Scottish government) and that of high-level champions (for example, the previous Scottish First Minister). A supportive coalition of civil society actors and wider public support means the agenda can withstand resistance.

Modelling on peers and support in numbers

While civil society pressure, favourable polls and a broad base matter, policy actors are more likely to move on an issue if someone they deem similar to them has already done so. Peer-to-peer learning enables modelling, copying and adaptation, and can help spread solutions. As seen above, magnet projects in policy, government and in the community and business demonstrate what is possible and offer lessons.

This seems to have been particularly important regarding the wellbeing economy agenda. It therefore presents a challenge, because actions need to be bolder and more comprehensive than is in evidence anywhere. Nevertheless, being able to point to what other governments are doing and encourage replication with those deemed kin has been a useful strategy in bolstering the appetite of actors in the Scottish Government to act on the agenda. Similarly in Europe, “promotion of the idea of a [wellbeing] economy relied heavily on international discussions and the support of international economic organisations” (Ahokas, 2021). The Finnish government were attentive to this during their 2019 presidency of the EU Council to build support for the economy of wellbeing:

a precise influencing strategy had also been thought out for the EU presidency ... When introducing the idea of a welfare economy [sic] to other EU countries, [the Finnish actors] relied on the arguments produced by international organisations, and especially the OECD, on how investments in welfare services and other welfare-supporting structures positively affect economic growth and social development more broadly. (Ahokas, 2021)

In Iceland, it was remarked that while the different size of governments made the example not entirely comparable, the Icelandic Government was impressed with what Canada was doing in measuring wellbeing.

The Wellbeing Economy Governments' partnership is an important manifestation of this peer-to-peer modelling. As Jonathan McClory, an expert in soft power, explains, “Shaping global outcomes in many areas now relies on the ability to encourage collaboration and forge networks, using attraction and persuasion, rather than coercion” (McClory, (n.d.)). In this vein, WEGo sees senior civil servants from member governments convene via policy labs to share respective experiences and lessons, and discuss common challenges for the [wellbeing economy agenda](#).



WEGo also shows the importance of protection in numbers and, similarly, *within* governments, the more intrapreneurs working to advance an issue across government, the more they can protect and support it. In Scotland, for example, relevant practices have emerged from not just the Office of the Chief Economist, but from procurement teams, the Just Transition Commission, civil servants tasked with supporting community wealth building and so on. In Costa Rica this has a temporal aspect, with incoming governments tending to augment and build on their predecessor government's work, rather than dismantling it. Similarly, Finland has followed a "Health in All Policies" approach for the last four decades, which meant the wellbeing economy agenda, which complements the approach, was relatively easy to adopt.

Relationships and reassurance

Relationships matter in changing government policy, whether they are relationships between civil society actors and intrapreneurs; between civil society actors themselves; between intrapreneurs themselves; or between intrapreneurs and external audiences.

First, civil society actors identifying, connecting with, gaining the trust of, and being seen as a useful contact for people working within government have proved important in helping intrapreneurs drive change from the inside. These relationships enable the floating of ostensibly radical ideas and frames in friendly conversations where trust is already established. They facilitate connecting intrapreneurs to experts who can present compelling evidence, which intrapreneurs may then utilise in conversations with sceptical colleagues. This is evident in the experience of The Club of Rome, which deliberately built trust and relationships within political institutions to enable knowledge exchange and to reassure intrapreneurs that they are not on their own in their efforts to generate change from the inside.

Second, relationships across civil society actors are important in providing support, backing and reassurance to each other; in working through questions; and in amplifying each other's messages. Scotland's small size and relatively well-connected civil society made this possible, but in any context it is only possible via proactive efforts by people from civil society organisations to build relationships with each other.

Third, intrapreneur-to-intrapreneur relationships within government are significant. In Scotland, two early supporters of the wellbeing economy agenda inside government were senior enough to bring the ideas into government spaces. They navigated the internal dynamics of government to push beyond path dependencies and business-as-usual mindsets. Framing is an important aspect of what such intrapreneurs do. Within the Scottish Government, proponents of the wellbeing economy agenda describe being very attentive to the language that will resonate with and reassure colleagues. For example, government sources reported that "future generations" works well across the political spectrum. Again, a temporal equivalent of this is evident in Costa Rica where more recent activities have followed remarkable initiatives in previous decades, such as ceasing spending on the military and investing public funds in health and education.

WEGo is also an example of intrapreneur-to-intrapreneur relationships providing reassurance – it serves as a community of practice for officials in different governments who support each other and share common challenges. In Finland too, civil servants fostered "integrated policy-making and long-term cohesion across government policies through its national sustainability strategies" (Fleischer & Stokenberga, 2023). Intrapreneurs socialise the agenda inside



government to help move the agenda beyond the political leadership and into bureaucracies. This bodes well for endurance during changes in political leadership, but, as seen below, this socialising is still occurring only in pockets and faces pain points and pushback.

Fourth, intrapreneurs and their allies in government can in turn reassure external audiences (such as businesses) of the benefits they can derive from the various elements of a wellbeing economy, for example, the emphasis on quality of life for workers, flexible work, place-based action and support for small and local enterprises. This was described by one interviewee as “doing it little bit by little bit, and never badging the agenda as beyond GDP, but alongside GDP”.

Champions and moments

Champions are closely linked to relationships, especially relationships between wellbeing economy advocates outside government and intrapreneurs inside. When key figures in government leadership roles endorse wellbeing economy ideas they provide political cover for intrapreneurs, who can then drive the agenda’s implementation.

Sometimes this backing from champions is a matter of subtle buy-in, a quiet word of support to indicate that a proponent of the wellbeing economy agenda is worth listening to and giving diary time to, or making an introduction that gives the implicit message “work with this person”. At other times this backing is very public. For example, the then Scottish First Minister’s [2019 TED Talk](#) not only bolstered the agenda among wider audiences (due to the profile and reach of a TED Talk), but among civil servants who referenced it as evidence that the prevailing political leadership wanted to advance the agenda: it gave would-be intrapreneurs permission to drive change. This public-facing statement of intent had a significant impact within government. Similarly in Iceland, the wellbeing economy [appealed to the Prime Minister](#), Katrín Jakobsdóttir, who oversaw the adoption of the agenda. She is said to have become a mini-celebrity abroad and is well liked in Iceland. Her interest and leadership in the agenda elevated WEGo and mobilised government officials. It enabled Iceland to be a founding member of WEGo, and more recently it saw Jakobsdóttir being appointed a [World Health Organization](#) Champion for the European Wellbeing Economy Initiative.

Another key champion in Scotland has been the Chief Economic Advisor. This office (OCEA) holds the secretariat for WEGo and is home to several intrapreneurs who have created wellbeing economy tools and reports. The Chief Economist regularly partakes in public-facing discussions about the wellbeing economy. OCEA’s position at the heart of the Economics Directorate meant it could drive the agenda as an economic one, rather than it being construed as an either/or between social and environmental goals. In Finland, between 2016 and 2019 the work of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health was said to be “a key factor in promoting the idea of a welfare economy [sic]” (Ahokas, 2021). The Ministry maintained good relations with the office of the (now previous) prime minister, who had been driving many of the sustainability policies, [including the Finnish government’s sustainability road map](#). Another example is the work underpinning Finland’s EU presidency in 2019 where the welfare economy was front and centre of their programme. Analysis has found this was the “result of determined groundwork [which meant that] commitment to it was already favourable both in Finland and in Europe ... [and] an epistemic community ... seemed to form around the idea of a welfare economy” (Ahokas, 2021).



