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## **Welcome to the Nordic Journal of Wellbeing and Sustainable Welfare Development (NJWEL)**

We are excited to introduce the first issue of the *Nordic Journal of Wellbeing and Sustainable Welfare Development* (NJWEL). We, the editorial board, represent different institutions, disciplines and strands of research. However, what unites us is a dedication to a common aim to *support progress towards universal wellbeing and social sustainability*. In this editorial, we outline the vision for the journal by introducing the *what*, *why* and *how* of the journal's aims and scope. We will introduce the values at stake to which this journal resonates (the *what*), the rationale for launching the journal (the *why*) and our approaches to critical, appreciative and transformative knowledge (the *how*).

### **What are the values at stake?**

The title of the journal expresses the values at stake. 'Wellbeing' indicates the core value, whereas the term 'welfare' represents mission-oriented actions and policies towards the promotion of wellbeing for all (Allardt, 1972). Thus, 'sustainable welfare development' refers to protecting and advancing social sustainability within restricted planetary and economic boundaries. We promote a systemic and ecological approach in which social sustainability is recognised as a key driver for human and ecological flourishing, while also acting as a prerequisite for the sustainability of welfare systems. Accordingly, we approach social sustainability as interdependent in how economies are being organised by governments, businesses, NGOs and communities.

There is no commonly agreed-upon definition of 'social sustainability'. However, researchers and policymakers alike broadly recognise social sustainability as encompassing core conditions for *universal wellbeing*, that is, the achievement of health and wellbeing for all for current and future generations (Prilleltensky, 2020; WHO, 2021). Universal wellbeing directs attention towards the interdependency between wellness, fairness, empowerment and democratic participation. However, it also shines light on the systemic interdependency between personal, relational, organisational, spatial, economic, commercial, structural and political conditions that impact peoples' real freedoms, to achieve active citizenship, health and wellbeing within a given context (Prilleltensky, 2012; Prilleltensky, 2020; Sen, 2005). Accordingly, the journal focuses on the social conditions and services that promote wellbeing, participation and citizenship at multiple levels: locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.

There is no disagreement among scholars and policymakers that enhancing human wellbeing is a desirable mission. The trouble appears when one must be more conceptually clear about how to define and operationalise such terms. This also appears problematic when one chooses a framing of *wellbeing for all* as a public value that is collective and dependent on equitable processes and outcomes. We will not define key concepts such as wellbeing, health, social justice, safety and dignity here. Rather, we invite authors to advance the conceptual developments on the *what* of this journal through respectful and curious dialogue. However, at this stage, what we want to make explicit is our commitment to the morally grounded imperative to leave no one behind and first reach those furthest behind (United Nations, 2015). This imperative requires levelling up the social gradient so that all people have real and equal opportunities to reach the highest possible levels of wellbeing while having the necessary capabilities to do so.

The purpose of launching the *Nordic Journal of Wellbeing and Sustainable Welfare Development* is to contribute to global calls for collaboration and transformation towards universal wellbeing and sustainable development while paying close attention to the imperative of *leaving no one behind* (United Nations, 2015). In our approach to social sustainability, we place universal wellbeing at the heart of public values. Thereby, we echo the increasing calls to reflect upon public value creation and the mission of welfare systems and the economy as a whole (Loeffler & Bovaird, 2020; Moore, 2019; WHO, 2021). Placing universal wellbeing, social sustainability and the promise to *leave no one behind* as organising values for this journal provides a common and normative grounding for our initiative.

### **Why launch a new journal?**

With our initial outline of the values at stake, some of the answers to why we launched this journal might seem obvious. However, manuscripts connected to these values could be published in several journals and in various fields of research. Hence, answering *why* and *why now* requires a deeper explanation.

People are left behind when they lack real opportunities and freedom to participate in and benefit from societal development. The systematic inequities in the opportunities to live well and flourish are increasing and even accelerated by recent social crises such as COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine (Beresford et al., 2021; European Observatory on Health et al., 2020). Moreover, populism, polarisation and other forms of alienation and social turbulence continue to escalate social and economic divides, marginalising population groups (OECD, 2020; Puras & Gooding, 2019; United Nations, 2020; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2018).

In the present climate of post-pandemic societal stress on a heated planet with increased forced migration, the time for social change is overdue. At the time of writing this editorial, the vision of *leaving no one behind* still seems like a distant dream. There is an urgent need to scale up visionary and transformative research, action and innovation, but also to critically reflect upon the values, concepts, terminology and methodology of sustainable welfare development. The scope of our journal brings attention to the impact of communities, the arenas and environments of everyday life, welfare services and other social and political institutions on the development of people's wellbeing and participation in society. Moreover, we want to spotlight the need to nurture societal trust and involve all citizens in societal development by complying with an all-affected principle of democratic participation, especially focusing on including those most affected (Afsahi, 2022). We spotlight this as those who are often labelled *hard to reach* in reality tend to be *easy to ignore* (Lightbody & Escobar, 2021).

