

THE REPUBLIC OF WELBEING: A MANIFESTO FOR TRANSFORMATION TO ACHIEVE THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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For too long, the international community has embraced a destructive development model and rewarded behaviour that has led to social and ecological imbalances. For most of the 20th century, success was defined as purely material economic growth, a narrow conceptualization of development that had a tremendous effect on international institutions, on the design of markets (at the local, national, and global levels), and on the global pecking order. The largest economies in the world were rewarded with prestige and power, regardless of whether their actions were destructive of their own societies and of the world at large. The environmental crisis (especially climate change) and the global economic downturn have contributed to a shifting of focus from economic growth to well-being as the overarching goal of both public and private institutions. More and more governments have begun to actively pursue well-being-oriented initiatives, while international institutions, chiefly the United Nations, have called for change. In the words of Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, “the old model is broken”: **“We need a new economic paradigm that recognizes the parity between the three pillars of sustainable development. Social, economic and environmental well-being are indivisible.”**

Against this backdrop, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a window of opportunity for radical change. This is not to say that they are perfect. Much to the contrary, they suffer from contradictions and redundancies, and ultimately reveal the inevitable compromises of most international agreements. Yet they capture crucial aspects of social, political, economic, and environmental sustainability that will guide the action of governments in the years to come. In this regard, they present progressive policy-makers, activists, and concerned citizens with an opportunity to transform their economies from mere producers of growth to promoters of human and ecological well-being. Although presented as a list, it is clear that the various SDGs are highly interconnected and reinforce each other. It is indeed impossible to end poverty “in all its forms” (goal 1) without addressing gender inequalities (goal 5) and promoting inclusive education (goal 4). Nor is it possible to achieve

sustainable and equitable economic development (goals 8 and 15), without reducing inequalities (goal 10), preserving oceans (goal 14) and terrestrial ecosystems (goal 15), and without tackling climate change (goal 13).

For the SDGs to be more than a wish list, the interconnectedness of all dimensions must lead to a shift in governance processes, starting with the need to design institutions that are effective, accountable, and inclusive (goal 16). If the promotion of human and ecological wellbeing is to become the founding principle of political and economic activities going forward, what implications will this have for our public and private institutions?

Let’s imagine a nation that is genuinely committed to pursuing the SDGs as its overarching policy framework. Let’s call it the Republic of Wellbeing. This country will require a shift from short-term to long-term planning. Presently, our governments and private sectors are overly concerned with short-term economic dynamics (a phenomenon known as “quarterly capitalism”, **criticized** also by US presidential candidate Hillary Clinton). We base critical decisions on sketchy estimates of gross domestic product, inflation, and stock prices, to name just a few examples, whose quarterly changes are very misleading, not only because of statistical errors but also because of their inherent flaws as indicators of good performance and success. By contrast, the SDGs place more emphasis on processes that require time to change.

What the Republic of Wellbeing will need is a new system of policy-planning and information-sharing, which encourages all stakeholders (not only public institutions) to work together to achieve a long-term view. The following are building blocks of such a transformation.

First, the Republic of Wellbeing should incorporate the concept of sustainability into its own founding constitution, something that Latin American and Caribbean countries have promoted through the **Quito Declaration**, following the successful examples of **Ecuador** and **Bolivia**. New Zealand has also **attributed personal rights** to the Whanganui River, and legal avenues have been sought by citizens to defend nature as a common good, with recent successes in the **US** and in the **Netherlands** (see also **the campaign “Claim the Sky”**). This would require legislators to assess how decisions affect not only the present but also future generations, as well as ecosystems.

Second, the Republic of Wellbeing would need a new approach to policy-making, with a view to managing the interconnectedness of equitable and sustainable well-being. We have become used to the separation of offices, portfolios, and tasks, especially in the functioning of government, according to the bureaucratic model of the late 1800s and in line with the prevailing philosophy of new public management. Although this may have made decision-making more efficient in terms of sectoral outputs, it has also reduced the capacity of institutions to approach problems holistically. For instance, a reduction in spending by some departments/offices (e.g. infrastructure, water and sanitation, police, etc.), which is usually rewarded as a sign of efficiency and good governance, may easily result in additional burdens and extra costs for other departments (e.g. health or social affairs). Separation also encourages competition (for a limited budget), thus forgetting that cooperative approaches are vital to deal with the multifaceted and complex issues of contemporary governance. Therefore, in order to achieve the SDGs, the Republic of Wellbeing would need to adopt a 'whole-of-government' approach, which the OECD defines as a system of horizontal co-ordination and integration embedded in the process of policy design and implementation, which helps a government respond to complexity. The establishment of a ministry dedicated to the 'future', as [instituted in Sweden](#), shows that it is not impossible for a government to focus on the long-term implications of their decisions.

Third, different metrics of performance are needed for the Republic of Wellbeing to prosper in its commitment to long-term quality development. Current statistics are of little help, given that they reinforce short-termism and separation between "the economy" and the rest of society. Metrics of genuine progress, which deduct the costs of negative externalities from measures of national income such as the GDP, would be very useful policy tools, as has already been the case in the US states of [Maryland and Vermont](#). In line with the focus on long-term governance, impact assessments, and cost-benefit analyses will need to adopt discount rates that are either neutral or give more weight to impacts and costs in the future than in the present, especially for natural and social capital. Reporting systems for business would also need to change. Total-cost accounting (including full environmental and social costs) is essential to gauge which businesses are really adding to the economy and which are accumulating income at the

expense of society, with a view to creating an appropriate system of rewards and sanctions. Sportswear giant Puma has pioneered [environmental profit and losses labeling](#) for its products, and many companies have signed up for [natural capital reporting](#).

Fourth, the Republic of Wellbeing would need to institutionalize SDG-based impact evaluations. In the legislative domain, innovative forms of "regulatory impact assessment", a practice increasingly in vogue in the European Union, should be implemented, with public institutions required to engage with citizens about the expected effects of new legislations on sustainable development objectives. Ideally, even political parties' programmes should be vetted through public scrutiny with regard to their impact on the SDGs, similar to what already happens in the Netherlands with respect to economic policy targets.

Last, but not least, the Republic of Wellbeing should be very vocal in global fora to ensure that international norms, principles, and agreements are conducive to human and ecosystem wellbeing. A policy focus inspired by the SDGs will indeed demand a restructuring of the global economy, with a focus on reducing ecological footprints and incentivizing the transfer of innovative technologies. In particular, financial markets and international trade will need to be re-designed to support rather than impede sustainable social progress, as a recent [UN inquiry](#) demonstrates. If global governance in the 20th century was led by nations and companies championing the classical model of industrialization, with high social and environmental costs, the 21st-century system must be driven by those able to marry economic dynamism with a high quality of life and the promotion of human and ecosystem well-being.

The Republic of Wellbeing is a metaphor of policy changes that are not utopian, but rather pragmatic and within reach, especially if we consider that each of these features is already present in one country or another, and that they are variously endorsed by an increasing number of companies as well. We need to build on the best governance innovations practiced by public institutions and private organizations if we are serious about using the SDGs as leverage to build a sustainable and desirable path to the future.