The work of champions can be instrumental when they are confident on a subject or have a strong personal drive to make change. In Wales, for example, current momentum on future generations thinking is driven by a member of the Welsh Assembly who is passionate about the agenda and is working with all possible mechanisms to build legislative frameworks around the vision.

Moments and events can similarly offer an opportunity to elevate the profile of a topic, build buy-in for an agenda or a specific change, and create pressure for action. As the Institute of Public Policy Research explains: “Successful movements prepare for and then harness external events ... events can offer a movement the chance to increase the reach and perceived significance of their cause – as well as reframing how the public or powerholders see it.” (IPPR, 2021). This was seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, which proved to be a time when political leaders, in WEGo countries at least, could emphasise the importance of health as a top priority, not least vis-à-vis the economy. Just prior to the pandemic, in Finland there was growing discussion of the climate crisis, propelled by the work of Greta Thunberg, to the extent that Finland’s 2019 election was described as the “climate election”. In addition to climate action, Finnish people also wanted socially just policies, so wellbeing economy issues had traction. In Iceland, in the aftermath of the 2007–2008 global financial crisis, which resulted in an International Monetary Fund bailout for Iceland, the country tried re-drafting its constitution via widespread citizen participation. While this new version did not pass Parliament, the process raised issues that have since been the subject of policy initiatives. Also in Iceland, increasing evidence of environmental harm pushed the agenda up the political priority list: for example, Ms Jakobsdóttir said environmental devastation was a key factor for Iceland to include indicators beyond GDP in its budget, the BBC reported in 2019.

Conclusion to parts 2 and 3

Both the selected literature and the exploration of what worked in the countries under consideration highlight three overlapping themes: cooperation, education and mobilisation.

Theme	Lessons from parts 2 and 3
Cooperation	Closing salience and power deficits Coalitions and bases Support in numbers Relationships and reassurance
Education	Pioneers and amplifying their messages Expert knowledge Feasible solutions on the table Evidence of impact Compelling communication Changed frames of reference Warm actors in the policy community Modelling on peers



Mobilisation

Work at all levels of the system
Public acceptability
Political pressure
Harnessing external events
Tolerable costs
Successful social movements
Enticing narratives
Champions and moments

Table 1. Lessons from theory and reality

Reflection on the role of environmental NGOs

One group of actors that features in several localities under consideration is environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In places such as Scotland and Wales, Friends of the Earth Scotland and WWF Cymru were important in pushing conversations in respective localities, bringing their campaign apparatus, media liaisons and so on.

In Europe, environmental organisations have each published papers on topics such as sufficiency (Friends of the Earth Europe: Potocnik et al., 2018) and debunking decoupling (European Environmental Bureau: Parrique et al., 2019), which have proved useful contributions to discussions about economic system change. They have also been active participants in establishing the [EU Wellbeing Economy Coalition](#).

However, the environmental movement has for many decades been subject to (largely unfair) criticism that it is inadequately attending to people's material needs and offering only a hairshirt future. The economic change movement needs to be attentive to this risk and the possible implications for how people perceive the wellbeing economy agenda. It thus needs to clarify the benefits that a wellbeing economy will deliver for people by helping avert the worst of environmental breakdown and reshaping the economy away from one that generates inequalities and injustices and towards one with a more equal market distribution, even prior to redistribution, that helps create good lives from the outset (see Part 5 below).

Part 4

Challenges: pushback and painpoints

The above discussion suggests some progress has been achieved in the considered countries in terms of positive announcements, broader measures of progress beyond traditional economic metrics, and certain policies being enacted that are in line with the wellbeing

economy agenda. Such progress has not been easy and certainly has not been sufficient. Change is often a slow and hard-fought-for process. This section considers the Scottish experience, again augmented by lessons and contrasts from the other jurisdictions. Discussion also draws on third-party articles that have analysed the extent of tangible change in Scotland and beyond. As one of them found, there are “several barriers that WEGos face in adopting more transformative narratives, in particular the prevailing dominance of neoclassical economics training within policymaking institutions,

siloed and short-termist approaches to policymaking, and the role of vested interests within policymaking and the economy” (Mason & Büchs, 2023).

This section finds that these – and other factors as set out below – present substantial challenges to the agenda. The pushback and pain points include system inertia; lack of bandwidth; deliberate blockers; weak implementation and co-option; confusion and impatience; not giving politicians what they need; not building an adequate support base; and friendly fire. No single factor has proved decisive across the board: each has played a different role in respective countries and has mattered to different degrees, including at various points in time. The section concludes with a brief examination of how these mattered in the case of indicators.

System inertia

The lack of adequate change is often not a result of flaws in strategy or down to political rivalries. Instead, the current economic configuration derives staying power due to the very nature of its incumbency. This includes the routine ways of doing things, existing legislation and policies, and path dependencies (Homer-Dixon, 2014; Göpel, 2016). As Bache explains, bureaucracies come with an “inbuilt inertia ... that give a comparative advantage to existing ideas and practices” (Bache, 2020). Even if there is political support for change, there is a powerful weighting against change that means action and delivery is invariably slow. In Finland, for example, one of the challenges was “how different public-sector departments are organised and siloed, without incentives to collaborate—which is precisely what the wellbeing economy demands” (Demos Helsinki). In Costa Rica, with its many checks and balances and complicated bureaucracy, political leaders of whatever hue struggle to deliver substantial change. Such governance structures that hold back the wellbeing economy agenda are reinforced by prevailing government instruments (such as taxes, subsidies and other incentives, institutions, goals and so on) and the structures of governments into thematic departments that often become silos. This means that wellbeing economy champions are trying to deliver fundamental

Change is often
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The current economic configuration derives staying power due to the very nature of its incumbency... built up around the current system are established networks, relationships and hierarchies of status.

change using old tools. COVID-19 was, of course, an exception to this – when entire machineries of respective governments were mobilised to respond in a matter of days and weeks.

There is a more informal, cultural component to this: built up around the current system are established networks, relationships and hierarchies of status, particularly for those who are more senior. Analysis of progress in the WEGo member countries found that when reform efforts confront existing systems, “the capacity of actors who seek to promote the wellbeing economy within established political institutions is currently curtailed by entrenched ways of thinking and working and by power imbalances ... [and by] their minority position within their own institutions” (Mason & Büchs, 2023).

Lack of bandwidth

Long-term change along the lines of the wellbeing economy agenda has struggled to find and hold political attention in systems often characterised by short-termism and downstream crisis response, issue by issue. Other policy goals get in the way and overwhelm the conversation. In Scotland, the question of independence takes a lot of political airtime. In recent years, gender recognition also occupied substantial political capacity. In New Zealand Aotearoa, the wide divisions over the government’s response to COVID-19 similarly sapped the bandwidth of political actors. The Finnish agenda risks being undermined by culture wars that not only take up considerable political airtime, but also have played a role in the recent rightward and populist political turn in Finland (see, for example, the anti-immigrant True Finns party). Costa Rica too has its share of culture wars dominating political discussions: the Bertelsmann Transformation Index reports that in Costa Rica “ideological polarization has also been increasing ... [and a recent] presidential election (2018) evidenced a different kind of polarization, based not on socioeconomic factors but on socio-cultural ones: same-sex marriage, abortion, sexual education guides and religion” ([Costa Rica Country Report 2022](#)).