The scope of this journal holds distinct attention to the Nordic welfare states and how ongoing transformations of the Nordic model can contribute to reducing social inequality and promoting human rights, democracy, health and wellbeing. The Nordic countries widely represent a *gold standard* of welfare regimes (Bambra, 2021; Raphael, 2014). The context of the Nordic countries should provide excellent conditions for pursuing a mission-oriented and transformative agenda for a journal, such as the present one. Building from a context of strong institutions, solid welfare state systems, high levels of trust and regulated economic systems, the Nordic countries have solid foundations to envision a solution space for achieving universal wellbeing.

This includes critical perspectives on how people are still being left behind. Despite universal welfare and high levels of economic redistribution, inequities in health and wellbeing are surprisingly high (Bambra, 2021; Elstad et al., 2022; Lundberg, 2020). The Nordic model, as we know it, has been shown to be unsustainable in the long run, largely because of changes in the demography, but also because of current practices and the way sovereign states are governed (Brix et al., 2021; Hänninen et al., 2019). There will simply not be enough professional staff in our welfare systems to continue as before, and the measures used simply need to be working together. People are also left behind because they are falling between sectorial gaps and fragmented division of labour. Continually, new forms of inequity arise with new societal problems and developments. *Left-behind* problems are, in some respects, especially severe in the Nordics, in a system that is supposed to be universal. The Nordic countries have insider/outsider problems, meaning that people on the inside of the welfare systems are very secure, but the few who end up on the outside tend to be worse off than those groups left behind in other countries. Fitzpatrick and Stephens (2014) argue, for example, that it is *better* to be homeless in the UK than in Sweden for this reason. The traditional Nordic welfare model was/is well suited for a well-behaved, wholesome, working public, but it leaves behind marginal groups that do not fit the requirements of insiders. These marginal groups are becoming a lot less marginal than they used to be. For example, relatively large groups of people with immigrant backgrounds are at risk of becoming permanent outsiders. Thus, it is possible to argue that the Nordic welfare model was the gold standard for the second half of the twentieth century, and for that exact reason, the Nordic countries are excellent illustrations of the fact that there is a need for new welfare solutions in the twenty-first century. For multiple reasons, transformation is also called for in our parts of the world. Hence, the purpose of the journal is to provide research and narratives of importance to development in the Nordic countries and beyond.

*Why* we launch a new journal does not only relate to a widening gap between people and sectors. The scope of this journal also addresses fragmentation in the scholarly literature. Just as sectorisation and silo thinking have become a problem for promoting joint action across the whole of society, so has fragmentation between disciplines, professions and fields of research. The aim of this journal—to support progress towards universal wellbeing and social sustainability—relies on a transdisciplinary and people-powered approach to research and publishing. That is, this journal acknowledges that transformative social change relies on knowledge from all kinds of disciplines, and that critical reflection, innovation and a well-functioning democracy are dependent on dialogue and disruption (Biesta, 2009; Gergen, 2015). Therefore, the scope of this journal is not restricted to a defined discipline, sector, field of research, scientific stance or methodology. Rather, we invite plurality and transdisciplinary approaches to thinking, research and action. The purpose is to publish contributions that nurture critical and utopian contemplation, and support progress towards a participatory society that promotes universal wellbeing.

## How will the journal go on from here?

This journal addresses the need to publish transformative research and stories from practitioners and people of importance to the Nordic countries and beyond. Answering the question of *how* we want to proceed is answered in creating a platform for publishing narratives of lived experiences, promising practices and research that might contribute to support progress towards universal wellbeing and social sustainability. By embracing multiplicity, we hope that this journal can provide a voice and agency to discuss and progress the values at stake described in the first section. Accordingly, we wish to publish critical, visionary and future-forming research, relevant stories lived and told, examples of *best practices*, and learning drawn from future-forming *next practices* and theoretical reflexive discussions to inspire social change.

We believe that the NJWEL could serve as an important platform for publishing ground-breaking research framed by a universal wellbeing narrative and for progressing a transdisciplinary approach to mission-oriented science. Therefore, we now invite researchers, practitioners and other agents of change across disciplines, sectors and settings to join forces in the *decade of action* to leave no one behind. The journal deals with social sustainability, but the editorial board also wishes to publish articles that study the linkages between social sustainability and economic and environmental sustainability.

The editorial board welcomes articles that target innovative welfare solutions, in which the welfare state and welfare society explore differentiated opportunities and ways to live well, as well as pathways towards the co-creation of welfare.

Furthermore, we seek to publish manuscripts that demonstrate theoretical and/or methodological creativity and innovation. We aim to publish empirical research, conceptual and theoretical contributions, methodology articles, comments, and short reports that refer to examples of promising practice. Our target groups are researchers working to promote wellbeing and sustainable welfare development, but we want to ensure the content is also relevant for students, practitioners across disciplines and professions, leaders and politicians, civil society actors, the media and the general public.

We are proud to present four articles and an essay representing contributions from Norway, Denmark and Sweden in this first issue of the NJWEL. In the future, we look forward to reading and publishing manuscripts from the Nordic countries and beyond that can support progressing universal wellbeing and social sustainability. We hereby invite your contributions.

The Editorial Board of the NJWEL:

Ottar Ness, Dina von Heimburg, Bengt Karlsson, Nina Kilkku, Sanna Turnaas, Johan Vamstad, Johan Lilja, Roberto Iacono, Ellen Saur, Ove Østerlie, Tore Dag Bøe and Trine Wulf-Andersen.

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