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Shaping a Wellbeing Future for People and Planet

We are living in turbulent times. In the aftermath of Covid-19, countries and communities continue to face multiple and interwoven crises. Geopolitical instability. War on the European continent. Cost of living crisis. Political polarization. The failures of capitalism in promoting and protecting the health of people and the planet. Globalized competition and the human downside to constantly managing our digital worlds. Unfair and increasingly unequal distribution of health, wealth, power, and opportunities leading to social fractures and erosion of trust (Monti et al., 2021; Prilleltensky, 2020). In a society where neoliberalism has moved under the skin of individuals and in relationships, and where social problems are too often coined as individual and medical rather than structural, political and relational (Lister, 2015; WHO, 2023a, 2023b), there is a need to rethink how science and societies work to create public value.

The complex web of interlinked problems described above are even exacerbated due to man-made climate change and a heated planet pushed towards the boundaries of its future existence, accelerating both inequity and the urgency to act. These problems not only represent a headache for state leaders but are also experienced as daily struggles for millions of people, resulting in years of life lost and the loss of years lived well and in dignity. The human right to health and dignity is not only under threat for people living in the present, but the syndemic nature of the above-mentioned problems also creates an unstable future for 6.75 trillion people – the calculated estimate of future generations of people yet to be born (Krznic, 2020). The time for transformative action is now.

The good news is that the myriad societal problems described above do not leave us on a deterministic track with vicious spirals of self-destruction. For decades Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has served as a key indicator of societal success, but this indicator fails to capture the wellbeing of people and planet. What is needed is a refocusing of our attention towards the values that matter most for people to thrive and the shaping of a fair and sustainable future (Corbin et al, 2021; WHO, 2023a). Some countries and communities are already taking bold steps towards an alternative vision to shaping societies where the wellbeing of people and planet are put at the heart of societal development, supported by the UN's Sustainability Goals and the pledge of leaving no one behind (UN General Assembly, 2015; WHO, 2023c). Some of these pioneer examples of wellbeing governments are found within the Nordic countries, which pave the way and support countries and communities elsewhere. Other champion countries and communities in Europe and beyond are pushing forward radical change that contribute towards inspiring transformation within the Nordic region. In life and in processes of transformation, we are all interconnected.

As the processes of shaping our societies are inseparably connected to the economy, transformative and sustainable social change also depend on rethinking how societies and the economy works to create value. There is a need for platforms and arenas to accelerate learning, exchange, and knowledge development. For the first time in the history, the WHO Europe, with stellar leadership from the WHO Venice office, has initiated a European Regional High-level Forum on Health in the Well-being Economy, which took place in Copenhagen on 1–2 March 2023 (WHO, 2023d). At the forum, Professor Sir Michael Marmot echoed the Monti commission's pledge to heal social fractures (Monti et al., 2021) and made a strong argument for making the moral case and attending to human dignity, rather than “fixing” market failures, the main issue in advancing a wellbeing economy. His key messages were that there is a need to:

1. Rediscover public purpose – place wellbeing for all, and the promise to leave no one behind, at the heart of public values.
2. Support intergenerational equity – narrow the inequality of opportunity to live well and flourish for current and future generations.
3. Use the evidence – we know what to do.

Then he posed the following question: *Do we have the will to turn hope into reality?*

Recently, Professor Sir Michael Marmot and his review team, supported by wide range of Norwegian researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, handed over a report to the Norwegian government – a rapid review of inequalities in health and wellbeing since 2014 (UCL Institute of Health Equity and NTNU WellFare, 2023). A key message from the report is that despite being a country characterized by a high and increasing standard of living for the majority of the population, there are significant and growing social and economic inequalities in health, wealth and wellbeing that could reasonably be avoided. These relatively large inequities remain a paradox within the Nordic welfare states not only relevant for Norway; the Nordic countries share similar problems and dilemmas that need to be tackled in the years to come (Bambra, 2022). Inequalities in the opportunity to live well and flourish are a result of the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, learn, love, work, and age. These problems cannot be tackled by the welfare state systems alone. Rather, there is a need to pay more attention to the structural, social, commercial, and relational drivers shaping the conditions of daily life.

As discussed, both at the WHO High-Level Forum in Copenhagen and in the Marmot report for Norway, there is a need to move beyond systems of (material and economic) redistribution and push forward radical change toward advancing a wellbeing economy where fairness and the wellbeing of people and planet is placed at the heart of societal development from the start. Then, as beautifully coined at the High-Level Forum by the prime minister of Iceland, *Katrín Jakobsdóttir*, economic sustainability becomes a means to an end to push forward social and environmental sustainability, rather than the other way around.

Going back to Marmot's point of rediscovering public purpose, such a transformative turn essentially implies recognising and celebrating the other as human beings holding the right to live well and in dignity and to matter in life and in society. Moreover, such a turn depends on developing high-trust societies where the need to deepen democratic agency and promote empowerment among left-behind groups is taken seriously, with a public sector that helps to mobilize a whole-of-society response and with democratic institutions where political representatives are held accountable for processes and outcomes. When it comes to justice, we need to pay attention to both distributive and procedural elements

(Prilleltensky, 2020). Fairness and wellness depend on participation and representation in shaping the economy and the political decisions affecting lives and opportunities.

This is also why our journal has invited people and organizations to publish stories lived and told that can go towards informing both scientific development and public debate. Moreover, we need to pay attention to the promising practices that can inform and inspire hope and turn it into reality. In this issue of NJWEL, the former Commissioner for Future Generations in Wales, Sophie Howe, share important learnings from the Welsh experience on setting the agenda for protecting and promoting the wellbeing of future generations.

Thus, the Editorial board of NJWEL invites readers to continue the dialogue in our journal and to invite others to push forward the dialogue and inspire innovative social change for the common good. Such dialogue cannot be based on unanimous arguments. Rather, we invite a multitude of perspectives and the worldviews of constructive disruptors who can challenge status quo and pave the way forward.

The Editorial Board,

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

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