A related pain point is that the short-term nature of a lot of political discussion and reaction to issues means the prevailing way of working is often one of responding to one crisis then the next. This undermines long-term thinking and exploration of different ways of doing things, and effectively leaves the path clear for orthodox solutions to be maintained. The wars in Ukraine, Gaza and elsewhere, the cost-of-living crisis and other urgent challenges reinforce this focus on short-term priorities. Given their undeniable seriousness, such immediate challenges can crowd out space for longer-term thinking and planning, let alone change. In Finland, the Ukraine war and the price of natural gas constitute an urgent challenge. In Iceland a lot of focus has been on inflation and COVID-19 recovery, and more recently the implications of the Ukraine war. The Costa Rican experience is similar: in the last few years of the previous president’s administration, “Costa Rica experienced a slowdown in economic growth and an increase in unemployment and poverty. A large fiscal deficit generated considerable uncertainty, restraining economic actors and dominating the political landscape” ([Costa Rica Country Report 2022](#)).



The perception that “now is not the right time” can push longer-term transformation discussions onto the “important but not urgent” pile. As analysis of implementation challenges in WEGo countries found that the “way policymaking institutions are designed still incentivizes and encourages short-termism and siloed decision-making” (Mason & Büchs, 2023). Governments are designed to deal with what they know and are orientated to immediate responsiveness. In many of the contexts considered, the sense that governments are short of resources has resulted in short-term cost-cutting. The results of this thinking can not only damage people and the planet, but also ignores the scope for financial savings by getting things right the first time around: in other words, avoiding the need for responsive repair and fix spending (Chrysopoulou et al., 2021).

Adjacent to this issue is the narrow focus of government departments that creates the infamous government silos, and with them the narrow and often downstream thinking that is antithetical to the wellbeing economy agenda. Fortunately many governments are working to address this via cross-departmental working groups, a focus on policy coherence, shared budgets, and so on – but there is much further to go to tackle this hindrance to the wellbeing economy agenda.

Another pain point that could be described as a lack of bandwidth stems from the frequency with which civil servants are promoted or transferred. While this might bring benefits in the form of spreading knowledge and cross-departmental collaboration (see “Relationships and reassurance” above), it also means that relationships need to be built anew, and wellbeing economy proponents must begin the process of convincing and educating their colleagues again.

Not giving politicians what they need

A manifestation of the challenge of long-term impact is that political realities mean politicians need short-term actions and impact to point to. While they might assert they are in favour of investment that prevents harm happening, it is often the “ribbon-cutting moments” that many politicians, with their eye on the next election, are likely to gravitate to. It was remarked that a classic political answer is to throw more money at a problem because this will appease agitators and enable avoidance of the almost inevitable disruption to the status quo that tackling root causes would bring. Such spending is, perversely, also likely to bolster the still-dominant metric of GDP.

Deliberate blockers

A more insidious iteration of pushback than system inertia and lack of bandwidth is outright blocking. As Duncan Green explains, when people depend on the current system they can block change, especially when a small well-organised number of people could lose a lot, and a large number perceive that they will only gain a little and are disorganised (Green, 2016). Analysis of implementation of the wellbeing economy agenda in WEGo countries found that:

opposition to the wellbeing economy within WEGos comes from deeply rooted ways of thinking and working ... [such as] the prevalence of neoclassical economics training among government officials and civil servants ... the decision-making power of WEGos remains strongly constrained by the power of vested interests, including the oil industry ... or multinational corporations. (Mason & Büchs, 2023)



There has been a spate of media articles in Scotland critiquing the wellbeing economy agenda, albeit without much sign of understanding its tenets and rationale. The extent of critique is stronger than had been the case in previous years. A likely reason is that the newly elected First Minister made the wellbeing economy a prominent part of his vision, and appointed a Cabinet Secretary for the Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy. So criticising the wellbeing economy agenda is a way for his opponents to criticise him. Another manifestation of this is that the prominent association of the agenda with the governing Scottish National Party and its coalition partner the Scottish Greens enables opponents to dismiss the wellbeing economy agenda as an SNP, Green or nationalist agenda, and it is thus unfairly tarred with separate critiques of those parties, such as allegations of being anti-business. This is one of the downsides of having political champions for an agenda: they have political opponents who will use almost any issue to attack them. They also have a political lifespan. For example, given her strong support for the agenda in previous years, when Nicola Sturgeon announced she was resigning as First Minister of Scotland, there was a concern among proponents of the wellbeing economy that it would lose momentum and support in government.

That said, current pushback in Scotland might be a signal of the rise in prominence of the wellbeing economy agenda – and thus a sign of its success. People who may not have heard of it before, or dismissed it if they had, now [react so strongly](#) and emotionally that they seem threatened by it. Regardless, consistent negative coverage can stall the progress of an agenda and leave a dent in its reputation, irrespective of the fairness of that coverage.

There seem to be three levels of blocking:

- First, from those who believe they benefit most from the current economic model, where the possible shift to an economy designed for greater fairness and sustainability would represent a form of loss, be it loss of pride, status, power or influence that they enjoy by virtue of the current economic model. In such instances, blocking can manifest as outright hostility: creating political heat, picking off soft supporters by briefing against the agenda, and creating divisions among allies of the agenda. Blockers often hear the ideas of a new agenda such as the wellbeing economy through their own biases, and thus pigeon-hole them without delving into the rationale or proposals. As one interviewee said, some of this pushback is “performative and lacking in understanding”.
- Second, for other blockers, there is a sense of complacency in the adequacy of the current system, something that is easier to feel when you are doing well in the current scenario. This complacency manifests as the dead hand of inaction and recalcitrance. This softer but powerful form of blocking is less an overt critique and more a reinforcement and reassertion of dominant thinking. Like the first level, such blockers tend to have considerable airtime, and thus get messages endorsing business as usual across. In Scotland, for example, the Scottish Chamber of Commerce is calling for the Government to [focus on promoting economic growth](#). Globally, there are many instances of advice being offered to governments by international institutions and consultancies that reinforce and thus perpetuate orthodox thinking.
- Third, perhaps the least hostile but still influential mode of blocking comes from those who might share some of the agenda but perceive some of the goals as being in contrast to their



immediate priorities or on the other hand, are considered not radical enough by some within the economic change movement. For example, environmental objectives being positioned as counter to job creation and job protection, or that acute needs are so profound that growth is seen as a necessary evil to fund service provision and redistribution. Such perspectives reflect a narrow reading or understanding of the wellbeing economy agenda, and by implication reflect that proponents are not sufficiently communicating to potential allies the joined-up holistic nature of the agenda and potential for co-benefits. It also reflects a narrow conception of the costs of the current system. It is likely that such blockers have not grasped or acknowledged the scale of challenges and thus the magnitude of change needed. This form of blocking will manifest in a lack of bold ideas being shared with political leaders and crisis-to-crisis working (as discussed above). It creates tensions where there need not be any, in turn undermining coalitions and broad-based solutions from being explored. An example of this is the previous Finnish government's climate change agenda, which included a call to reduce tree felling. This created tensions in rural areas, where forestry is a significant employer. Proponents for reducing tree felling had not adequately addressed the social implications. In Costa Rica, it was observed that the conservation agenda has not been accompanied by an adequate focus on economic opportunities for people in rural areas.

Different mental models in respective corners of government may also clash with the wellbeing economy agenda. As Mason and Büchs conclude, champions within government

face opposition within their own institutions, which is likely to limit what they feel able to say and do. Economists in ministries and other political organizations have predominantly received neoclassical economics training; and thinking around GDP as a measure, economic growth as goal, and capitalism as we currently know it, are still widely accepted among their colleagues. (Mason & Büchs, 2023)

The New Zealand Aotearoa Treasury, for example, is described as often thinking numbers are magic and being relatively conservative. Since the Treasury, via its Living Standards Framework, was largely responsible for the wellbeing economy agenda, implementation was consequently subtle and small scale, at best. Similarly in Finland, the Ministry of Finance is reported as being a rather difficult partner for the agenda, with “the wellbeing economy ... sometimes seen as a competitor, hindrance or replacement to established economic goals” (Demos Helsinki). This reflects how the Finnish “mainstream intellectual and policy landscapes are heavily permeated with a hegemony of neoliberalism protected by strong defenders ... mainstream discussion is fairly uniform and follows economic dogma” (Demos Helsinki).

Beyond the countries being considered in this analysis, a stark example of the first form of a deliberate pushback to a proposal that has resonance with the wellbeing economy agenda is the surge in conspiracy theories about [15-minute neighbourhoods](#). One of its leading advocates has received death threats. A Change.org petition in solidarity captures some of the story behind various forms of blocking:



The 15 Minute city is catching on because it helps cities to confront many of the challenges they face with unsustainable transport, use of public space, physical and mental health, liveability and economic goals. But this is also why it attracts so much negativity. It confronts cities and people with the problems that have arisen with the ways we have been dealing with mobility in the past decades. For those for whom this worked well, this feels as a loss. Or even as a frontal attack on their lifestyle. This makes it vulnerable to become part of conspiracy theories. This tension is a normal part of any transition, any transformative change. Where people win and people lose. Where the balances between different rights and privileges are being discussed. ([Change.org](#))

Weak implementation and co-option

The flipside to blocking is co-option and weak implementation.

Campaigners often focus on achieving tangible 'small wins' in the form of specific policies that enable them to show success and maintain momentum

For example, campaigners often focus on achieving tangible 'small wins' in the form of specific policies that enable them to show success and maintain momentum. If these incremental steps are not connected to a bolder goal, there is no change in underlying systems, and the wins will remain isolated islands of progress and vulnerable to pushback.

Similarly, without proponents holding a vision consistently and concertedly, opponents have scope to frame it themselves. This seems to have been the case in New Zealand Aotearoa where there was little follow-through and no plan to deliver the transformation talked about by political leaders. New Zealand Aotearoa's wellbeing budget efforts seem to be largely reactive amelioration, and while positive media moments were frequent, there was little impact on citizens or connection to the work of civil servants employed in areas such as procurement and planning. Political theorist Grant Duncan of Massey University in Auckland, New Zealand, has written:

From [Prime Minister Ardern's] first campaign speech in August 2017, she had created a sense of promise that her government was ultimately unable to fulfil. She claimed climate change was her generation's "nuclear-free moment", and that a decent, affordable home was everyone's right. It sounded great, but on both counts progress fell short of expectation and need. Later, she would capitulate on a full capital gains tax to help solve the housing crisis. ([The Conversation](#))

The previous Finnish Government did not demonstrate how its efforts to build a wellbeing economy would bring long-term impact, which was perhaps inevitable given how recent those efforts are and that benefits can take time to be evident (as discussed below). A Demos Helsinki analyst warns that "if the wellbeing economy does not offer concrete policy alternatives and choices to policymakers, its adoption as a policy tool will be challenging". The analyst concludes that in Finland, while the wellbeing economy agenda has grown in prominence, it



has not yet been embedded in governance processes and economic decisions and instead “is mostly pursued through individual policies or ministries ... [and] the most prominent challenge ... [is] the absence of an all-encompassing governance framework” (Demos Helsinki).

Several researchers report weak implementation in both Scotland and New Zealand Aotearoa. For example, Hayden and Dasilva concluded that governments in these countries “moved beyond GDP” by introducing new wellbeing measurements and using them in policymaking, but that there is “continuing dependence on economic growth to achieve intermediate goals, such as employment creation and provision of welfare state services” (Hayden & Dasilva, 2022). In Finland, various departments responsible for delivering the wellbeing economy lack “the necessary capabilities or shared direction to do so” (Demos Helsinki). For Bhutan, part of the challenge in robust implementation relates to what happens beyond its borders. It is said to be “hard to be a GNH bubble in a GDP world”. Bhutan is struggling to hold the GNH course without much support from outside actors in, for example, trade and aid negotiations.

Turning to co-option, intentionally or otherwise, there are several examples of use of the term wellbeing economy in ways unlikely to yield the fundamental system change it requires. For example, McCartney et al. report that “when some policy actors have utilised wellbeing economy framing, they have done so while still viewing people and the planet as inputs to economic goals, instead of seeing the economy as working for people and the planet” (McCartney et al., 2023). They warn that the term faces risk of “misappropriation and capture by organisations and governments which either do not sufficiently understand the implications of making the change to a wellbeing economy, or which wish to present themselves as being in favour of more radical change than ... intended” (McCartney et al., 2023). Demos Helsinki points to how “the concept of wellbeing tends to be used in vague and abstractly positive ways in public discussion”. The Finnish Government often uses the term “economy of wellbeing” and regularly points to how the wellbeing of people is good for the economy. Other members of WEGo also do so to a lesser extent. Such framing matters as it prioritises wellbeing in service of the economy, not the other way around, which is critical to the wellbeing economy. In Scotland there has been a [similar use of the term wellbeing economy](#) to essentially describe business as usual.

For the fundamental change inherent in the wellbeing economy agenda, systems inside government need to change.

For the fundamental change inherent in the wellbeing economy agenda, systems inside government need to change. New Zealand Aotearoa amended its State Sector Act and its Public Finance Act to enable multiyear funding, some pooling of budgets, cross-departmental collaboration, and a more permissive environment. But internal accountability frameworks (“where the rubber hits the road for civil servants” as one interviewee explained) largely remained the same. In contrast, Wales is proactively changing both the overarching laws and internal rules and practices, with the role of the Future Generations Commissioner tasked with holding government agencies to account and working to support change in internal cultures.



Confusion and impatience

Closely related to co-option is the lack of clarity some people experience when engaging in the agenda. Deliberately or otherwise, some policymakers use the terminology and rhetoric of wellbeing economy to cover different agendas or describe less bold actions, thus hollowing out the vision and preserving the status quo. Wellbeing economy is a deliberately broad term. This allows diverse groups to feel part of it, thus creating a wider movement, and bridging certain tensions in the economic change field. It also means the term is vulnerable to co-option and that “abstract and broad definitions of wellbeing can lead to unavoidable differences in its operationalization. [For example] wellbeing means one thing in the ministry of education and another in the management of a rural health centre” (Demos Helsinki).

In Finland, for example, Demos Helsinki reports that the “concept of wellbeing tends to be used in vague and abstractly positive ways in public discussion. This creates a risk that wellbeing becomes a formless virtue that is impossible to oppose ... If wellbeing remains abstract and undefined ... it becomes a difficult comparative or instructive tool”. The term “welfare economy” is also often used in Finland, but this risks being construed as state-provided welfare, rather than the economic system change that proponents of the wellbeing economy agenda call for. Icelandic lacks a direct translation of wellbeing, so some people have suggested alternatives such as the Icelandic for “prosperity” (*velsæld* or *hagsæld*).

How the agenda augments or perhaps replaces other frameworks and goals is also a cause of confusion. For example, in Iceland many civil servants responsible for the delivery of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) are now being told to focus on wellbeing. Despite commonalities between the SDGs, and despite the wellbeing economy agenda including deliberate links in the indicators, civil servants say they cannot meet or comply with two separate agendas. Alternatively, civil servants assert they are already advancing a wellbeing economy. Another confusion arises when organisations such as the OECD are perceived as sending mixed messages – for example, a recent OECD report was pointed to as pushing growth, while other parts of the organisation emphasise wellbeing economy-aligned changes.

While this confusion can create impatience, so too can the time it can take for wellbeing economy-aligned actions to show tangible impact for people, not least as there are significant headwinds that offset progress (austerity, climate disasters, COVID-19, conflict in Ukraine and in Gaza, and elsewhere, and inflation, for example). It was noted that since Iceland sits relatively high in terms of many of the indicators pertinent to a wellbeing economy, compared with other countries, it is hard to show improvement in the metrics. In other instances, governments have adopted the wellbeing economy agenda only in fits and starts, creating an incoherence as contrary actions can undermine progress in achieving tangible outcomes. In Costa Rica, famous for its relatively substantial social spending, “poverty and extreme poverty levels have respectively remained at around 20% and 6% of households. Inequality levels have also remained high relative to historical levels” – and of course have been set back by COVID-19 ([Costa Rica Country Report 2022](#)). Costa Rica shows that even with concerted effort at implementation, benefits are not always immediately apparent. Then-Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern recognised this when first introducing her wellbeing budget in New Zealand Aotearoa. Even with such warnings, lags can allow detractors or even impatient supporters to



denigrate the agenda as only about rhetoric. Fortunately, delayed benefits is not the case with every element, meaning there are some opportunities for pointing to the nature of impact – living wages being one example where there is scope for tangible and timely impact. Similarly, the benefit of community wealth-building to wellbeing and mental health, as revealed in the case of Preston in the United Kingdom, offers another example of tangible impact (Tanith et al., 2023).

Inadequate support base

While opinion polls in Scotland and elsewhere show support for the overall ethos of the wellbeing economy (see Part 3 above) and for various elements within it, and there is a coalition of actors helping drive the agenda, this has thus far been insufficient. Supporters need to build

a broad base and a range of powerful people need to support the agenda, or at least not stand in the way (Demos Helsinki). In particular, a broad-based constituency is necessary to mitigate the impact of blockers and empower politicians to act.

The New Zealand Aotearoa comparison is pertinent here. The approach to the wellbeing economy agenda there was largely top-down and a combination of a technical exercise led by the Treasury via the Living Standards Framework combined with political championship. When the Treasury first unveiled the wellbeing budget, the policy community reportedly expressed surprise. In contrast, Wales undertook substantial public consultation involving thousands of Welsh voices, which gave the Wellbeing of Future Generations agenda a mandate, legitimacy and resonance beyond the policy world. People in Wales see that they have a stake in the wellbeing economy agenda and they understand it. Iceland's approach similarly involved public engagement over a two-year period consulting various stakeholders, including the public, political opposition and public servants about wellbeing goals, and subsequent distillation of the feedback into six wellbeing priorities.

New Zealand Aotearoa's civil society has been described as "thin", with the agenda lacking prominent champions beyond

select political leaders (though this is changing thanks to the work of WEAll New Zealand Aotearoa and others). Scotland sits somewhere in the middle: the coalition that emerged in civil society bolstered the agenda but the Scottish Government itself has undertaken only small-scale consultation, in relation to revision of the National Performance Framework and arguably in the form of citizens' assemblies. In recent months, engagement with business has been said to be inadequate on a proposed bottle deposit return scheme. Even just the perception of inadequate consultation undermines support for change among those most affected. Finland seems to similarly sit in the middle, since "the concept of a wellbeing economy has emerged from active NGOs and entered the governmental agenda from the third sector ... [but] the level

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of civil society participation was moderate or increasing at best” (Demos Helsinki). The ideal scenario would be strong bottom-up support and dialogue around the agenda and vision, and then robust and inclusive consultation on the various component parts, with the lack of either boding very badly.

There also is a risk for proponents that in their strong conviction of the need for change they neglect to make the argument compelling to enough audiences. Often activists and change agents declare that there is a need to be positive and not waste time “admiring the problem”, and instead prioritise solutions. But, in heeding this advice, perhaps there is an implicit assumption that the flaws of business as usual are as apparent to everyone else as they are to those in the movement? Certainly, agitation for economic system change has not come from enough quarters. Powerful defenders of the status quo have been able carry on without much hindrance, without calls to answer for their position and justify the current set-up.

Another risk of not having a strong support base is that when a prominent champion leaves office, even a sympathetic successor may want to differentiate themselves or may lack the gravitas to protect the vision in the face of pushback. This seems to be the story in Scotland – the departure of Nicola Sturgeon and with her the strong communication skills to articulate the wellbeing economy vision and ability to convince certain audiences of its merits, including within government, has brought a vulnerability. Her successor, Humza Yousaf, seems to support the wellbeing economy idea and has even appointed a Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy, but has not yet shown he can hold the vision and implement it to the depth and extent required.

Finally, a broad support base also matters *inside* government. In New Zealand Aotearoa, it has been noted that wellbeing economy proponents need to bring wider government functions into the conversation, and obtain leadership from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) – rather than the Treasury alone, which civil servants see as a specialist department. The PM&C could spread the ethos and ways of working across other agencies, integrating tools and programmes. The Finnish case reveals a similar challenge: in order for the agenda to shape economic decision-making, the government functions leading the wellbeing work “must facilitate ongoing dialogue to ensure that the culture of the wellbeing economy is disseminated everywhere in the public administration” (Demos Helsinki). Consideration of WEGo members reveals a similar story of a lack of embeddedness and inadequate rollout:

[wellbeing economy champions] are part of wider government institutions, which themselves are embedded in a global system of governments, which act in accordance with discourses, tools, and institutions structured around growth-based, capitalist, neoclassical economics. Within this setting, it remains difficult for individual innovators, and even for a group of innovator countries, to adopt a more explicitly post-growth-oriented wellbeing economy position and to advocate a transformation of the economic system. (Mason & Büchs, 2023)

In contrast to truncated rollouts, whole-of-government efforts are necessary to create holistic and systemic responses.



Friendly fire

Finally, while the economic change movement is characterised by a healthy plurality of concepts that resonate to different degrees with different audiences, proponents should elevate and emphasise their common core themes to avoid the risk of misperceptions about conflicting narratives. As outlined earlier, change happens via a mixture of ideas, action and a plurality of tactics, underpinned by a bottom-up foundation of support.

Further, despite coalition-building, often constituents of the economic change movement seem to find it easier to critique each other regarding relatively marginal differences of emphasis and tactics. This gives the impression of confusion and disarray. It drains the emotional energy of actors. While interrogation of methods and ideas and emphasis of fellow movement-members

Indicators

A critical element of the wellbeing economy agenda is broadening the focus of measures of progress beyond GDP. Such indicators, when sufficiently prominent in government purviews, are critical in broadening the suite of goals policymakers pay attention to. The next and often more challenging step is to “make the measures matter”. This is about using them to shift policymaking and evaluation, thereby beginning to re-shape the economy – which would otherwise retain its usual form, despite the existence of new indicators.

The governments in all countries under consideration in this paper have developed and, to different degrees, begun to use multidimensional wellbeing frameworks. These incorporate important aspects of quality of life and include distributional analysis. The creation and publication of such measurement frameworks seems to have taken place without obstructive pushback hampering progress. Where the pain points emerge is in relation to the adoption of indicator frameworks: do the indicators simply exist or do policymakers make them matter? Are the indicators used to inform policy analysis and set priorities, evaluations and so on?

In this regard, similar manifestations of the pushback set out above are apparent when it comes to indicators:

System inertia: the existing metrics that governments use to assess success of the economy (and consequently the success of governments themselves) are found in explicit laws and regulations and in implicit practices in governance systems. Fiscal rules reinforce the use of GDP, and the prevalence of GDP as part of political communication means it acts like a magnet, consistently drawing policy actors back to it. Media too are accustomed to reporting and questioning governments on the movement of GDP. Opposition parties of whatever political hue use it as a rod to hit their government opponents.



Lack of bandwidth: in times of crisis, civil servants can dismiss the metric debate as something for easier times. The task of making new measures matter in policymaking requires a substantial redesign of governmental processes. To be done well, this needs to encompass consultation, engagement and collaboration with civil servants and external actors, all of which requires time, resources and leadership. This can be in short supply when governments are rushing from one crisis response to the next.

Deliberate blockers: despite widespread recognition of the flaws of GDP among economists and civil servants, those who defend GDP on the assertion that it tracks important goals such as jobs and living standards often hold powerful posts in government, or in organisations that influence government. The third level of blocking (discussed above) is also apparent among entities who work on challenges that a wellbeing economy would help address, but who do not make the connection between the persistence of those challenges and the GDP-orientated economy and GDP-aligned policymaking processes.

Weak implementation and co-option: the beyond-GDP movement is certainly not lacking in alternative metrics and indices. As flagged above, all governments under consideration have developed frameworks that encompass a broad suite of metrics. However, they are not accorded influence in policymaking on a par with GDP. This is a stark example of governments recognising the arguments of beyond-GDP proponents and establishing frameworks, but doing so without shifting the mechanisms of government in ways that are necessary for a wellbeing economy. A cynical reading of this is that this is about deliberate placation to quell discussion of paradigm change; a more sympathetic reading would allow for the time and challenges inherent in making the measures matter.

Confusion: the plethora of beyond-GDP measures and related initiatives being proffered to governments all have their strengths and weaknesses. They range in emphasis and in the degree of public participation in their construction. It is understandable that government officials would feel confused and unsure of which ones to embrace. Similarly, how the wellbeing indicator frameworks that governments have adopted interact with a rather cluttered landscape of assessment architectures – such as the SDGs, gender impact assessments, inequality impact assessments, human rights analyses, environmental targets and others – does not make things easy for civil servants.

Not giving politicians what they want: many indicators are relatively technical, which distances them from popular conversations. This means politicians are unlikely to hear about indicators from their constituents. Voters rarely demand beyond-GDP indicators; instead, the more specialised policy community tends to bring these indicators to politicians' attention. Indicators do not offer politicians the newsletter-fodder or ribbon-cutting moments they often seek in their political careers.

Inadequate support base: while it is easy to articulate the connection between better indicators and the issues that various groups work on, the way advocacy, media and movement-building work in practice means indicators are not likely candidates to be front and centre of allies' campaigns.



Friendly fire: related to several of these previous points is the implicit competition between various non-government indicator projects, with each new indicator or index adding to an already crowded space. This confuses things, which in turn interferes with political understanding and endorsement.

is of course important and keeps standards high and goals bold, divisions cast the shadow of fragmentation over the economic change movement and thus imply incoherence.

To address these issues, promoters of beyond-GDP indicators need to do a better job of explaining the connection between indicators and better outcomes for people and planet. This should include more robust explanations of the way that indicators can inform better policymaking, recognising that merely adopting new indicators is not enough, as we see in the OECD countries that have multidimensional wellbeing frameworks but remain a long way from wellbeing economies. Beyond-GDP indicator proponents also need to be more prominent and consistent in their critique of GDP to build consensus that the noise around quarterly GDP-reporting is focused on an outdated measure. They also need to support intrapreneurs prepared to champion the use of beyond-GDP indicators. There is no shortage of government officials who recognise the flaws of GDP: they need support in moving beyond that recognition to incorporating alternative indicators in policymaking and understandings of economic progress and government success.

Part 5

Implications for advocacy, campaigning and influencing: how to push back the pushback?

Keep pointing at the anomalies and failures of the old paradigm, you keep speaking louder and with assurance from the new one, you insert people with the new paradigm in places of public visibility and power. You don't waste time with reactionaries; rather you work with active change agents and with the vast middle ground of people who are open minded. (Donella Meadows, 1990)

The previous sections have outlined what works in theory and practice in getting the wellbeing economy agenda taken up (to some extent) by policymakers. They set out some of the challenges that have emerged and hindered this effort.

This section reflects on the implications for the economic change/wellbeing economy movement writ large. Many of the suggestions for pushing back the pushback are already being undertaken or are already planned by individual actors and organisations in the movement, and proponents should read them as endorsements of existing strategies. Many are also time-consuming and resource-intensive and it would be impossible for a single entity to attend to them. Therefore, the suggestions are offered to the plethora of players and actors in the movement in the hope that between them they can cover more bases.

The suggestions fall under the following headings: consistently critique the status quo and celebrate the vision; build a broad base; emphasise social justice credentials; curate a network of champions; invest in intrapreneurs; broach the blockers and build partnerships. They speak to a spectrum of advocacy – from cooperation and education to persuasion and contestation.

Consistently critique the status quo and celebrate the vision

Given the extent of resistance to change, the economic system change movement needs to **highlight the failures of the current system**, repeatedly. The resilience of business as usual indicates that the movement also needs to do more to contrast this with the possibility of how things could be better. For example, pointing to aspects of life that the public cherishes that are under threat. Then highlight the **history and patterns to show the structures that produce harmful behaviour and events that threaten what matters to people** (Meadows, 2008). The movement could also tally the fiscal costs of the current system as WEAll has done for Scotland via its Failure Demand report (Chrysopoulou et al., 2021), which drew attention inside the Scottish Government, according to interviewees.

Similarly, the movement should be proactive in **outlining a compelling picture of what a new economic model might look like**, conveying the common core concepts across the plurality of new economic visions. This will help counter and even prevent confusion and co-option.

Particularly important is to emphasise **how people's lives will be better** and communicate the benefits of pioneering practices. Proponents should use topical issues to highlight wellbeing



economy solutions, linking things people are experiencing such as the cost-of-living crisis, how these challenges stem from the design of the current system, and the potential of the wellbeing economy agenda to address them. If the movement explains positively the nature and process of change and demonstrates how the wellbeing economy agenda will protect livelihoods, then when shocks scare or anger people, they may also be ready for challenging business as usual (Homer-Dixon, 2014).

Celebrating the vision needs to be consistent if it is to maintain momentum and stay prominent in the public mind. This in turn will help hold decision-makers to account for implementation and create potential for cross-party support. The movement needs to monitor current issues and be ready to frame future ones as examples of system problems.

Build a broad base

The wellbeing economy agenda requires more than movement players as champions and more than a single organisation. Nor is the support evident in opinion polls enough. Such polls show that people might be positively inclined towards the agenda, but for change to happen, that needs to move to *proactively supporting* it. **Support needs to be strong enough and spread wide enough for politicians and decision-makers to stand their ground** in the face of blocking, system inertia, impatience and other pushback.

Consistent critique of the status quo and celebration of the vision will help broaden the support base. The more that intrapreneurs feel support from outside government, the more they will be able to convince their political colleagues to go further faster. This will also help position the agenda as being about society, as opposed to being the preserve of one or two political parties, with everyday people feeling they have no stake in its attainment. A broad base will also drive politicians across the board to show their wellbeing economy delivery credentials and hold each other to account for progress via parliamentary committees and debate, for example.

The broader the base, the more likely that it can marginalise the first two levels of blockers (the vested interests and those complacent with business as usual). For example, in 2023 the WEAll Scottish hub coordinated a letter signed by 200 organisations which demonstrated to government that the wellbeing economy agenda has wider support, thus helping [counter the pushback](#). For the third type of blockers (those potentially sympathetic or onside with elements of the agenda, but not appreciating the interconnections), the task is to find common ground – for example, an interviewee explained that in Finland there is potential for rural employment from tourism, a sector that will be hampered by the forestry industry continuing to fell trees.

Deliberative processes of vision-building and co-creation of policies hold great potential for broadening the base. For example, citizens' assemblies and [Climate Fresk](#), an initiative that supports local dialogues about climate change in over 130 countries.

Building a broad base also requires investment in narratives and communications and use of language, with metaphors and framing proven to work among key audiences. See, for example, Tax Justice UK (2020) for how to talk about tax, [Anthropocene Magazine](#) and [Climate Outreach](#) for how to talk about climate, and the [Public Interest Research Centre](#) for how to talk about system change. Presenting the vision in **everyday terminology and being positive and humorous is likelier to succeed than sharp or aggressive critiques** of the current system.



The broad base applies within politics and in government too. The movement needs a cohort of champions in several political parties in respective countries. Forthcoming elections in the European Union, United States and elsewhere could be critical opportunities to integrate wellbeing economy concepts in party manifestos and build support for them during campaigns to build cross-party support. For officials, as seen below, a range of policy actors need to see a way to interact with the agenda and translate it into their own work.

Emphasise the social justice credentials

Engaging with communities not well served by the current economic system is crucial. **People currently struggling in the face of prevailing economic arrangements need to be excited about being better off in a wellbeing economy.** There are plenty of communities who are suffering in terms of bread and butter issues because of business as usual, but have not yet been engaged in the economic system change agenda. The social justice credentials of the agenda are strong, but the outreach and sales job to communities such as the so-called left-behind towns in the United States, the Brexit-voting red-wall constituencies in England, and coastal communities in Costa Rica has been inadequate. Instead, in some cases populist and far-right protagonists have offered divisive and retrograde agendas.

The economic change movement, ideally in conjunction with relevant local entities, needs to find ways to build support for the economic system change agenda in such communities. As one interviewee said, “It also means engaging with those who have been convinced by the slogans and promises of the vested interests, despite the vested interests not really caring about those groups.” This requires **focusing on the positive changes that will improve the situation of people not well served by today’s economy** and emphasising overlaps of interests to help build engagement and coalitions. Proposals and practices inherent in the vision of a wellbeing economy, such as a universal basic dividend, community wealth building, just transition, reindustrialisation of local communities via circular economy enterprises, and prosumer approaches, can bring a tangible benefit for those most disadvantaged by business as usual.

Anticipating any risks that the process of transition to a new economic system might present to the already fragile livelihoods of certain communities will be important, as will then working with them to **ensure that tangible transition pathways** address these risks. [Gus Speth](#) warned:

in a country [the US] ... you have this huge number of people, now even more so, who are economically insecure. So if you merely hint, for example, that somehow this policy might result in the rise of gasoline prices, or energy prices, people become alarmed, because they’re barely getting by as they are.

The *gilets jaunes* protests against a proposed carbon tax in France offers a seminal reality check. Research has found that contrary to how the protests were reported, the movement was “not a denialist, anti-environmental movement ... [and participants were] not necessarily against carbon taxes; they are against the specific French tax” – with the researchers concluding that “carbon taxation requires participatory and equitable design” (Mehleb et al., 2021). That a wealth tax had been removed just prior to the carbon tax being imposed generated a perception that in France the poorest were being penalised and the wealthy were not paying their fair share. The [Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan](#), recognises that “there are genuine concerns



around how we tackle climate change, and air pollution – so we do need to ask ourselves whether the policies are fair”. **Environmental measures need to be rooted in social justice outcomes and stand on robust consultation and conversations** to ensure people do not feel “done to” and are excited about the ways they will benefit from a wellbeing economy.

Champions

In building a broader base, curating a network of champions outside government is important. The movement needs champions beyond those who are credible in the respective areas of the arguments, such as scientists or systems thinkers, and beyond existing advocates and campaigners. The Finnish and Scottish governments hosting prominent economist Mariana Mazzucato would be an example of using a well-known and well-regarded advocate to reassure doubters. But the movement also needs **champions who are enticing to those outside the movement, with reach and influence beyond it**. Celebrities, business leaders, writers, sports people, musicians and others with credibility among a particular audience, and a willingness to use it, would be helpful. Organisations working for economic system change need to identify them, meet them and glean their sense of what arguments will work and address any questions they have. Such organisations can then provide the champions with key facts, useful metaphors and tested frames. They can regularly brief these champions, supplying them with evidence, proof of concept and inspiration as necessary. Organisations can maintain champions’ commitment by bolstering their energy, resilience and conviction of the need for change. They can invite champions to meetings and places where they can encourage and reengage them.

Invest in intrapreneurs

Embedding the agenda within the civil service can also help mitigate against the risk of it being vulnerable to political changes and politicisation.

Work with people who have power in the current system, or who could gain it. Often, if people are more senior in an institution, they are more locked into the current system, so this might merit a focus on rising leaders and people not yet trapped in current institutional ways of working, orthodoxy and path dependencies.

Something that (understandably) impatient people in the movement sometimes forget is that change is up against a bureaucracy designed for the current way of doing things, whose staff are trained and incentivised to fit and conform to that mindset and ways of working and measures of success. Intrapreneurs will need help to translate ideas into policy and to convince hesitant colleagues. As with champions, wellbeing economy proponents should provide intrapreneurs with key facts, useful metaphors and tested frames. Building consensus this way is critical to bolstering the ambition of these intrapreneurs and their political counterparts, and will help them withstand competing demands and blockers.

These intrapreneurs need protection. As Lorenzo Fioramonti has noted, often in governance systems the actors who are most innovative are perceived as deviants and given little status in the prevailing system (Fioramonti, 2017). **Intrapreneurs thus need celebrating and connecting, with credibility bestowed on their work.**



Broach the blockers

Working with those already onboard with the agenda is patently not enough. As one interviewee put it: “systems-change conversations have to happen at both ends” – in other words, with those who are supportive and with those yet to be convinced. Sometimes change agents explain their tactics as “going where the energy is”, but while this is an important part of movement building and momentum sustaining, proactively broaching the blockers is also necessary, particularly for the first and second levels of blocking outlined in Part 4.

This will entail **anticipating possible pushback, mapping from whom it will emerge and on what basis**. In other words, proponents should anticipate some of the blockers’ arguments, including how hostile media outlets might contort and distort the ideas and re-frame the issues. Broaching the blockers also requires understanding them, including discovering who influences

them and what arguments might work to open conversations with them. For some, this might entail leading with the science, perhaps emphasising the extent of risk to their own interests. Making the scientific case for change was effective in bringing former British [Prime Minister Boris Johnson to the table](#) on climate change.

Broaching the blockers is also about recognising that certain groups have a vested interest in maintaining the system: the task is to pick apart their concepts and explore their defence of the status quo. One possible argument to offer is the magnitude of the fiscal cost of the current system. The avoidable expense at various levels of government responding and reacting to the damage of the prevailing configuration may reveal the inefficiency of business as usual. For example, WEAll published a report on the extent of this “failure demand” (Chrysopoulou et al., 2021), which is said to have had a big impact in the Scottish Government. Another point to bring to the fore in conversations with vested interests is the cost even they bear of social tensions, instability, and insecurity.

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On the other hand, due to confirmation biases, people often dismiss facts that do not align with their established world view. In such instances, the task of a persuader is to find a connection, familiar language and shared interest that allows people to focus on and build from what is important to them as human beings. Research in the United Kingdom found that engaging policymakers at Westminster with postgrowth arguments could be done by framing growth dependency as a [public policy problem](#), highlighting the vulnerability of this dependency and outlining the role politicians could play in addressing it. In other instances, identifying an enterprise in the constituency of key members of parliament that could be celebrated as reflecting the sort of enterprise aligned with a wellbeing economy will help show the benefits and practical manifestations of the agenda and help politicians tell a story about it to their constituents and peers.



Finally, proponents must remember that this is not about convincing everyone. For those least likely to change, let them be. Take Donella Meadows' advice (1999): "don't waste time with reactionaries". Instead, select a small number of people to engage with. This subset will be determined by a combination of factors, such as their potential to listen and be open to the arguments that might counter their world views, and their scope to influence others like them.

Partnerships

The president of the Hewlett Foundation has observed that

The neoliberal framework and narrative look far more coherent and unified in hindsight than they did at the time. This is an important point to bear in mind as we think about crafting a new narrative today: agreement on every intellectual point is neither possible nor necessary; what's necessary is finding a common story, language and set of values.
([Hewlett Foundation](#))

The economic change movement needs to **proactively build partnerships of common cause** (and common enemy) with groups not immediately part of the economic change movement, but who are impacted by and working on different parts of the economy. Trade unions in particular, not least for their size, but also because the concerns of their members often stem from the current economic model, and for their record as a powerful forum for popular resistance. In Costa Rica, for example, "there are powerful actors capable of influencing the course of public affairs, notably business groups, public unions, the clergy and the press" ([Costa Rica Country Report 2022](#)), whereas in Finland, the labour movement is strong and able to influence social policy (Demos Helsinki). Other examples are faith groups (see initiatives such as that of the [UN Environment Programme](#) and [Laudato Si' Movement](#)), and business organisations with reach, receptiveness and credibility, such as the World Business Council for Sustainable Development. Health agencies offer another suite of networks and platforms where the alignment with the ethos of the wellbeing economy will have resonance, and indeed many are already proactively engaging in the wellbeing economy agenda (see, for example, [EuroHealthNet](#) and the [World Health Organization](#)). Many young people also show they hold values aligned with the wellbeing economy vision and thus are a crucial ally. Shifts in paradigms do not happen because someone converts the faithful to business as usual, but instead when younger generations adopt a new way of viewing the world (Zaman, 2018; Kuhn, 1962). This might seem to contradict the findings outlined above about the importance of a positive response from elites, but the different approaches are not mutually exclusive: they are positively reinforcing.

It is, however, important not to over-claim the benefit of a wellbeing economy: it is a necessary part of addressing major injustices in the world but alone does not suffice. Instead, wellbeing economy proponents **need to emphasise and celebrate common core goals**. This will help prevent the impression that there are alternative and competing ideas for change, which blockers could use to allege confusion and justify business as usual.

Conclusion

The wellbeing economy agenda has gained traction in a range of spaces: amongst activists, scholars, businesses, institutions and policy makers. There are plenty of examples of key elements of the change programme being put in place by enterprises, communities, and governments around the world. The conversation is reaching mainstream quarters as major institutions are recognising that business as usual cannot continue and that the ideas of a wellbeing economy have scope to benefit communities and the planet. Yet, as Part 4 has shown, efforts to build momentum for and adoption of the wellbeing economy agenda have faced considerable and varied pushback. Part 5 has set out a range of responses the economic change community can explore to address the pushback. As the prevalence and strength of various types of pushback vary between locations and over time, trying to identify if one is more significant than another would be misleading: actors will need to take stock of the situation they are facing and prioritise responses accordingly.

Instead, by way of conclusion, the interactions between the various pushbacks set out in Part 4 and the responses outlined in Part 5 are summarised in the table below. What is apparent is that rather than each response being linked to a single manifestation of pushback, almost all the responses offer a means to address a range of pushbacks. This means the economic system change movement collectively needs to engage across a suite of practices, tactics and entry points. This is perhaps unsurprising given the tapestry of meaningful tactics and the non-linearity of change.



Pushback	Response
System inertia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistently critique the status quo and celebrate the vision Build a broad base Curate a network of champions Invest in intrapreneurs Build partnerships
Lack of bandwidth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistently critique the status quo and celebrate the vision Emphasise social justice credentials Curate a network of champions Invest in intrapreneurs
Deliberate blockers: i) vested interests ii) complacency regarding the current system iii) prioritising one goal vis-a-vis another	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistently critique the status quo and celebrate the vision Build a broad base Curate a network of champions Broach the blockers Build partnerships ii) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistently critique the status quo and celebrate the vision Build a broad base Curate a network of champions Invest in intrapreneurs Broach the blockers Build partnerships iii) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistently critique the status quo and celebrate the vision Build a broad base Emphasise social justice credentials Broach the blockers Build partnerships
Weak implementation and co-option	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistently critique the status quo and celebrate the vision Curate a network of champions Invest in intrapreneurs Broach the blockers
Confusion and impatience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistently critique the status quo and celebrate the vision Emphasise social justice credentials Invest in intrapreneurs
Not giving politicians what they need	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistently critique the status quo and celebrate the vision Build a broad base Emphasise social justice credentials Curate a network of champions
Not building an adequate support base	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistently critique the status quo and celebrate the vision Build a broad base



- Emphasise social justice credentials
- Curate a network of champions
- Build partnerships

Friendly fire

- Consistently critique the status quo and celebrate the vision
- Build a broad base
- Emphasise social justice credentials
- Build partnerships

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